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**The Influence Of Policies And Government
On Communication Ethics**

By

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Perhaps nothing so starkly illustrates the impact of policies and government on ethical media practice in Pakistan as the treatment meted out to a speech by the founder of the nation, Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. On August 11, 1947, three days before Pakistan officially came into being, Mr. Jinnah in his inaugural address to the country's first Constituent Assembly declared:

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that we are all citizens and equal citizens of one state... Now, I think that we should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in course of time, Hindus would cease to be Hindus, and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the state."

In the first press advice in Pakistan's history, issued even before the country came into being, bureaucrats in the cabinet division and the information department attempted to black out from news reports what they considered secularist passages in the speech. The attempt failed, but it clearly foreshadowed the shape of things to come.

The history of the press in Pakistan is a pitiful saga of the use and abuse of the press by successive governments and the capitulation of the press to both. The 46-year history of the Pakistani press has seen the successful use of both the carrot and the stick to keep the press in line. Both instruments have been used by governments in all periods of the country's history - the ostensibly democratic period after independence in Ayub's military regime, in Bhutto's civilian dictatorship, in Zia's military dictatorship, and in the post-Zia democracies.

The rot set in within a year of independence. A draft ordinance providing for detention without trial had been summarily rejected by Mr. Jinnah. But in October 1948, barely one month after his death, his successors passed the bill he had refused to sign: the Safety Act Ordinance of 1948. In May 1952, parliament ratified the ordinance, and in 1956 it became part of the constitution. The long shadow of government control of the press had begun to manifest itself, with its inevitable impact on media ethics.

The decade following independence was ostensibly a democratic one, but in both political terms and in relation to the press, it was a dark decade, not only because of the government's actions but in terms of the press's own response to

them. It is a sad fact that the press which had served as a torch-bearer of the freedom movement in British India now became, with rare exceptions, a handmaiden of the government. Like the colonials, the rulers of independent Pakistan could brook no criticism. All the colonial laws remained on the statute books. Colonialism, it seemed, had merely been transferred from the British to the local elite.

The press fell into line as democracy was crushed by successive governments. There were a whole range of instruments with which to browbeat or persuade the press into compliance: newsprint quotas, government advertising, press advice, and various laws under which journalists could be jailed, publications banned, presses sealed and security deposits demanded. All governments in Pakistan used all these instruments to manipulate the press.

The first attack on press freedom in Pakistan came in 1948 when the Muslim League government proscribed three progressive periodicals. When the ban expired, and one of the journals reappeared in the market, it was asked to furnish a security deposit. After the next issue its editor was jailed under the Safety Act. Other publications were also banned or asked to furnish securities and their editors were arrested.

In 1949 government advertising to *Inqilab*, Lahore was stopped, its newsprint quota was withdrawn, its entry into the North West Frontier Province was banned, and pressure was exerted on hawkers and news agents not to distribute it. Ultimately, the paper closed down after 22 years in existence.

During the first seven years after independence, 31 newspapers were banned in the Punjab alone and security deposits demanded from another 15. Yet in 1950, Altaf Hussain of *Dawn*, one of the country's best-known editors, told the Commonwealth Press Union in Canada that the "Press in Pakistan has no use for freedom in her present stage of development" because "we are skating on thin ice." The impact of government policies on media ethics had begun to show: instead of defending the press, press stalwarts were defending the indefensible actions of the government towards their community. In an article in the *Herald* in August 1977, Zuhavr Siuddiqui wrote:

"In the years that followed, the government could, almost always, find support for its arbitrary action against a newspaper in one section or another. The support was generally extended in the name of "the national interest, the glory of Islam, the ideology of Pakistan" or some other mundane consideration... It may be added that the editors of two papers went to Zurich to justify that outrageous assault on a section of the press before the International Press Institute."

The press itself in fact, actively played politics, supporting one political group or another, and even defending the establishment's measures against the press. Perhaps the culmination of this shameful distortion of media ethics was the joint editorial on May 6, 1949 by 16 dailies demanding penal

action against the *Civil and Military Gazette* for publishing an unconfirmed report by its New Delhi correspondent that Kashmir would be partitioned along its existing boundaries. This despite the fact that the paper had subsequently denied and regretted the report. The government promptly obliged by closing the paper for six months. The CMG never recovered from this action, losing circulation and business, and ultimately closing down in 1964.

In 1953, the civil and military bureaucracy engineered a political coup against Prime Minister Khwaja Nazimuddin, first by inspiring the anti-Ahmedi riots, then by raising the false spectre of an impending famine. In this effort the press too was mobilised; it ran a famine scare campaign. Not content with that, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, one of the country's leading Urdu dailies, went on to demand the Prime Minister's resignation and if he did not, it advised, the Governor-General should "sack the Prime Minister and even suspend the constitution." With such editors the press had no need of enemies. But *Nawa-i-Waqt* was hoist with its own petard in a sense when it was placed under pre-censorship in February 1951, a month before provincial elections in the Punjab, when the political group it had opposed was in power.

On December 1952 the entire press went on a 24-hour strike to protest the arrest of the editor, cartoonist and printer = publisher of the *Evening Times*, Karachi for a front-page editorial and cartoon accusing the government of plunging the country into chaos.

But such instances of press courage under pressure were few and far between. On the other hand, the capitulation of the press to more attractive pressures continued. During the anti-Ahmediya riots of 1953, four papers were given funds by the Daultana government from the Adult Literacy campaign to fan the anti-Ahmediya agitation, which ultimately led to Pakistan's first martial law, imposed in the Punjab in 1955.

But despite all the tribulations that the press faced in the ostensibly democratic period between August 14, 1947 and October 8, 1959, it was just a mild forerunner of what was to follow. On October 8, 1958, Pakistan's first countrywide martial law was imposed. The national Assembly was dissolved, the constitution abrogated, political parties banned, and press criticism prohibited. Editors were jailed under the Security Act or the Safety act. The imposition of martial law was welcomed editorially by every daily in the country except the *Pakistan Times*. Such temerity could not go unnoticed or unpunished, and censorship was imposed on the Progressive Papers Ltd, later replaced by an advisory system.

But even that did not tame the PPL papers to the satisfaction of the martial law regime. And so on April 18, 1959 the PPL group was taken over by the Ayub government on the charge that "they contained news likely to endanger the security of Pakistan and that "they were printed with funds from foreign sources." The man who carried the news to the editor of the *Pakistan Times* was a man who was to play a leading role in

Pakistan's subsequent history, and that of its press: Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. On August 19, 1959, PPL shares were auctioned, and the bid by industrialist Ahmed Dawood was accepted. In the 12 years of their existence the PPL papers had, with the exception of the joint editorial against the Civil and Military Gazette, fought consistently for the freedom of the press, the rights of the people and the interests of the country as a whole. They stood out in the prevailing environment of sycophancy and fanaticism, and had to pay the price for it. Perhaps the most sordid aspect of the takeover of the PPL papers was the applause it drew from the press barons. From the takeover of the PPL group to the formation of the National Press Trust was perhaps an inevitable step. Realising the power of the press, and prompted by his information advisers, Ayub Khan felt the need to have a mouthpiece of his own. The Times of Karachi hailed the government move in a front page editorial and in Dawn Altaf Hussain wrote: "The occasion demands that the rest of the national press should hail the ideological re-birth of the Pakistan Times and its allied publications. The revolutionary regime has rounded a signal service to the cause of a free press in Pakistan." Altaf Hussain himself subsequently joined the cabinet of the revolutionary regime. And in 1964 the National Press Trust (NPT) was raised from the ashes of the PPL papers to raise the "standard of journalism in the country." Founder members included the country's major industrial and business families. At least five of the nine trustees were to be government servants or susceptible to its control. The Trust went on to acquire 12 newspapers in English, Urdu and Bengali.

In East and West Pakistan. The income of the Trust was tax-free, and Trust papers got the lion's share of government advertising. The ideological direction of the NPT papers was thus clearly delineated. In the words of Zamiq Niazi in his seminal work on the press, Press in Chains writes: "Right from the start all the Trust papers assumed the role of official spokesmen and toed the official line without any qualms. Sycophancy and sensitivity became the watchwords, and the watchdogs of yesteryears turned into the lapdogs of the establishment."

This policy had a corrosive effect on the professionalism, ethics and mindset of NPT journalists. After 10 years of working for the Trust the editor of one Trust journal confessed that she had grown so used to writing in support of the government that she had been rendered incapable of writing any other way. The Trust completely stifled independent thinking, and encouraged regimentation.

The impact of the wholesale suppression and regimentation of the press had a debilitating impact not only on the ethics and professionalism of the NPT papers but on the press as a whole. A prime example of this came in 1968 when the country's newspapers were ordered to print special supplements to highlight the progress made during Ayub Khan's much trumpeted Decade of Development. Zamiq Niazi in Press in Chains point out the extent

of press debasement through two examples. Dawn, a major NPT paper, published 95 photographs of President Ayub in its 32 page supplement on the occasion. It also reproduced some of the editorials written by its former editor Altaf Hussain on the historic significance of the Ayub revolution and the progress achieved under his dynamic leadership. But to the NPT paper marshing went the honour of reproducing from the Decade of Development brochure a blasphemous poem by a director of education in Karachi claiming that "God Almighty himself would not have dared to accomplish what the Great Saviour Ayub Khan undertook and achieved in 1958.

The sensibility of NPT papers extended without bias to whichever government happened to be in power. When Ayub fell, the loyalties of the NPT empire were promptly and unabashedly transferred to his successor, General Yahya Khan, and when he fell, to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, against whom they had waged a sustained campaign during his days in the political wilderness after he fell out with Ayub.

Little wonder then that no government had the stomach to surrender such a vital propaganda organ as the NPT. The dissolution of the NPT was part of the foundation papers of Mr. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party. But a few months down the road after coming into power, the PPP government did an about face on the issue. Bhutto's information minister claimed that the PPP had committed itself to dissolution of the NPT earlier because it was in the hands of "anti-people forces". With a people's elected government in place, he no longer saw any reason for the NPT's dissolution. In a further travesty of the PPP's earlier stand, he characterised the formation of the NPT as an act against "private ownership" and maintained that the trend in favour of nationalisation and "collectivisation" could not be reversed.

Despite the existence of a plethora of laws that were already in use against the press, Ayub found it necessary to introduce an even more draconian law to control the press when he lifted martial law and introduced his own constitution in 1962. To the Safety Act, the Security Act, the Official Secrets Act, the Defence of Pakistan rules and the maintenance of Public Order rules was now added the notorious West Pakistan Press and Publications Ordinance.

Under the ordinance, only those reports of court and assembly proceedings could be published that were officially allowed, all government handouts and press notes were to be printed verbatim, the security deposit limit was raised from Rs.10,000 to Rs.30,000 and the government was authorised to suspend or annual declarations, worst of all, the power of the high courts to hear appeals was withdrawn. Qualifications for editors were also laid down, they were required to be of good character with adequate training or experience of journalism and sufficient financial resources. The law outdid anything the colonial rulers had thought up. The British closed down newspapers but did not prohibit new publications by empowering

magistrates to refuse authentication of declarations and barring appeals to high courts on the issue, as the new ordinance did.

The ordinance led to a countrywide protest strike by journalists, but that only delayed its promulgation by a month, with a only modification in the provision relating to reports of court and assembly proceedings. This was the ordinance that ruled the press till 1988.

As if this were not enough, the press advice system, a colonial legacy, was introduced by Ayub during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war. When the war ended, the job of advising the press was taken over from the by the press information department. It became a unique device to control the press: advice about killing or carrying news, display and placement of news, sizes of photographs, headlines and even captions poured in over the telephone, killing all initiative and independent thinking. Successive governments have made full use of this weapon to regiment the press. After Zulfikar Bhutto was re-elected in 1977, papers were advised to print his photograph in 8 x 6 in with the caption, The Supreme Leader, the undisputed Leader, The Great Leader.

If on the one hand the stick ensured that independent journalists were kept in line, on the other a variety of carrots bought the loyalties of others. Newsprint quotas were fixed by the government not according to the circulations of publications but according to their stance towards the government. Favoured publications were given over-liberal quotas while offending publications were denied newsprint or given far less than what they needed. The result was that those publications which were denied their quotas had to purchase newsprint from favoured publications, some of which muted small fortunes by blackmarketing newsprint.

Advertising revenue is another major instrument with which the press has been manipulated in Pakistan. Instead of being distributed according to the circulations of publications, government advertising was doled out as largesse, lavished on favourites of the government, withheld from its critics. The advertising weapon has been used to its maximum extent by all governments in Pakistan, and continues to be used to this day.

The impact of the advertising carrot on media ethics can be gauged by the fact that there are in existence today what are virtually dummy publications, which exist only for the purpose of securing advertising revenue. They print no more than perhaps 500 to 1000 copies, but are distributed to all government departments to ensure that the advertising revenue keeps coming in. These editors have votes and even leading roles in the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) and the All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS), which has contributed to the inability of these organisations to safeguard the interests of the press.

The role of these two organisations has been not merely dubious but often detrimental to press freedom. They have been co-opted in a sense by the establishment. Two examples amply illustrate this. In 1980 four months after the Zia government

imposed pre-censorship, CPNE president Z.A.Suleni stated that the press freedom allowed by the regime in its three years had never been enjoyed in the last 33 years of the country's life. Similarly, Majid Nizami editor of Nawa-i-Waqt and president at one time of both the CPNE and the APN said that the freedom enjoyed by newspapers during the current military rule was more than before 1938. (when democracy was functioning. On one occasion Mr.Nizami went even further and demanded a martial law regulation to control the number of pages or pictures that a newspaper could publish in order to control what he called 'unhealthy competition.' When those supposed to safeguard the interests of the press demanded more curbs on it, what hope could there be for an independent press.

And that in a sense has been the crux of the crisis of the press in Pakistan. It has been easy for successive government to emasculate the press in Pakistan because newspaper owners and journalists have bartered their consciences for financial gain. Commercial interests have predominated, exemplified by the scramble for ads, plots of land, bank loans, free trips abroad and other favours from the government. For those who were in journalism as businessmen and not because of any commitment to the profession, it was easier to fall in line, to succumb to the glitter of financial incentives rather than face the vicissitudes that came with taking on the government. By their servility their condonation of government repression against the press, newspaper baroujs have played their part in killing democracy and strengthening authoritarianism.

Ayub Kahan's sins against the press could perhaps be understood, if not forgiven, but he was not the only one to feel the need for ever more repressive laws to protect himself against dissent. The populist leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto made full use of all the instruments available against the press, banning publications, jailing their editors and initiating proceedings against them under martial law regulations, sealing presses and then went on to invent some new curbs of his own. The sorry spectacle of a popularly elected leader resorting to martial law regulations reached its zenith when a new ML order No.5, billed the Objectionable Publications Order, 1972 was drafted to ensure that offending journalists were put permanently out of action. The law prohibited editors, publishers and printers whose declarations had been cancelled from editing, publishing and printing any other newspaper under any name whatsoever. The emasculation of the independent press was complete.

Bhutto honed into a fine art the use of all the instruments that had been put in place by the Ayub regime. The NPT papers, which had hounded him when he was politically persona non grata, were now pressed into the service of his regime. Both editorially and in their news columns, the NPT papers promoted the Bhutto regime on the one hand and slandered the opposition on the other.

Bhutto successfully wielded both the carrot and the stick. Newsprint quotas and government advertising were denied to offending publications, and lavished on NPT papers and other that

toed the line.

If the Bhutto regime was a black period in the history of the press, the period that followed set new records in the repression of the press. General Zia-ul-Haq, whose iron rule extended for 11 dark years, introduced new weapons in the authorities, armoury against the press. The Chief Martial Law Administrator wanted to break the will of independent journalists - and cracked the whip literally to do it. On May 13, 1978, four journalists were sentenced to rigorous imprisonment and lashes for organising meetings at public places, raising slogans, displaying banners and starting a hunger strike. The sentence was executed within 70 minutes of the judgement. The action was meant to break the countrywide agitation launched by journalists against the repression unleashed on the press. By that time, 11 papers had been banned, 13 others fined, and several journalists arrested. Journalists had protested by courting arrest, and 150 of them had been jailed, but the regime broke the agitation by creating a split in the ranks of the journalists and press workers unions: Two PFJUs (Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists) and two APNECs (All Pakistan Newspaper Empllkoyees Confederation) were formed effectively eliminating the journalist community's weapon of last resort a total strike.

Zia-ul-Haq then went on to add another weapon to those emasculating the press; censorship. On October 17, 1979 he postponed elections for the second time, dissolved all political parties, sealed their accounts, and imposed blanket pre-censorship on newspapers under MLR 49.

Minions of the provincial information departments, with little or no knowledge of the media, and concerned only with pleasing their bosses, became the arbiters of journalistic destinies. Readers were thus treated to the strange spectacle of blank spaces in their newspapers and journals. The mental calibre of those sitting in judgement on the press can be gauged from the fact that in one issue of The Herald (of which I was editor at the time), an article on Khomeini's Iran was totally censored out but the headline, by-line, pictures and captions were passed. An that is precisely how the pages were printed. Blank spaces became a form of protest against censorship - and a way of letting readers know what had been censored. But it was not long before the authorities realised that white space itself was news and censored that too pre-censorship remained in force for over two years, after which it gave way to self-censorship.

Inevitably, while censorship prevailed, the public turned to other sources for information, most notably the BBC and All India Radio. A survey conducted by the BBC in mid-'82 in fact, found that AIR's audience in Pakistan was 58.5% against the BBC's 46.8%.

Pre-censorship may have given way to self-censorship but the sacred cows remained. Fooling the censor became a way of life for journalists seeking to portray the truth. At the Herald we had our own code words for the sacred cows; the army was never the army but the laws enforcing agencies, while the government was

the current dispensation or the powers that be.

General Zia touched surprisingly new heights of inventiveness and brazenness in his attempt to gag the press. On December 18, 1979, the CMLA President promulgated an ordinance amending sections 49 and 500 of the Pakistan Penal Code to make the publication of defamatory matter even if it was true and in the national interest, an offence punishable with 5 years R. I. or a fine or both. Only court proceedings were exempt from the purview of the ordinance. Never before had truth and the public interest been so contemptuously dismissed. Even the 1860 Law of Defamation introduced by the British in India had allowed exemptions for reporting in the public good, and on the conduct of public servants. With one stroke of the pen, the press had been put into a virtual straitjacket; there was no room left to manoeuvre. To further ensure that only the officially certified truth was available in institutions under his control, Zia took yet another measure; he directed that government departments, autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies, educational institutions and libraries purchase only NPT publications.

Zia-ul-Haq justified his repressive policies on the ground that he was protecting Islam. The ideological priorities of the country, he maintained, had to be defended, and anyone writing against the ideology of the country and the nation would be checked. The February 1978 issue of The Herald which carried a cover story analysing the Islamisation of Pakistan drew the general's ire. We were issued a show cause notice and asked to deposit Rs.30,000 as security.

Yet on April 8, 1984, the Federal Shariat Court in a historic judgement on a petition filed by a private citizen challenging, along with other repressive laws, the WPPPO 1963, declared that Islam lays great stress on freedom of expression and not only gives people the right of dissent but makes it obligatory on them to protest against tyranny, injustice and oppression. The mass media cording to the judgement, are entitled to express freely their opinion about affairs of the state with a view to ensuring the authorities remain within the framework of the law. The media are entitled to question the highest authorities in the land, and to exercise this right without fear or favour.

The Shariat Court also declared that some provisions of the WPPPO were repugnant to Islam and recommended that changes be made in the procedure for issuing declarations, fixing a time limit for pending applications, and that appeals should be allowed against refusals. With the court giving a September deadline for amending the law, the dreaded ordinance was replaced that year with the Registration of Printing Presses and Publications Ordinance, which made the issuance of declarations automatic after four months if the district magistrate had not issued it by then, and allowed appeals against refusal of declarations. But this did not happen till after Zia's death in a plane crash in August 1988 which marked a dramatic turning point in the fortunes of the Pakistan press.

The easing of restrictions on new declarations saw a sudden blooming in the Pakistan media, with a variety of new publications appearing. During Benazir Bhutto's first government, the press enjoyed unprecedented freedom, which perhaps contributed in no small measure to her downfall. The press, highly polarised by now and divided largely into pro- and anti-Bhutto camps, played its own politics. While independent publications like Newsline ran investigative stories on the corruption in the Bhutto government, the IJI, which had formed the government under Nawaz Sharif in the country's largest province, the Punjab, initiated a sustained campaign of disinformation about the Bhutto regime. Scandal sheets carrying obscene and highly slanderous stories about the Bhutto family were financed by the IJI.

But while the press was now free of the crippling laws that had characterised the earlier decades, new threats to the independence of the press had reared their head. Scattered incidents of violence against the press had taken place in the late '60s, '70s and '80s during the Yahya, Bhutto, and Zia regimes, but the organised use of violence as a weapon with which to browbeat the press became a common phenomenon in the '90s. Sins of both of bill omission and commission sparked attacks on newspaper offices and journalists, and the distribution of publications. All the major political parties - the PPP, the Muslim League, the Jamaat-e-Islami the MQM were guilty. The statistics on violence are revealing of the rising trend: from 1965 to 1991 there were 181 reported cases of violence against the press, while in the period between March '91 to October '91 alone there were 40 cases of threats or assaults on the press. The administration failed both to protect victims of more violence even when its help was sought, and to take action against the offenders even though it knew who they were. By its inaction the government provided tacit support for acts of violence against the press, encouraging militant, ethnic, highly armed organisations like the MQM to virtually hold the press to ransom, terrorising publications into submission, attacking offices and journalists, holding up distribution at will and, even more insidiously, terrorising newspapers into printing its press releases as staff reports.

The government's role in violence against the press reached its zenith during Nawaz Sharif's rule when Sindh chief minister Jam Sadiq Ali, a former PPP minister turned PPP remesis, threatened journalists himself. He warned the Hyderabad bureau chief of The Frontier Post that if he did not stop filing reports against his administration, he just might 'disappear'. A Frontier Post correspondent was subsequently picked up and tortured by the police.

In 1991 the Nawaz Sharif government tried to acquire more powers to curb the press by attempting to reintroduce some of the provisions of the WPPPO. When the attempt failed, other means were tried. Journalists were harassed by intelligence agencies, secret dossiers were compiled on critical journalists, a sedition

case was instituted against Maleeha Lodhi, editor of The News, Islamabad. The time-honoured tradition of using advertising revenue and newsprint quotas as levers also continued so did the method of planting informers in newspaper establishments introduced by Altaf Gauhar, Ayub Khan's controversial Information Secretary, and ex-Editor of Dawn. Nawaz Sharif himself claimed that 300 journalists were on the payroll of one intelligence agency or another.

The manipulation of the press by political or intelligence plants shows in the manipulation, suppression or playing up of news about the agency or party for which they are working. In fact, the stark polarisation of the press is one of the grave dangers threatening the independence and objectivity of the press today.

During the caretaker governments brief tenure, all political parties were allowed time on television. The caretaker government also issued an ordinance making television and radio a semi-autonomous corporation, but unless the ordinance is ratified by Ms.Bhutto's government within four months, it will lapse. This step formed part of Ms.Bhutto's own election manifesto, but manifestos have fallen by the wayside before. Thus far the electronic media have been covering the opposition too, but it is early days yet. All parties want a free media when they are out of power and responsible media when they are in power. How Ms.Bhutto's government deals with this dilemma remains to be seen.