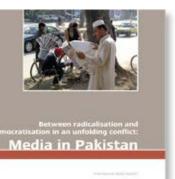# THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN ROLLING OUT DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN

Lotte Dahlmann

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In order for Pakistan to make a successful transition to democracy, media must be able to perform its role as a watchdog, is the conclusion of a report from International Media Support.

Under the title *"Between radicalisation and democratisation in an unfolding conflict: Media in Pakistan"*, International Media Support produced a report about media in Pakistan, which was launched in September 2009.

IMS' report about media in Pakistan. Photo © IMS

The main conclusion highlights the importance of media in the ongoing political transition in Pakistan: "If Pakistan is going to make a successful transition to democracy, the media must be able to perform its role as a watchdog, holding politicians, the state apparatus and army accountable and keeping the general public well informed". This falls in line with the ideal role of media in any democratic society as commonly referred to by UNESCO and other international advocates of press freedom. "A good test of democracy is citizen participation. The Media can help citizens play their part in enhancing the democratic experience" (UNESCO, 2009).

MEDIA FREEDOM CRIPPLED

According to the findings of the IMS report, journalists in Pakistan face propaganda, threats, coercion and targeted killings when trying to fulfil

their job. Media are prevented from covering events and even prohibited from going into certain zones in the North-Western provinces affected by years of armed conflict between the federal army and military insurgents. The media's lack of access to information or outright self-imposed censoring when reporting has led to a significant information vacuum in conflict-ridden areas, and keeps the vast majority in Pakistan in the dark about important developments in their own country.

In addition to being caught up in the violent conflicts, the media sector is entangled in a war on words, ideologies and propaganda. In the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) alone, more than a hundred radical, illegal hate speech radios produce and disseminate "news", while at the same time mainstream media is being subjected to a radical agenda as well.

"On top of these daunting challenges facing media in society, an important part of the challenge is for the media to take on its responsibility in society", says Muhammad Amir Rana, Executive Director of the Pak Institute for Peace Studies in Islamabad.

DETERIORATING MEDIA SITUATION

Following alarming reports of the deteriorating security situation journalists are facing in large parts of Pakistan, IMS decided to map out the media situation. In 2008, 12 journalists were killed. This year the number of journalists killed had reached six at the time of publication of the IMS report, making Pakistan the most deadly country in the world for journalists to work in.

In January and February 2009, IMS undertook a mission to Pakistan to carry out a needs assessment of the media sector. Focus was on the safety of journalists and the identification of partners who could address the challenges identified as quickly as possible in order to offer support to enable the media to play fill out its role on the road to democracy in Pakistan. The reporting team, which included IMS team coordinator Finn Rasmussen and Jeppe Matzen, Ma in history and a Danish journalist specialized in Pakistan affairs, consulted with key media stakeholders in Pakistan including media owners, union of journalists, media regulating bodies, Ministry of Information, civil society representatives as well as educational institutions.

The following is an account of the main findings of the report, its recommendations, as well as a presentation by Muhammad Amir Rana, Executive Director at the Paki Institute for Peace Studies in Islamabad

who took part in the launch of the report in September in Copenhagen upon invitation by International Media Support.

ON THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

Pakistan finds itself at a cross roads in its history. After nine years of military rule, the country is in its second year of a challenging transition from military rule to democracy. Since its creation in 1947, the Pakistan Republic has experienced three long periods of military rule. As a consequence, democracy has not had time to take fully root in the population nor in society. State institutions such as the judiciary system remain weak and a democratic discourse has not emerged.

Nevertheless, support for democracy is strong in Pakistan. In recent years, civil society has proven to be stronger and more committed than ever. This was underlined in March 2007, when the Lawyer's Movement led a series of protest rallies in support of a disposed chief justice. Later that same year, popular dissent against the military rule of President Musharraf gathered millions of people in street rallies. The Pakistani media, especially the electronic media, played a significant role in mobilizing public support for the demonstrations.

Over the years, the country has developed a vibrant media sector. Ironically President Musharraf's regime played a significant role in liberalizing the media sector –even if for the wrong reasons.

In the coming years, the media sector can prove to be a crucial and positive factor, provided that the media is able to assume the role of watchdog for democracy. To do this, the media sector in reality needs to break with its historical legacy.

BORN TO CREATE NATIONAL IDENTITY

The media in Pakistan dates back to pre-partition years of British India, when a number of newspapers were established to promote a communalistic or partition agenda. The newspaper Dawn, founded by Quaid-e-Azam and first published in 1941, was dedicated to countering "anti-Muslim propaganda" and promoting for an independent Pakistan. The conservative newspaper, Nawa-e-Waqt, established in 1940, was the mouthpiece of the Muslim elites who were among the strongest supporters for an independent Pakistan.

In a way, Pakistani print media came into existence with a mission to promulgate the idea of Pakistan, which was seen as the best national option for the Muslim minority in British India and as a form of self-defense against suppression from the Hindu majority. The need for self-defense runs deeply in Pakistani identity due to the role as a minority and a victim in India before the independence.

The Pakistani army is one of the caretakers of this identity and it is seen as the defender of the national identity which is formed by alertness towards India with the national religion, Islam and the national language, Urdu, as its cornerstones.

The emphasis on Islam as a major pillar of national identity has led to an alliance between the custodians of Islam - the religious leaders with the military, government institutions and the intelligence services. The nexus between these national guardians has had a huge influence on Pakistani media as they argue that they defend national identity and interests as a way to justify controlling the media.

Religious leaders have promulgated blasphemy laws that have curbed freedom of expression, the intelligence services have manipulated the media, and the civil bureaucracy has been used to control the media through its administration of media laws, licensing and placement of public funds for ads.

The various military regimes in Pakistan have had a special interest in controlling the media, and have been behind many of the existing laws used to censor the media.

Against this backdrop, Muhammad Amir Rana suggests that media in Pakistan have suffered more than other groups in the ongoing battle for democracy over the years in Pakistan.

Hear Muhammad Amir Rana in this video clip.

CHANGING TACTICS

From 2002, under General Musharraf, media faced a decisive development that would lead to a boom in Pakistani electronic media and pave the way to it gaining political clout. New liberal media laws broke the state's monopoly on electronic media. TV broadcasting and FM radio licenses were issued to private media outlets.

The military's motivation for liberalizing media licensing was based on an assumption that Pakistani media could be used to strengthen national security and counter the threat from India. The justification was as much a desire to counter Indian media power, as a wish to set the media "free" with the rights that electronic media had in liberal, open societies. The military thought it could still control the media if it strayed from what the regime believed was in the national interest –and in accordance with the government's own political agenda.

However, this assessment proved to be wrong as the media, and in particular the many new TV channels, became a powerful force in civil society. In fact, media turned into an important actor in the process that led to the fall of Musharraf and his regime. By providing extensive coverage of the 2007 Lawyers Movement's struggle, mentioned above, to get the chief justice reinstated, the media played a significant role in mobilizing civil society. This protest movement, with million of Pakistanis taking to the streets in the name of an independent judiciary and democratic rule, left Musharraf with little backing from civil society and the army, and with no choice but to call for elections.

The emergence of powerful civil society actors is unprecedented in Pakistani history. The IMS reporting team concluded, that these developments would not have gained in strength without the media. The media will need to continue to play a pivotal role if Pakistan is to develop a stronger democracy, greater stability and take on socio-political reforms.

TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Radicalisation, sensationalism and poor quality of journalistic practices

Today, Pakistan is home to 49 TV channels, including 15 news channels,

32 entertainment channels and two religious channels. Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation dominates the radio waves in Pakistan with 31 stations reaching 96,5 percent of the population. In addition, there are more than 40 licensed radio stations and more than a hundred illegal radio stations. According to The Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies there are 142 proper newspapers —as opposed to newspapers that in reality function as mouthpieces serving vested interests instead of building on fact-based, verified news.

In addition, a parallel media industry consisting of countless 'Jihadi' media outlets built in order to support the call for Jihad in Afghanistan, has boomed since 9/11. The emergence of the Jihadi media industry —as well as a radicalization in the mainstream media— is a result of the historical evolution of Pakistan's media sector.

RADICALIZED MEDIA

Radical Islamist influence on the media first manifested itself in the 1950s, when the government in Punjab used the media to promote radical views against the Ahmadis Muslims. The newspaper "Nawa-e-Waqt" was among the papers receiving money from the Punjab government to incite public anger against the Ahmadis. Since then, radical groups and political parties such as Jamaat-i-Islaami, Sipahi-Sahaba, and more recently the Pakistani Taliban, have infiltrated the mainstream media.

A Pakistani newspaper stand. Photo © IMS

Today, the number of radical publications runs in the hundreds. Six major Jihadi outlets print more than 50 newspapers and magazines alone. The Urdu monthly, "Mujalla Al-Dawa", has a circulation of approximately 100,000 copies. It is published by the Jamaat ud-Dawaa, an organisation run by Lashkar-e-Taiba, which has been labeled as a terrorist organisation. Lashkar-e-Taiba also publishes the weekly paper, "Ghazwa", claiming a circulation of approximately 200,000. The Islamist party Jamaat-i-Islami publishes 22 publications, with a total circulation equal to that of a large mainstream Pakistani newspaper.

In his presentation in Copenhagen in September 2009, Muhammad Amir Rana gave a thorough account of this development:

- Radical Islamist media were not only born in specific conflict areas in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Until 1944 there were 109 radical publications with a wide readership, and until the 1980s they were not only published in Pakistan but also in cities in Europe –including Copenhagen. These publications were owned by a few Arab and Afghan groups, but they were

getting the funds and strength from Western societies as well.

- The mainstream media, which were very liberal and very moderate, started -without realizing this- to come under the influence of these radical tendencies, especially during the 1980's and 90's, and we saw how they adopted the same tone of the radical media to project the Jihadis and Mujahedins in Afghanistan. After 9/11 radical tendencies in the mainstream media have been strengthened. It took media workers who had sacrificed a lot for many years by surprise, how this change could have happened. On a similar wave-length as the radical media, mainstream media began to oppose all the transformational steps taken by the government and to understand in a broader way the strategies, foreign policies and the problems that Pakistan was facing. We have seen the real strength of radical media since 9/11, when these outlets started to challenge the mainstream media, despite governmental steps to stop them.

SENSATIONALISM

Part of the radical influence has also been generated by the media's own dynamics, as it sees the conflict as hot news and follows it intensely. During the Red Mosque incident in 2007, the media was criticized for covering the event as an entertaining spectacle and for giving too much airtime to the radicals inside the mosque. This indicates that journalists are not sufficiently trained to have a critical eye to sort out undocumented information and radical viewpoints when these are not relevant or necessary to present current affairs news stories.

A Pakistani TV reporter. Photo © IMS

Radical organizations seek media coverage in various ways, because they want to spread their messages. The media are aware of this and, consequently, give the radicals extensive coverage to avoid being

threatened. The hunt for sensations and the entertaining elements of news are further exacerbating this unfortunate trend, as TV-anchors and reporters who want to be popular and increase their programs' ratings, are inclined to cover what they believe to be popular events and issues to maximize their audiences. Some Urdu media propagate radical viewpoints because they believe that their readers and viewers are conservative, and more likely to appreciate Islamist agendas.

QUALITY OF JOURNALISM

To some extent sensationalism can be seen as an inherent challenge following a recently liberalized and booming electronic media, with ambitious journalists trying to learn to deal with the responsibilities that comes with working for a powerful medium. Adding to this, sufficient training and education of TV-professionals has not accompanied the sudden boom of TV-channels.

Commercial interests, hidden political agendas, and attempts to coerce the media are often the motivation behind the airing of biased information in newspaper and TV-reports, interviews and talk shows. So far, however, journalists have not been able to unite and raise their concerns about the lack of objective, balanced journalism with the powerful media owners.

Part of the problem is also that investment in education or professional training is not rewarded in the workplace. Moreover, the professional education on which educated journalists base their work tends to be lacking in terms of standard as well as practical training. Thus, there seems to be room for improvement of the professional foundation of the media sector.

PAKISTANI MEDIA AT A CROSS ROADS

While Pakistan is at a cross roads concerning democracy, Pakistani media are also at a cross roads of sorts, says Muhammad Amir Rana: "When the media claim they had a long struggle for the restoration of democracy and for the freedom of expression, then it is as well their duty to transform the societies and to accept the democratic values as a social norm. So this is, I think, the major responsibility of the media".

The IMS assessment stresses the fact that there are indications that change is indeed underway. Having played a significant role in the downfall of the military rule of President Musharraf and the resolution of

the judicial crisis, Pakistani journalists have demonstrated an unprecedented ability to act as catalysts in connection with the efforts by civil society to strengthen democracy. The media have indeed marked a positive change, which bodes well for the future of the Pakistani state and its citizens.

This said, IMS's report also concludes that the media are going through a critical phase with the current economic crisis negatively affecting the economy of the media sector; Media outlets have limited resources available to improve the safety and security of media workers and are vulnerable to prevailing political conflicts and extremist insurgencies. Coming to terms with the new role of media and the responsibilities that follow in the transition from military rule to democracy may therefore require nurturing and support.

Building on its assessment, IMS has developed a strategy, which focuses on initiatives within four focus areas that can support the media in assuming a role that prompts democratic reform, and in playing a positive role in bringing stability and security to a country ridden for decades by conflict. The four areas include:

1. Safety and security for journalists and media workers

2. Pakistani-Afghan media relations

3. Information vacuum and media distortion in conflict regions

4. Quality of journalism

The recommendations primarily address the media's present needs in breaking the silence engulfing the ongoing conflicts in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the situation in NWFP, FATA and Balochistan.

The recommendations are guidelines for the course of action that IMS together with local and international partners will pursue in Pakistan. IMS hopes that the recommendations may also serve as inspiration and guidance for others engaged in supporting the media and journalists in Pakistan.

Read the full report or download it for free at http://www.i-m-s.dk/node/925

Lotte Dahlmann is a trained journalist with 15 years of experience in covering international affairs for Danish news media, specialized media and from working for the UN. She is the communications coordinator in International Media Support. ld@i-m-s.dk

UNESCO (2009) Civic Education for Media Professionals: A Training Manual

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