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Pakistan's Press System

By

Nisar A Zuberi
Since the restoration of democracy and the induction of popularly elected representatives in the government, the Press system in Pakistan is in for a new era of development. It is destined to experience more liberty and independence, both in relation to government and other pressure groups, better quality and higher credibility, economic viability and expansion and more effective and pervasive role as a social force. A summary of indicators of these phenomena follows here below.

I. The Press & The Government:

A major impediment in the growth of the Pakistani Press has been the coterie of government regulations, imposed during 43 years from 1947. From sedition to defamation, these regulations deal with almost all imaginable offences and perhaps nothing in print would fall out of their purview. Various governments announced that they had no intention to use any of these draconian laws, but none tried to do away with them. By keeping the laws intact, they showed that intention to keep the Press tamed is there.

The fragile Press in Pakistan had to survive under threats of intimidation from the various governments, arbitrary use of rules and amid all kinds of favours to only those who comply. Under these unfavourable circumstances, the growth of Press remained slow, distorted and unhealthy. One indication of this is provided by the fact that only one newspaper is being published for every 71 people. This is one of the lowest readerships in underdeveloped Asia and among the worst in the world.

Failures in the establishment of a democratic government and marked apathy to increase the rate of literacy have contributed almost all ingredients for keeping the Press under pressure. On the other side, various governments did not change the following practices:
i) Issuance of declaration (permission to publish) only to those who could guarantee compliance.

ii) Doling out advertising support to only those newspapers who did not challenge and displease the government and went on beating their drum for flattering.

iii) Disseminating only such news which could favour the government and the party in power.

iv) Issuance of newsprint permits to conformist newspapers.

Through these tactics, various governments kept the Press under tremendous pressure and managed to slow down its growth. Even today when the worst press law PPO-63 has been replaced with a far better Registration of Publication Ordinance (1988), and the practice of issuing newsprint permits has been abolished, the government remains the single most significant authority which keeps the heart of the Press in awe. The fact that government contracts the 60% advertising of the country is enough to show the scope of its power over the Press.

Even then, one might say that the present is better than the past. Today the Press is free to an extent that the President, the PM and the heads of the armed forces are being openly criticised. The system of 'Press Advice' is no more in vogue and quota of newsprint is not being used as a lever. These three major developments have changed the whole scene to a formidable degree which fosters hope for a better future only if the nation is not forcefully driven to square-one again. As the Press freedom is still at a nascent stage, and political temperature is still high even after an election (Nov. 1990), the danger to democracy still lurks. In such a situation, nothing serious is required to disturb the environment. Something, whatever ordinary, might change it all, anytime.
II. Quality & Credibility:

With the repeal of Press & Publication (Amendment) Ordinance, 1963, known as "Black Law", Government Press relations now stand on a new footing, and the image of the Press as a credible source of news has also been restored. It has always enjoyed far more reliability than the official media of radio and television. With three elections in a span of five years, (from 1985 to 1990), it got a golden opportunity to be bold and to the point in its function of surveillance of the social horizon at large. Political parties striving to secure more seats in the parliament, had to pledge more freedom in their election manifests. Emboldened by these commitments, and knowing that freedom is not really given by any agency, the newspapers and periodicals went on writing according to their conscience. This also increased the number of exclusive and investigative stories in all newspapers. Many such stories are now being published on the front page and are getting a very favourable response from the readers. It is also interesting to note that the front pages in Urdu newspapers have become historic in the sense that number of news items given on this page is usually more than 50. Connected with the continuations on inside pages, the make-up is more circuit than the term would indicate. It is really a hotch-potch of headlines in reverse.

More and more newspapers have realised the significance of exclusive news through their own correspondent. Previously, because of the paucity of funds, even the major newspapers published monotonous news circulated by the official news agency (The Associated News of Pakistan). Today, at least the big newspapers are quite diverse in their content and presentation, and a reader can get a better choice which was never available to him before. He is also getting more reading material than ever before as competing newspapers have added weekly supplements which cater to various tastes.
III. Growth & Development:

The one area, where the Pakistani Press stands with its head high, is that of technological advancement in the last few years. Country's newest daily "The News" (1991) which is using computers at all stages has triggered a new era of better presentation. Pakistani newspapers today, are profusely coloured, publish several supplements every week for women, children, sports, showbiz and religion. So much reading material is being provided that no reader can possibly read everything. Even the smaller newspapers are equipped with telefax facilities and pictures are also being transmitted by this facility.

Only one thing stands in their way to attain higher levels of development. That one very crucial requirement is literacy, which may not be forthcoming as the budgetary allocation for education is to remain small, due to economic pressures augmented by the "Gulf Crisis".

IV. The Press & Society:

The area which is the hotbed of perhaps the most disturbing problem so far, is where the society comes in. Pressure from the government side is not new for Pakistani Press. Newspapers, in general are used to it and try to cope with it, as a permanent and perpetual affair. But the coercion and intimidation from the side of political groups and parties is not something which might be taken lightly.

During the last four years, several incidences of attacks on newspaper offices have been reported. Daily Jang, Lahore & Karachi, daily Kawa-i-Waqit, Lahore & Karachi, daily Jasarat, Karachi and weekly Takbeer, Karachi are, to name only a few publications which heavily suffered. During these attacks, journalists have been abused and beaten, office furniture and machinery has been damaged/put to fire and even the walls were subjected to all sorts of graffittis.

Outside the offices, sale of newspapers etc. has been thoroughly disturbed. Press history was created when a group organized the boycott of a daily on March 10, 1989. It
was on such a massive scale that the newspaper virtually did not exist for that one day.

This rather confusing campaign against the press in general, reached to new heights of amazement, when journalists (reporters) were killed by political activists during 1990. Condemned by an American report recently, these killings took place in the interior Sindh and the killers have not been detected so far.

The Press, which has time and again proved itself a brave fighter for a cause, is bewildered by this new situation where the society at large, is sucking its blood. Right from 1947, Pakistani Press has been putting up a sustained struggle for the uplift of a society on democratic lines. It has always preached tolerance, equal rights and justice to all sections of the society. But the society, in turn is proving itself even more coercive than the governments of various dictators.

It is this relatively new, far more complicated and deeply undemocratic attitude of ultra politicalised groups which is at the very neck of the Pakistani Press. And the threat is so profound that otherwise influential bodies like APNS (All Pakistan Newspaper Society), CPNE (Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors), have not been able to think a practical solution to the problem, except to be soft and accommodative.

This, perhaps, is the most difficult test, which the Press has to pass. The situation is in no way, disappointing, but it certainly would warrant every ounce of courage and intelligence. If the Press pulls through this most difficult crisis, it would perhaps not have to face anything like it in the future.
SUMMARY

Seen functions-wise, the Press in Pakistan, has to go a long way if strength and quality is to be acquired for fighting the pressures. It is a good, reliable informant and an excellent entertainer, but not yet a guide and educator of needed quality. At times, its news function is amazingly efficient but on other occasions it fails in its basic duties. The chief reason for this unsmooth and unguaranteed quality control is the regularly disturbed process of democracy in the country. Yet some burden of responsibility lies on newspapers also who do not jealously guard their freedom and that of the society at large.

In recent years, the pressure from government side is somewhat reduced, but other forces have emerged which threaten the smooth functioning of the Press. At present this is the most disquietening and very powerful element which seems to keep minds engaged for quite some time to come.