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THE NEW MULTIMEDIA COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT: THE IMPACT ON FREEDOM OF PRESS IN PAKISTAN

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The world and Asia is currently witnessing a revolution of great significance in the form of mind boggling developments in communications technology which have brought the world so close together that it is now popularly referred to as a global village. Telexes and fax machines are already technology of the past, as now dish antennas, e-mail and the Internet have set into motion an information explosion whose most significant feature is that common citizens have suddenly acquired free, easy and amazingly low cost access to the news and information completely free from official controls. They can just press a few buttons on the key board of their computer and within seconds send or receive information which in the days gone by would not have passed most government control barriers anywhere in Asia. And the governments are virtually looking aghast, not knowing what to do about it. In Pakistan rumours have been floating that the government was planning to introduce licensing system for organisations offering e mail and Internet services to the general public. But they have done nothing so far apparently apprehensive of the national and international upsurge for freedom of communications. They also have a previous precedent to learn from. When dish antennas first appeared, the government of Pakistan immediately imposed a hefty license fee, something like Rs. 50,000 and an arduous screening procedure to get government clearance. But peoples' defiance was complete. While a virtual jungle of dish antennas mushroomed over rooftops no one applied for the

license and the regulation died its own death. So the situation today is that all kinds of news and information transmissions to destinations inside and outside Pakistan are taking place side tracking the archaic government communications systems in the post and telegraph departments.

In Pakistan this has come as a tremendous boost for the atmosphere of freedom of thought and expression that is now sweeping the world and Asia. People are enjoying the freedom, using it to communicate with the world at large and among themselves with a unprecedented gusto. The number of subscribers to the E Mail and Internet, just as buyers of dish antennas, is swelling like a flooded river.

These developments and the atmosphere of free and unfettered information flow has had its impact on the public mind and the national press. The press in Pakistan is enjoying an era of freedom which was something unbelievable only a few years ago. But at the same time is showing great guts to fight back attempts to curtail this freedom through pressures and threats from both official and retrogressive private organisations.

In the first week of this month, we in Pakistan, alongwith rest of the world observed the United Nations World Press Freedom Day . A well attended seminar was held in Karachi and naturally the state of press freedom in Pakistan was the focus of discussion. The broad consensus of speakers at the seminar was that Pakistan's media is witnessing what may be called "an era of relative press freedom". This of course applies to the print media alone because the electronic media - radio and television - is in the control of the Government and in Pakistan it is most severely regulated.

Even Pakistan Television Two (PTV-2), which is on the air through Star satellite channels 24 hours a day ,follows the dictates of its mother channel PTV-1 in matter of

news and current affairs. Even where government has allowed private television networks to operate, their freedom is limited to the field of entertainment, not in the field of news and views. They mostly reproduce what the PTV-I dishes out in its news and current affairs programmes. The state of government control over electronic media can be gauged from the fact that Federal Information Minister told the National Assembly on June 28, 1995 that in the first five months of 1995 the government received over 16 hours of coverage in national news bulletin of Pakistan Television whereas the leader of the opposition got just five and half minutes.

The private sector Shalimar Television Network (STN) is allowed to air CNN and BBC news bulletins, but these programmes too are subject to strict checking. It does not appear to bother the government in the least that people in ever increasing numbers are erecting dish antennas to receive uncensored programmes of not only BBC and CNN but also from the Arab and European channels. This is more of what made the people in our region for years turn to the BBC or Voice of America radio stations to know the truth about their own countries.

And what is the end result ? The credibility of radio and television is so badly dented that even when they speak the truth people take it with a pinch of salt.

The state of freedom of press in Pakistan is closely related to the fate of democracy in the country. Pakistan which became independent nearly 50 years ago in 1947 passed through a long and dark period of military and civilian dictatorships. This began with the imposition of first Martial Law by General Mohammed Ayub Khan in 1958. His advisers soon set about framing laws which destroyed not merely the national

democratic structure but also suppressed freedoms and human rights also. In 1963 the darkest of all press laws, the Press and Publications Ordinance was promulgated which laid down heavy punishments for errant newspapers. After a long period of nearly 30 years that era came to an end with the ushering in of democracy in 1985.

The year 1985 saw the coming into power of a democratic government under late Prime minister Mohammed Khan Junejo. It is an irony that Junejo was hand-picked by the last military dictator General Mohammed Ziaul Haq to head a docile government after the party-less general elections. But Junejo, a non assuming gentleman politician, soon proved his mettle and against the wishes of the military dictator set up a real democratic government.

In the meantime General Ziaul Haq was killed in a plane crash in 1988, and the democratic traditions set afloat by Mr. Junejo flourished. Successive general elections saw the coming into power of governments of Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan Peoples Party in 1988, of Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan Muslim League in 1990 and again of Benazir Bhutto in 1993 but fortunately the seeds of democratic freedoms, foremost among them the freedom of the press, not merely survived but thrived. Today many foreign visitors on their first visit to Pakistan are surprised to see the national press so free in its reporting of news and views. They are, however, also appalled at the gross violations of private rights of individuals and organisations, something unimaginable in their country. This raises the questions of ethics of a free press to which I will revert later.

One of the most remarkable expressions of this freedom is visible in the disturbed city of Karachi where in the recent years a ruthless campaign against "terrorism" has been

carried on by police and para military Rangers. Here the press has shown the courage to challenge police and Rangers version of killings in encounters. Whenever the police declares "terrorists" killed in an encounter , the press launches its own independent investigation. In numerous cases the press has been tearing to pieces police claims of encounters by publishing independent versions on the basis of evidence of relatives and witnesses. The government has been greatly annoyed over this state of affairs. At one time when the Sindh provincial government announced it was closing six newspapers of Karachi for publishing "falsehoods" there was a national uproar and the government had to beat a hasty retreat.

In this way the freedom now enjoyed by the newspaper is not a gift on a plate, but a laboriously wrested and jealously guarded privilege. In its policies towards the national media, the governments still retains a highly negative attitude consisting of repeated threats and harassment. But given the defiant mood of the mediamen and of the nation as a whole, and also due no lesser degree to the upbeat atmosphere of democratic freedoms prevailing in the world , the government refrains from taking harsh measures which might tarnish its image internationally.

As I said earlier the Press in Pakistan is paying the price for freedom. In addition to the government harassment mentioned earlier, this price is also paid in the form of violence from political and non political organisations who do not hesitate to use force to obtain news coverage of their liking. A report on the state of Media in Pakistan for the year 1995 released in early May by Islamabad based media watch organisation, Green Press said that incidence of violence against the media had increased during the year 1995. Mr. Zamir

Niazi, the renowned author of many books on press freedom in Pakistan said in one of his recent reports about the state of press freedom in Pakistan: "For the past six months the attitude of the government towards the press has become too frightening. The government has become oversensitive even to mild criticism. Government advertisements and newsprint quotas have been slashed from dissenting publications. Prime minister Benazir Bhutto and her Ministers have in the recent past come down heavily on the national press accusing it of "spreading misinformation and rumour mongering" or calling the national press "thoroughly irresponsible. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in its report for 1995 has enumerated 24 cases in which policemen, para military rangers and private armed gangs indulged in acts of violence against journalists. However despite all these pressures, threats and harassment, the press in Pakistan continues to put up a valiant fight for their freedom. They have continued to struggle for press freedom against odds which at times appear to be overwhelming.

The subject of press freedom in Pakistan will remain incomplete if a reference is not made to the widespread violation of press ethics by the newsmen themselves. There is no mechanism to check the violations of fundamental rights of citizens and organisations. Newspapers often print stories which in any other civilised country would get a quick conviction and heavy fine in a court of law. Unfortunately in Pakistan there is no such thing. I cannot recall a single case where an offending newspaper has been convicted. At the same time there is no mechanism such as the press council in other countries where aggrieved people can take their grievances. The dialogue on a press code of ethics has continued between the newspaper editors and the government for many years now but no outcome is in sight. There is no difference of opinion on the contents of the Code of

Ethics, which are universal in nature, the disagreement is on who will be the judge and who will award punishment if any. The result is that newspapers today enjoy a kind of total immunity from accountability.

One can only hope that the present state of media aberration is only a temporary phase and with time the press would become more mature and more responsible. Ends

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