

Press in Pakistan 1947-1958: A Historical Evolution

Abstract: *Pakistan inherited its media culture and traditions from the British colonial India. The Indian press regulations in colonial era reflected the imperial strategy to suppress any dissenting voice. Throughout the dramatic events of Second World War, freedom movement and the last days of partition; Indian press remained aloof from the aspirations of common masses. With the advent of Pakistan; this atmosphere of alienation remained intact between Mass media and the general public. Pakistani press remained under stress from the same state policies that had been designed with imperial intentions before the partition of India. The colonial legacy of suppression and censorships on media continues to this day.*

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Key Words: Mass Media, Censorships, Press, Journalists, Free speech

Introduction

Press hold a great significance for development and prosperity of a Nation. The journalists are entrusted with the responsibility to keep an eye on the public interest. In the modern World, Journalists are considered as the flag-bearers of democratic norms. It is rightly said that the prosperity of any nation is directly proportional to their extent of freedom of the press. This scale justifies the economic conditions of most of the developed and under-developed countries. Pakistan, a nation of twenty four million people fulfill this criterion; owing to its economic indicators and freedom of the press. International media monitors have listed Pakistan as the

world's most unsafe destination for journalists for the past two decades. One might wonder how the state of affairs ended up here. Well it dates back to the earliest years of the foundation of Pakistan; when the lone ruling party Muslim League faced its political opposition based on ideology, ethnicity and regional interest (Ahmed, 1982). The increasing popularity of ethnic nationalism was in itself a threat to the ideology of the newly formed Pakistan. Ruling Muslim league already on the verge of collapse, began its crackdown against the printing press to avoid the uprising of the masses. There was an ideological war erupted between Soviet Union and the US by the time Pakistan showed up on the World map; the

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whole World was divided into two blocs, namely the communist bloc and the American bloc. Pakistan too had to choose between the two, so the country's leadership decided to become part of the American bloc, and thereafter numerous measures were taken against those newspapers, magazines and journalists that leaned more towards the communist school of thought. The first decade after partition established the future plan and problems for Pakistan's journalism. The censorship and press regulations became a regular part of a journalist life (Aziz, [2002](#)).

Methodology

The study investigates the earliest challenges to Pakistani journalists and press from the newly formed state. Using the qualitative method of research, the paper analyzes the state anti-press laws in colonial and post-colonial context to understand the gravity of the circumstances. These laws and regulations were meant to curb the flow of information to the masses. The motives behind these totalitarian laws have also been the focus of the study.

Press: A Colonial Past

The Colonial Press had nonconformist status and was hostile in its affairs with foreign rulers prior to partition. Relations with the British regime were quite different from what they became after Partition; in fact, the press performed a more sacred task, namely to act as the mediator of freedom (Niazi, [1986](#)). However, after partition, the hostile state of the relations between press and the government became contentious. The publishers, in most cases, also owned and wrote in their dailies while at the same time involved in politics. Zafar Ali Khan, who edited and owned both Zamindar and Comrade daily newspapers, Sir Syed too edited weeklies for years. Al-Hilal was run by Abdul Kalam Azad, which played crucial role in educating the Muslims of the subcontinent. Journalists were sincerely involved in Indian political process and were always at odds with the British authorities. By 1937, just 34 English dailies and an equivalent number of weeklies rouse to 54 dailies and 260 weeklies by 1947 (Niazi, [1986](#)). Such a dramatic surge occurred at a time when the establishment of a Muslim nation seemed unavoidable. The

explanation for this increase was the Muslim press's important role in the foundation of new Muslim state. However, it was a time the press was unpredictable due to restrictive onslaught by British authorities. After the Indian mutiny of 1857, the British authorities started to comprehend the depth of the situation. They accused the press for sabotaging the peace in the Indian peninsula. This resulted in a action against the press which brought its number from 38 newspaper to mere 12. But it didn't stop the press from criticizing the imperial policies. The British authorities reacted with even more suppressive measures. From time to time a several of press laws have been imposed and incorporated into the book of Codes. Following the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1898, sections 124A and 153A of the Penal Code were adopted. In addition, Section 565 of the Indian Penal Code applied. Between 1908 and 1919, four new laws were passed, including the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1908, the Press Act of 1910, the Prevention of Seditious Meetings Act of 1911, and the Newspapers Act of 1908. Additionally, there existed the Official Secrets Act, 1903 Amendment. The Defense of India Act, passed in 1914, strengthened press regulations. In a briefing on the implementation of the Press Act of 1910, the Press Association of India highlighted that approximately 1,000 newspapers had faced legal action. The government got about 5 lakh rupees in confiscations and collateral in the first five years of the statute. Another official statement from 1918 claims that the law forbade more than 500 publications. In order to carry out the policy of the British Government of India regarding the repression of political agitation or free public criticism of its regular acts and methods of administration in India, the Defense Act's provisions were used in India not only for military purposes but also for all other political purposes. The Press Act wreaked disaster on the Indian subcontinent's press. More than 1990 newspapers were targeted, 286 were warned to improve their opinion on the administration. The security deposit of 705 dailies and weeklies were confiscated, and all new publishing businesses' declarations were revoked. For several years, journalists suffered imprisonment for various reasons, and newspapers were penalized financially for their audacious

stand against the authorities. From the 1857 Indian Mutiny to Partition in 1947, the government utilized all means possible to choke and control the press. Because of their strong views at the time, ties between the press and the administration were never pleasant. The entire press did its best to instill anti-British Raj sentiment and supported any movement aimed at driving the foreign rulers out of the subcontinent. Although the Hindu press suffered under the British government's reign of terror, Muslim newspapers too were the primary targets (Niazi, 1986). The Muslim press gave up its own liberty to free the country from the oppressive control of the British administration. As a result, it is correct to say that the Indian masses and press had only one goal, which they had been fighting for a long time: freedom from colonial authority. The press served as an advocate for the common man's interests.

Press in the State of the Pure

The press was not entirely developed when Pakistan was founded. The hub of journalism activities was Lahore. Additionally, a few newspapers from Karachi, and Dhaka were published. Chittagong served as the primary press hub in East Pakistan (Nichols, 2001). The Press was well aware of their constitutional role in nation building. And so was the father of nation, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who believed in free press and freedom of speech. A few months prior to the inception of Pakistan he talked to the representatives of Muslim press;

“Press have great power. They can lead or mislead people. You can make or mar the biggest personalities. The power of the press is really great, but you must remember that this power which you are wielding is a trust.... However, I also expect you to be brave. If I make a mistake or the League makes a mistake with any aspect of its policy or program, I want you to criticize it openly as a friend and as someone whose emotion rhythms with our Muslim homeland (Jafar, 1977).”

He never deviated from his principles of equality and freedom of speech while serving as head of state. He left it to the other editors to hold the press accountable for their acts whenever a newspaper spewed out toxic opinions through

stories or editorials. He objected to legislation that curtailed fundamental liberties enjoyed by people and the press. When we read his reaction to the legal document he was about to sign—restricting press freedom—it becomes evident how he held to his remarkable position on the matter. You expect me to sign these black laws even though I have battled against them all my life. No, I will not permit it.

One of his earliest stance from 1913 on press act 1910 during a meeting of the Imperial legislative council where he was of the view that he believed in criticizing the administration without any fear and similarly it was the responsibility of every citizen to support the administration in the right cause. As a lawyer by profession; Muhammad Ali Jinnah strongly believed in constitution. He had a very clear idea of the rights and freedoms of the individual and in particular freedom of the press. In many cases, he advocated maintaining freedom of the press without being invited. Regarding his personal beliefs, he always welcomed suggestions and debate and saw this as an education. He reportedly said that in his entire lifetime he upheld, and have deeply believed that individual liberty is the most important thing in a constitution and should not be taken away by any means.

Public Safety Act

Muhammad Ali Jinnah died after serving as Governor General for a short period. The demise of Jinnah, not only caused a huge vacuum in governance but also put the development of press on hold. The law, rejected by Jinnah, was signed and put out in October 1948 as the Public Safety Ordinance. Khawaja Nazim-uddin, who succeeded Mohammad Ali Jinnah after his death in September 1948, signed the disastrous ordinance. Pakistan already in a state of crisis from the moment of its inception; the lack of leadership further jeopardized its sovereignty. All of these issues had to be addressed when Khawaja Nazim-uddin took over the government. Though a capable politician, he lacked the vision to confront the serious issues of the moment. He was unable to tackle the issue of starvation, for which the media propagated and dubbed him

as the "Quiad-e-Qillat" (Leader of Scarcity) (Niazi, 1986).

The press triggered criticism on the government due to the prevailing problems that had engulfed the entire country. As a result, the government used the Central Special Powers Act to shut down Moulana Zafar Ali Khan's daily newspaper; *Zamindar*. His publishing was prohibited for two weeks due to his criticism of the government's Kashmir policy. Such government intervention was not new to the publication or its publisher/owner. Above all, weak political governments lack the resilience to face criticism and dissent. In addition, Governor-General Khawaja Nazimuddin too belonged to a group that did not accept criticism and had a fractured political alliance. He exposed his government by using the Public Safety Ordinance against journalists. Under this act, the government has the authority to halt the publication of newspapers for any cause. Furthermore, authorities may break into and search any newspaper office without a warrant, and they could seize any publication material they deemed threatening to the public. Under this directive, Urdu newspaper *Safeena* was confiscated, and no evidence was offered to support the press crackdown. The administration harassed the press in an attempt to have complete control over their operations. Sibte Hassan and Faiz were detained, fined, and called for assurance from their editor for their unprofessional behavior. The cycle of imprisonment of editors did not stop there; a long list of journalists were being detained, prosecuted, and instructed to follow the official narrative. There was barely any newspaper that articulated its opinions without being subjected to persecution. There was barely a newspaper that articulated its opinions without being subjected to persecution. Not a single journalist was spared, who had not received at least one warning for his misconduct; provided he kept up with his professional responsibilities. Internal disputes in the province assembly, as well as ministerial grouping, left the administration exposed to the press. The political situation in Sindh deteriorated to the point where a governor rule was put in place to prevent a further collapse of the province's stability. The political turmoil

caused the government to introduce a succession of decrees and legislation to restrict press freedom. Because of the sensitivity of the political and economic issues, the government pressed for publishing only officially confirmed facts. The press, on the other hand, had experience of dealing with colonial rule; refused to accept the official version, resulting in contentious relations with Khawaja Nazim-Uddin's Government.

Press under the Oligarchs

Soon after the murder of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan, Former civil servant Ghulam Muhammad; with the help of the bureaucracy, was crowned as the Governor General of Pakistan. General Iskander Mirza, who was Minister of Defense at the time and had considerable army backing, helped Ghulam Muhammad to be appointed as Governor-General. Choudary Mohammad Ali, then the General Secretary, took over the stressful Ministry of Finance. On October 19, 1951, Governor-General Khawaja Nazimuddin resigned as Governor-General and became Prime Minister.

Soon newspaper headlines began to appear carrying the news of forming and dissolving governments. The constant shuffling of ministries brought Muhammad Ali Bogra, who used to be ambassador to the United States. Once he took the reins of the government, the authorities started a malicious crusade to suppress the press. This Bogra government, like every other weak and unpopular government, established and implemented laws to hijack the press. The Public Safety Act of 1948 was reinstated, as were the Pakistan Security Act of 1952 and the Official Secrets Act of 1923, which served as way of controlling the authoritarian rulers. These laws were often invoked against newspapers that weren't adhering to government protocols. In fact, government officials blackmailed publishers by enforcement of this law. However, some members of the press took close note of the government's warnings and labelled them a violation of basic liberties. The most heinous part of this authoritarianism was the institutional corruption of the press. Some newspapers were bribed and given financial

support to cover up their anti-government remarks.

The first Martial law was declared in Lahore on March 6, 1953, Major General Muhammad Azam Khan, became the chief administrator. The Lahore Martial law was military's first ever experience of civil administration and the use of force. Military rule and freedom of information are completely at odds. With Martial Law established in Lahore; came comprehensive restriction of the press in the city, which housed the majority of the national and nearly all of the opposition press (Aziz, 2002). Before publishing, all stories and opinions had to pass through the military censors and bear their approval mark. The General would not allow anything derogatory of military rule to appear on the news. The first martial law in Pakistan worried newspaper editors, who were unsure what would enrage the all-powerful generals. The Punjab Director of Public Relations had routinely sent significant amounts of money to specific Lahore newspapers on behalf of the state, thereby escalating the outrage. Ghulam Mohammad, Governor-General, and Premier Mohammad Ali Bogra began to lose authority over the affairs of the government. The newspapers grew in its publications becoming more vocal in their reporting. As a result, a number of harsh policies and rules were enacted to counter the press. Nearly 34 publishing houses were sealed for a small time period, with 18 being closed for a year, eight for a duration of six months, and 18 being ordered to deposit securities. Several newspapers were also issued notices to improve their conduct.

General at Work

General Iskandar Mirza's reign was similar to that of his forerunners. He employed the same strategy to silence the press. In addition to cutting economic strength of the press by refusing government advertisements, security confiscations, and newspaper checks; repressive measures were employed to curb the sharp edges of the sword. Several newspapers have been closed for various reasons. The court ruled that the government's actions were illegal and that the newspapers involved should not be fined or imprisoned. The press's reaction to the government's illegal and repressive acts from

1947 to 1958 was quiet normal. The reason for this behavior was their earlier memories of resistance to the colonial ruler's illegal and repressive conduct. The press was well-prepared to answer back to the government's illegal acts. General Mirza subjected Pakistan's press to intense surveillance; inspired by McCarthyism of United States. The ruthlessness of the state was unleashed after the episode of Rawalpindi conspiracy Case 1951. Journalists and writers were subjected to constant harassment, their movements were restricted. Most of them were suspected as Communist spies due to their progressive thoughts and opposition to the government. Censorships and license cancellation became crucial instruments for the government to suppress the freedom of Speech. No space was given to Journalists who worked with their conscience. In such circumstances, a majority of the Journalists underwent self-censorship to escape persecution.

Conclusion

After the demise of Muhammad Ali Jinnah; the state policies towards Press proved that the goal was to suppress the voice of the masses. After all an economically and politically fragile government never allow space to a free and fair press. So they adopt severe measures to curtail the role of the media. To control the press activities; strict laws and regulations were adopted while criminal ventures such as bribing editors were also reported. It bring about a scarcity of professionalism in the conduct of print media. Such Practices diminished the chances of progressivism and improvement. Furthermore, the institutional norms that evolved over a long period of conflict with colonial masters faded out. There were numerous press organizations, Publishers and board of directors who had their own political and economic intensions. Individual journalists are more concerned with personal gains and ignored the responsibilities of their job. This is evident by the fact that when the Army chief Ayub Khan Declared Martial law in Pakistan; there was no resistance to this undemocratic move. The decay of democracy in Pakistan took place at a time when press was crushed. This highlights the crucial role of Press in developing institution and democratic culture

in a country. Except for a short period of time; Pakistan remained infertile to progressive ideas. One cannot hope for a free press in such an abnormal situation. This lack of openness came from the very foundation of the country when the gravestone in the form of objective resolution was laid down to haunt the country for the rest of

its existence. The idea that no law or constitution could be passed in conflict to the objective resolution left no room for enlightened ideas to infiltrate in the Pakistani masses. The despotic attitude of the earliest Pakistani leadership they had inherited from their imperial masters; had left the national institutions in shambles.

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