**Journalism transgression of freedom**

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Quaid-e-Azam, the founder of Pakistan says “I expect press for complete fearless.” regrettably, press in Pakistan has been unsuccessful to appreciate the goal of Quaid-e-Azam. Throughout the first, the decades after 1947 media space in Pakistan remained tightly regulated by the state. There were hardly any players in the broadcast sector. It was restricted to only government-managed television and radio operations. Pakistan Television (PTV) and Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), both owned by the state, remained the sole means of mass broadcasts for news and current affairs during this time. Some historians suggest that media blackout started as early as the departure of Quaid-e- Azam. Immediately after the demise of the Quaid, his sister. Mohtarma Fatima Jinnah was not allowed to give a speech that was approved by the government.

Ironically, when she persisted with her desire to proceed with an uncensored text, she was given go-ahead to make the speech. Suddenly a technical default was developed and full speech could not be delivered.

Print media had remained fairly independent before partition. Invaluable sacrifices were made by protagonist Muslim journalists who set the highest standards of reporting and resistance against media restrictions. It is Ironical that the newly-created country which had been achieved after a vociferous media struggle chose to keep media restrictions under the pretext of national security. After a while, restrictive and monopolistic control of media paved the way for helping martial law sweet the corridors of power silently and perpetuate military rule which took up more than half of the 50 years of independence.

The adage of Alexander Pope which said “Let fools argue over the form of government. What is administered best is best” kept people ignorant about the detrimental effects of martial law and deprived them of any argument against the dictatorial dispensation through the imposition of media restrictions. There was hardly any educated public opinion or awareness over fundamental rights, education, citizen welfare, and entrenched democratic ethos. Sadly, military regimes were largely unimpeded by democratic resistance in the absence of mobilization of independent public opinion through mass media. This entire saga of media restrictions offers interesting insights into Pakistan’s political evolution. The role of media in the early years was restricted to reporting and evaluation of government policies. During the first four decades, several poets and journalists were persecuted for raising their voices. Habib Jalib, Faiz, and other notables highlight the need for free media and the lifting of restrictions. Illiteracy and lack of media presence had not galvanized public opinion during this large period. However, the media remained fairly free to report on matters during the regime of Zulifqar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s and later under Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s. However, it was not until the dawn of the 21st century when private channels of media started operating freely and independently. Media reforms were enacted allowing for non-government, private broadcast media to merge. The dozens of television channels and FM radio stations which subsequently came about fundamentally altered the contours of public opinion mobilization and were directly responsible for the resistance to Gen. Pervez Musharaff’s dispensation and the eventual return of democratic rule in 2008.

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The message is clear and independent voices are under ‘surveillance’ and on the radar of those who in their own view ‘crossed’ a certain red line. Media is also under constant attack from the social media activists of different political parties. Criticism is always welcome but the threat is dangerous as only last year seven journalists had been killed in Pakistan and it is still regarded as among the five dangerous countries for reporting.

There have been dramatic changes in Pakistan’s media landscape since liberalization was embraced by President Musharaff&#39;s regime. In the wake of the war on terror, an urge was felt to change the narrative among the population and to provide the justification of volte-face on several policies that the state had been pursuing for the last 50 years without giving its citizen any say. “Enlightened Moderation” was made fashionable by the Musharraf government to improve the image of the country and improve its democratic credentials among the world. Ownership of different mediums of media such as news channels, newspapers, and magazines has also changed dramatically. Most of Pakistan’s private media is family-owned businesses that have their interests. Many news channels have been developing interests and agendas of their own thereby impacting politics and governance, sometimes threatening the stability of the system. Apart from a personal ax to grind whereby some news channels tow the official line to get rewarded, some have had a head-on collision with the state. There have been several instances when the media caved into official pressure or temptation for falling in line with the official’s narrative. In other cases, there have been abductions of journalists and blockade of news channels. Recently Matiullah Jan was abducted and his early release became possible due to the strong and collective voice of the journalist fraternity, not only within the country but also from international journalists and human rights bodies. Political parties and civil society including bar associations reacted sharply and Islamabad High Court, the chief justice took prompt notice of the petition.

All this helps in exerting pressure on the alleged kidnappers and those behind the move. Now the Pakistani media has gone from being one of the liveliest and free in its history to become one of the most subdued and controlled. There have been many attempts to regulate speech, but PECA stands out because of the sections that criminalize speech and grant authorities unchecked powers to curtail and persecute it.

The law is laced with ambiguity and has been criticized for violating Articles 4, 10-A, 14, and 19 of the constitution. It has in some instances provided clues about the impropriety of content and its being against the ethics of journalism. But censorship and destitution without any cause in the democratic state is a deception of the freedom of the state.

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