

The Performance of Press During Women Movement in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the performance of press in Pakistan with regard to the issues central to women status in society. In Pakistan, the movement for women rights was at its peak during the days of military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq whose politically motivated Islamization, particularly targeted women in the country. Pakistan's women activists challenged him by coming on the streets in 1983. The protest opened a new chapter in the struggle for women emancipation in Pakistan. The article analyses the coverage of four newspapers, two under the government-controlled National Press Trust and two independent, including the Muslim (now closed), to know about the trajectory Pakistan's press had adopted. This historical case study provides a view of the trend of newspapers with regard to gender issues in Pakistan and offers a reference to judge the performance of present day media with respect to the issue of women. The articles includes a background of the women movement, organizations and the 1983 protest itself before analyzing the coverage of the press, ending in conclusion.

The article analyzes the press and women issues in the backdrop of the harsh political climate that exists in Pakistan.

KEY WORDS: Women Movement, Rights, Hadood, Organizations, Bias, Gate-Keeping, Press.

Introduction

Today, women in Pakistan, arguably, enjoy a much better status than what they had, a decade ago. One should be thankful to the increasing awareness about their rights in society, and improved educational and employment opportunities. At present, Pakistan has a number of private television channels that are taking up women issues and are cognizant of the need to give voice to them. Pakistan's media's performance maybe not up to the mark with regard to the women issues, yet it has shown improvement in the last few years. The Urdu media, particularly daily newspapers which lack specific women editions dedicated to serious issues,

still lags behind the English media when it comes to promoting women issues. The article attempts to find how the press in Pakistan performed when covering a ground breaking event in Pakistani women movement. The 1983 protest in Lahore by a large number of women to register their viewpoint against Hadood Laws in the regime of General Ziaul Haq, can be used as a historical case study to know about the attitude of press and to find a clue about the trend later followed by Pakistani press vis-à-vis women issues. A brief history of the country's political centralization and its effects on culture of pluralism and tolerance is due here.

Dictatorial streak in Pakistan

Authoritarianism has afflicted Pakistan since time immemorial. Authoritarian in Pakistan is rooted in history. In the Indian Sub-Continent, the hierarchy of authority emerged due to the fact that lands and people connected with it belonged to the feudal lord and through him to the king (Khan, 1967: 18). The British Colonial system aimed at reconsolidating its authority by placing the networks of social collaboration and control on a firmer footing (Jalal, 2001: 37).

Though Pakistan and India inherited this legacy, India made an effort to democratize itself; Pakistan, on the other hand, failed to make a transition to democratic rule. This was because the Muslim elite of Pakistan comprised of the opportunists who only joined Pakistan Movement after it was apparent that a new Muslim state was going to emerge soon. And "the bureaucratic authoritarianism inherent in the colonial state structure remained largely intact" (Jalal, 1995: 18). Politicians have exploited the country in collaboration with the military. Lust for power has proved to be disastrous for Pakistan, and 'masters of the new nation, the bureaucrats had little interest in organizing elections, and political developments following Jinnah's death can only be described as chaotic (Jones, 2002: 230).

By 1954, the Muslim League that had founded the state was in terminal decline. Personalities counted rather than ideologies or party institutionalisation. "The lack of expenditure on what would today be termed as human development, hampered the emergence of a civil society which might have questioned the growing influence of the army". Pakistan, therefore, kept falling deeper and deeper into the abyss of authoritarianism (Talbot, 2000: 218). The military is supposed to defend the country's borders, but in Pakistan, the military have regularly seized power. As explained by Plato, "Ruin comes when the trader, whose heart is lifted up by wealth, becomes ruler; or when the general uses his army to establish a military dictatorship" (Khan, n.d.: 90-91).

A military rule inherently means dictatorship. Military dictators are even worse than civilian authoritarians and they have a civil bureaucracy ready to kowtow to them. Field Marshal Ayub Khan told about two bureaucrats in his book, " I noticed that one or two of them looked rather sulky and I went for them; they all settled down after that fairly quickly" (Jalal, Op.cit: 308-09). Military rule

in Pakistan has resulted in the breakup of the country. The Yahya regime (which took over power after Ayub) had no intention of transferring power to any political configuration – whether from the eastern or the western half of the country – which aimed at circumscribing the interests or reducing the dominance of the two main institutions of Pakistani state. And the civilian leaders collaborated with the generals. The tragedy of East Pakistan is a pointer to this fact. While the people of East Pakistani were showing signs of acute resentment against the excess of West Pakistan establishment, the political leadership in the West Pakistan remained busy, endorsing the generals' scheme. "In any case, separation is drawing closer. The Bengalis are doing everything possible to make it do so. Meanwhile, Bhutto, in conjunction with Yahya will do everything to accelerate the process". Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was a shrewd politician who played his cards right (Ibid: 177). He targeted one general after another to raise hopes of a civilian comeback. "Now it was Yahya's turn to be Zulfi's target, as Ayub previously had been. Zulfi told his people that Yahya only intended to "lead the politicians to their doom" (Ziring, n.d.: 375). But Bhutto too centralized authority in his person. "The rapt attention of those around him, and the animated popular support for his presidency, proved to be the most exhilarating experience of the young man's life" (Hussain, 2007: 14). Being an authoritarian by nature, Bhutto strengthened the military apparatus which ultimately led to his own downfall. Bhutto did little to strengthen the democratic institutions and to make the process of democratic reform irreversible. "The collapse of democratic institutions and the Constitution's loss of sanctity created a vacuum of authority that provided a favorable condition for the Bonapartist generals" (Arif, 2001: 413). Thus entered General Zia-ul-Haq brandishing his gun and also his love for Islam; he rapidly grew into a no-holds-barred dictator. "Initially, the foreign media called him a 'reluctant military ruler' but Zia shed his reservations, if he had any, when he quickly developed a taste for power and authority" (Ziring, Op.cit: 276-77).

Zia-ul-Haq's period saw the worst cases of repression against women, students, political parties and civil society in general. The question is pertinent to ask why true democracy has not been established in Pakistan; one reason is linking religion to state – the example of which is Zia-ul-Haq's regime. Building a democracy in a country devoted to religious tradition has been a problem in numerous states. Pakistan has not been able to separate the mosque from the state (Bin Sayeed, 1980: 167). Those in power have used the religious card to further their own vested interests. "The common man had been told that perhaps the greatest factor responsible for the establishment of Pakistan against the overwhelming odds was the Islamic bond". After the death of Zia-ul-Haq in a midair explosion and the subsequent inception of political governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, with caretaker governments in between, Pakistan has struggled to attain true democracy and shape a society tolerant of dissenting voices and sensitive to women, minority and children causes (<http://:countrystudies.us/Pakistan/37.htm>). After General Pervez Musharraf's exit in

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2008 and the inception of a political government, quasi democracy exists in Pakistan which has given relatively more space to the political parties and civil society. Women are, arguably, better placed.

Beginning of Women Activism

Women Action Forum (WAF) was formed in 1981 to strengthen women's position in Pakistani society. In Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, a group of women agreed to formulate the policy statements and engage in political action to safeguard women's legal position, especially with reference to Hadood Laws promulgated by General Zia-ul-Haq.

WAF members led public protests in mid-1980s against Law of Evidence. It objected to the law because it was of the view that it gave unequal weight to the testimony by men and women in financial cases. Fundamentally, they objected to the assertion that women and men cannot participate as legal equals in the economic affairs.

Beginning in August 1986, the Forum led a debate over the passage of *Shariat* Bill, which decreed that all laws in Pakistan should conform to Islamic law. They argued that the law would undermine the principles of justice, democracy and fundamental rights of citizens and pointed out that Islamic law would become identified solely with the conservative interpretation supported by Zia's government. In May 1991, a compromise version of *Shariat* Bill was adopted but the debate over whether civil law or Islamic law should prevail in the country continued in the early 1990s.

Cases of Crimes against Women

In July 1983, the case of Safia Bibi appeared. Safia Bibi, an 18-years-old virtually blind girl, had been sentenced to public lashing (15 lashes), 3 years imprisonment and a fine of Rupees 1000 on charges of adultery by a Sahiwal court. Safia, daughter of a poor peasant, was employed in a local landlord's house as domestic help. According to her statement made to the police was that she was raped first by the landlord's son and then by the landlord himself. As a result, she became pregnant and finally gave birth to an illegitimate child who died later. Her father registered a case of rape. The judge acquitted both son and father, as there was not enough evidence to prove the rape under the Hadood Ordinance. This sentence shocked the public at large because the girl was virtually blind. What escaped the public until it was brought to their notice by WAF, was the fact that Safia Bibi's father had registered a case of rape and the judge had taken it upon himself to sentence a rape victim for adultery on the basis of her own evidence.

WAF publicized the case both inside and outside the country, and before a legal appeal could be filed, the Federal *Shariat* Court, using its suo moto powers

for the first time, asked for the case to be transferred to it for review. The court went on to say that in the case of rape, if a man was acquitted due to the lack of evidence and given the benefit of doubt, then the women must also be given that benefit of the doubt and the mere fact of her pregnancy was insufficient to prove her guilty.

For women organizations, this was a very significant case since it was through this case that women achieved a high level of sophistication, both in terms of organization and coordination. While the two major cases that WAF took up were those of Fehmida and Allah Bux and Safia Bibi, there were many others. In almost all the cases reported in that period, WAF responded with resolutions, press statements and public protests.

There was yet another case under Haddood Ordinance. A young married woman was convicted of *zina* and was sentenced to flogging and imprisonment. In her case, she had been raped by a male cousin living in her house. When the matter was discovered, the cousin had promised her father to marry her but later when she was found to be pregnant, he retracted. The child was born and died and was buried in the house to hide the dishonor. The cousin, on being pressurized to marry her, filed with the police a case of homicide against the girl. As a result, not only was she convicted of murder but also of adultery.

In September 1983, Lal Mai became the first women to be publicly flogged at the Liaquatpur (a tehsil of Bahawalpur District). She was convicted under the Hudood Ordinance and was awarded 15 lashes, given by a man with 5,000 people watching. WAF Lahore organized a picket in protest in October outside the Governor's House in Lahore. Placards condemning the unjust law and demanding its withdrawal were displayed and a resolution passed unanimously by the general body of WAF, was distributed to the Journalists and passer by.

Launch of Women Movement

This action of women organization created public awareness of the law and women's second class position-besides embarrassing the government. Discourse about the position of women in Islam and women's roles in a modern Islamic state was sparked by the government's attempts to formalize a specific interpretation of the Islamic law. Although the issue of evidence became central to the concern for women's legal status, more mundane matters such as mandatory dress codes for women and whether females could compete in.

The law of *Qisas* and *Diyat* was drafted in December 1980 with hardly any public protest. But in the meantime, a lot of things happened to make the women uncomfortable and uncertain to top it all of was (late) Dr *Israr* Ahmad's controversy that left women feeling offended. Between October 1982 and October 1984, when the law of evidence was finally promulgated, this remained the basic issue for women's organizations. The campaign against it reached at high point in

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February 1983, when women's organizations responded to a call by Punjab Women's Lawyers Association and marched down the Mall Road to Lahore High Court to present a memorandum against the proposed law to the Chief Justice. More than 300 women from different walks of life gathered in a side street off, the Mall. They were quite surprised to see a large number of male and female police in the area (approximately 500). The events that followed were the most unexpected, as confrontation between the police and the women ensued.

The women were told that they could not go to the high court as that would be a breach of law. However, women assured the police that they were here for a peaceful demonstration and were also willing to walk in pairs at a reasonable distance from each other so that no violation of the law occurred. Initially, women decided to stage a sit in right there with a three drop cordon. The mere presence of the police, a much hated force in Pakistan, was a provocation enough. The situation was further compounded when police forcefully tried to remove Habib Jalib, an anti-government poet, from the sit in. This was the breaking point for the women; enraged women broke through the cordon and started running in the direction of the High Court.

Groups of women ran through 40 feet wide Mall with the police chasing and brandishing batons, while some women had moved ahead; others were trapped by the police, beaten up, dragged along the road and thrown into the police vans. The impact of the demonstration of February 1983 was tremendous. All of a sudden, women were being taken seriously by politicians, by the government and by society at large.

Press, Democracy and Women

Press can play a vital role in strengthening democracy and giving voice to the weak sections of society, including women. Liberal theorists from Milton through Locke to John Stuart Mill have argued that a free and independent press can play a vital role in the democratization of a country (Pakistan Legal Decisions). From the national development perspective, mass media researchers like Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner have argued in favor of media's role in the national development (Dawn, 1983, December 23; The Muslim, 1983, December 23). And from the political communication perspective, the media is supposed to provide a public sphere for a free exchange of ideas in order to promote democracy (The Muslim, Ibid).

Since 15th century, media has gradually led to the democratization of society (Sadeque, 1984, 75-78). Development of modern democracy is largely because of the press's role in informing, educating and building the public opinion in favor of the attributes of a democratic culture. The mass circulation newspapers in the mid 1800s became the single source of daily dialogue about political, cultural and social studies (Mumtaz, 1988: 148). This enhanced the power of the press in

society, as it became a site for battles for the control of society (Norris, 2004:117). It can be understood in this context that the press of country has to function in such a way as to strengthen democracy which requires providing freedom to it and this freedom is only available in a democratic society. "Press freedom provides the oxygen in a climate of a healthy democracy" (Servas, 2007: 167-8).

This role of the press is vital in Pakistan. Pakistan Movement was based on the political and constitutional efforts of Quaid-i-Azam and was supported by the Muslim press. In the middle 40s, *Dawn*, *Morning News*, *Nawa-i-Waqt* and other newspapers played a notable role in Pakistan Movement (McQuail, 2000). It was, therefore not wrong to hope that the post-independence press in Pakistan would help strengthen democracy and raise the cause of weak sections, including women, in the country. It was expected that rather than adopting an agenda following the role under pressure from the country's authoritarian setups, it would promote an agenda based on its values of civil society. The press and democracy are intertwined and as such it is possible to have a free press and good responsive and democratic government at the same time (Folkerts and Lacy, 2005: 3). But it is also a truism that the press has to wage struggle to earn its freedom. Historically, at the world level, the winning of press freedom is attributed partly to a heroic struggle against the state (Biag, 2005: 274). It is irrefutable that where press faces various pressures, its role in promoting democracy and providing a platform to all sections of society is compromised.

In media theories, the agenda setting theory proposes that the public agenda- or what kinds of things people discuss, think, and worry about. Public opinion is powerfully shaped and directed by what the news media choose to publicize (Larson, 1994). This means that if the news media decides to give the most of time and space to an issue, it will become the most important item on the audience's agenda (Kellner, 1998: 35). Agenda setting research examines the relationship between the media priorities and audience priorities in the relative importance of the news topics. In recent years, the most popular subjects in agenda-settings research are:

- (1) How the media agenda is set and whether the media follows the agenda or not
- (2) How the media choose to portray the issues they cover (Shamsi, 2006: 50).

Pakistan press's performance with respect of raising the issues of weak sections, in the present article, women, is jeopardized. In the protest of 1983 by women activists, the performance of press can be weighed using this context of pressures on the press and its policy of following the agenda of the ruling establishment.

The initial media coverage of the demonstrations of 1983 did not give credit to WAF and other organizations. In fact, the government controlled 'Pakistan Times' failed to mention WAF altogether. WAF, however, relied on the press, especially the English, 'The Muslim' being the foremost, for its success (Hasan, 2006: 48). It managed to use the attention of press because the banning of political

parties and the imposition of the press advices precluding the coverage of political statements had created a political vacuum.

The event of February 1983 can rightly be described as a new chapter in the struggle of Pakistani women for their rights, as they were able to stand up to the naked state repression to register their point (Shamsi, Op.cit: 50). In Zia-ul-Haq's dark era when every political activity was crushed and every dissension was smashed, women leaders and activists stirred the political waters through their demonstration and exposed the regime's brutality. In 2010, when Pakistani women have been able to gain the improved status, aided by a much more sensitive media, especially television, that event must be recalled to find how press in those suffocating days covered that demonstration and which frames were applied by the newspapers (Curran and Jean, 2006: 1).

For this research, 'supportive' coverage in the case of women rights and Women Action Forum's movement, the researcher looked for 'women have been given all rights by the Constitution', 'women should play their role in all fields', 'Hadd laws are anti-women', 'women should not be the targets of biased laws'; for 'non-supportive', the researcher looked for 'Islam does not permit women to go out of house', 'Women's best role is in their homes', 'women organizations are spreading vulgarity', 'women rights organizations are anti-Islam' and other pre-judicial statements.

Women organizations brought out a protest rally on Mall Road, Lahore, on February 13, 1983, against the law of evidence promulgated by General Zia-ul-Haq. The rally was led by the activists of WAF and participated by hundreds of women and men who were opposed to the introduction of that law for its being anti-women because it provided for half witness of woman. The rally was a historic event because it was for the first time that in the radical period of General Zia-ul-Haq, that a rally was brought out by women to challenge a religious law, regarded discriminatory by them. The fact that in the absence of the political challenge, the draconian regime of the military general was put to test by Pakistan's civil society is significance (McCombs and Donald, 1972: 176-87).

The rally was subjected to brutal police action. The researcher especially explored the files (of the February 1983) of two independent newspapers, *Daily Jang* and *The Muslim*, and two government-owned (disbanded) National Press Trust (NPT) newspapers, *Daily Mashriq* and the *Pakistan Times*, in order to find how the days in the run up to the event on February 13, 1983 and then from the day of the rally to the end of the month were covered by the said newspapers. For 'supportive' and 'non supportive', the defined indicators were used.

The researcher found a total of 42 stories, out of which 16 were supportive and 26 non supportive. In *The Muslim* 5, *The Pakistan Times* 7, *Daily Jang* 14 and *Mashriq* 16 stories were found. In *The Muslim*, 4 stories were supportive while one story was non supportive. In *The Pakistan Times*, 4 stories were non supportive while 3 were supportive. In *Jang*, 10 stories were non supportive while 4 were supportive. In *Mashriq*, 11 were non supportive while 5 were supportive. The

share of non supportive statements was 21, out of 26 non supportive matter published in these newspapers, making it almost 80 percent. In *Mashriq*, 11 non supportive statements were published, which is indicative of the agenda following and a biased gate-keeping.

Some stories are given below to give an idea about the anti-civil society rally bias of the press in Ziaul Haq's regime.

On February 14, the second day of the WAF rally, *Daily Jang* published separate statements from Sahabzada Khursheed Gillani and Barakullah Khan. Sahabzada Khursheed demanded that strict legal action should be taken against the women who brought out the rally. He also used typical clichés to denigrate women activists, and Barakullah Khan asked women to seek God's pardon for taking out the rally. On February 15, *Daily Jang* published a story that told readers that the Lahore High Court Bar and some other associations had condemned the police action against the participants of the February 13 rally. It was supportive but it was neutralized by another story on the same day in the same newspaper.

Conclusion

The coverage of the rally of WAF in Lahore in 1983 depicts an anti-women trajectory. Women's role was interpreted within the confines of its stereotypical role in Muslim society. The coverage reflected anti-women clichés and rhetoric and exhibited themes given in the indicators. The government-run NPT newspapers were obviously vastly non-supportive of women's enhanced role. *Daily Nawa-i-Waqt* too adopted a traditional approach in taking up the issues of women. The newspaper, despite being independent, was comparatively close to Zia ul Haq, so its anti women tilt could be understood. In the case of WAF rally, out of 26 non supportive stories were published in four newspapers, 21 were the statements, pointing to the policy of the newspapers' reliance on statements rather than playing a proactive role in highlighting the issue of women empowerment, which is central to women organizations which are a member of Pakistan's civil society. The role of now closed The Muslim now closed in promoting women rights and organizations was positive.

This case study shows that the press in Pakistan tended to adopt a negative attitude towards women organizations in the days when the press was under great pressure and some leading newspapers under NPT were directly controlled by the government; now things have changed to some degree with regard to women issues as a result of opening of private television channels and functioning of new forms of information, giving a better voice to Pakistani women in general.

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