The Media, the State and Governments in Pakistan: An Assessment of Attitude

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Abstract

This research was carried out to evaluate the attitude of state and governments in Pakistan towards news and journalists. The research investigated what sort of treatment the news media and journalists received during both the dictatorship and the democratic political systems in Pakistan. Thirty journalists were invited to attend in six focus group discussions arranged for various districts of Sindh province, Pakistan. That averaged five journalists in each focus group discussion. A purposive sampling was implemented to select the six districts and recruit the journalists for focus group discussions. The data instrument was a pre-determined questionnaire which generated data according to the purpose and research questions of the study. In brief, Pakistan has a checkered political history. And there was variability in the attitude of state and governments towards news media and journalists, keeping in consideration the political system in the country.

**Key words:** State; Government; News media; Attitude; Participants

INTRODUCTION

The media and politics related literature guides that the media, the state, and the government of the time in all over the world, direct or indirect, are somehow related and interdependent upon each other in various respects. Some of the assumptions in this regard could be that the state or the government of the time may need media to propagate positive image of the country in the world over, political parties or politicians depend solely upon the media to have a large and positive publicity, and etc.. Hence, in the light of above-said assumptions, one can image that due to such relationship of interdependency upon each other the attitude of the state and the government towards media may matter a lot and deserves an academic consideration, particularly, the idea of Waisbord (2007), that the stable and legitimate institutions of the state are a basic requirement for democratic journalism.

The significance of the relationship among the media, the state, and the government could also be assessed from the view of Tresch (2009) that in incumbent Western-democracies the media are the main intermediary between politicians and citizens. Because, all citizens attend neither political meetings nor they have personal contacts with politicians. Hence, media are the best source to have access to the political system for citizens (see, Tresch, 2009). Moreover, on the one hand for a politician to remain in a political process and have a voice in the media is an important political strategy, as they can get legitimacy and power (Ibid, 2009). On the other, it is found by Brants, Claes, Judith, and Philip (2010) that journalists and politicians are not only part of a similar circle but also breathe the same air; and also are dependent upon each other to establish a condition of check and balance. Further, Brants et al. (2010) adds that the relationship between journalist and politician is a symbiotic one. Therefore both can benefit from each other, as they need each other (see, Brants et al., 2010). However, on politicians” part it is also said that they are dissatisfied with the way their views are depicted in the media (Ibid, 2010). Because, media have a potentiality
of doing both to make and break politicians (Aelst & Stefaan, 2011).

Additionally, from the state’s point of view it is noted that the state is not only a regulator of the media, but also itself a communicator (Keane, 1992). And state according to Chen (1998) necessarily interferes in the social, political and cultural relations of society (see Chen, 1998). Therefore, in this situation “In contemporary societies, the connection between the state and the media is far more complex” (Chen, 1998, p.13). As state authorities or government agencies instead of using old tactics of secrecy and censorship, now apply the latest strategies of information management, inclusive of public relations and image making, to exploit the media for their own interests. Because, media play a key role in the public sphere, and making government accountable to people (ibid, 1998).

In this way, research indicates that the news media have performed a significant role in fostering accountability (see Smith, 2010). However, it is also made clear that, one should not get hoodwinked by this idea that when it is democracy then journalists are no longer pressured or intimidated by political officials (see Hughes & Lawson, 2005; Rockwell & Janus, 2003). Even in democracies, the annulment of government censorship is not enough to guarantee press freedom (Harlow, 2011), despite the fact that democracy only performs when the press or media can also help in explaining to its consumers the difference between democratic and military rule (Ette, 2000). However, in response to the state has not always been reciprocated with positive developments for journalism or media. It (state) rather evokes censorship, political persecution, violence, media legislation in favor of powerful interests..... (Waisbord, 2007).

In the context of above literature, this paper evaluates that in the opinion of Sindh journalists in Pakistan how and what sort of relationship and attitude has been applied towards the media in Pakistan by the state and governments of time in Pakistan.

1. METHODOLOGY

The focus group discussions were used to collect data for this study, as the nature of the research question required qualitative data to be answered. Therefore, focus groups according to (Puchta & Potter, 2004) elicit participants’ feeling, attitudes and perceptions about a selected topic. The population of this study was working journalists in Sindh employed in both privately or state-run media outlets.

1.1 Location, Population, Sample and Sample Size

The location of the study was Sindh province which was administratively distributed in twenty three (23) districts during data collection. A purposive sampling technique was applied, because according to Hansen et al. (1998) in focus groups the persons who are invited to participate must be able and willing to provide the required information (A. Hansen, Cottle, Negrine, Newbold, & Halloran, 1998). Hence, out of a total of 23, six districts were chosen due to the following characteristics: First, compared to other districts, the membership of journalists in these district press clubs was larger. Therefore, it was easy to arrange the required number focus group discussions and to select the articulate journalists. Second, the researcher had more access to the journalists in these district press clubs. Third, it was determined to conduct at least six focus group discussions, because according to Hansen et al. (1998) “it would be difficult to justify fewer than six groups” (Hansen et al., 1998, p.268). About the number of participants in each group, it was attempted to arrange at least six participants for each focus group, as Morgan (1998, p.1) suggests that “six to eight participants in each group”. However, in practice on average five participants could be arranged for each focus group discussion.

1.2 Data Collection and the Recruitment of Participants

The questionnaire for focus groups had a pre-determined agenda, which allowed the focus group participants to talk about the agenda as they wished, while a moderator kept seeking to elicit and measure the arguments, views and responses of the participants. The questions on the agenda were formulated as loose, broad and much more flexible; because owing to such formulation the discussion also suggests additional topics of inquiry to be followed (see Alreck & Settle, 1995, p.397).

The participants were recruited with the co-ordination and consultation of office-bearers and senior journalists of the selected press clubs. The selection was determined taking into consideration the fact that all the participants belong to different media outlets and must be willing and articulate. The timing of the focus group discussions was fixed at evening, except two. Finally, out of a total of six, the three focus group discussions were arranged at the press clubs of the concerned districts, two at district bureau offices of media organizations and one at the regional office of a news agency, see Table below for exact details:

1.3 Implementation, Recording and Analysis of the Focus Groups Data

The focus group discussions began with an introduction by the moderator which had three sections: Welcome statement, a brief overview of the subject matter to be
Table 1
Time, Location, Duration and Number of Participants in Focus Group Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sampling unit</th>
<th>Date and time</th>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Karachi</td>
<td>06-04-2009-06:00 pm</td>
<td>District press club Karachi</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>59:34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Sukkur</td>
<td>11-04-2009-01:00 pm</td>
<td>Office Daily Ibrat newspaper</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>47:39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Khairpur</td>
<td>11-04-2009-06:00 pm</td>
<td>Office Sindh TV channel</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>46:52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Larkana</td>
<td>12-04-2009-01:00 pm</td>
<td>District press club Larkana</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>50:28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Hyderabad</td>
<td>13-04-2009-9:00 pm</td>
<td>Office APP news agency</td>
<td>06</td>
<td>01:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District Thatta</td>
<td>14-04-2009-5:00 pm</td>
<td>District press club Thatta</td>
<td>04</td>
<td>57:49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

discussed, and an explanation of the discussion rules. The principal data produced by focus groups are the verbal responses, statements, opinions, arguments and interactions of the participants (A. S. Hansen & Newbold, 1998, pp.276-277). Hence, taking into consideration the nature of the data, all the focus group sessions were audio-recorded. Because, this is the most simple and inexpensive method, and it can be transcribed verbatim or condensed into brief, written reports (Alreck & Settle, 1995, p.404). In addition, audio-recording is considered the most common way of making the focus group conversations analysable (Morgan, 1998, p.56). According to their nature “the fundamental data that focus groups produce are transcripts of the group discussions” (Morgan, 1988, p.10). Thus, the analysis of focus group data involves the researcher’s subjective process of making sense of what was discussed in the groups. Therefore, a final written report of the focus group data has been put together and discussed under the major themes and research question that took place across the full set of groups. Finally, in the consideration of ethical aspects the participants were informed that what the purpose of the focus group discussions was and where and how they would be conducted, with whom and who the researcher was and what they represent, and also they were told that the discussions would be audio-taped.

2. FINDS OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The first section of the focus group agenda contained a question which stimulated the participants to express their views about the “general attitude of the state towards news media in Pakistan”. The aim of this topic was to know and assess the views and opinions of the participants about the attitude of the state towards the news media during different political systems in Pakistan. In this way, the relevant data generated on this agenda item have been analysed in the following sections.

2.1 Attitude of State Towards the Media as a General, and During Military and Democratic Rules

To begin with, it is very common to be able to say that, in terms of its political history, Pakistan has a chequered past. As more than half of the period, since independence, it has been ruled by military governments for varying lengths of time, which have been succeeded by democratic political systems, which were then succeeded by other military dictatorships; and even the democratic governments have not been absolutely democratic. Therefore, while complimenting the democratic political system in Pakistan one participant mentioned its true colour in following words that “over here it is a feudal democracy it is not even a capitalist democracy” (Karachi focus group). In a similar vein one other participant in another district while defining the current political situation expressed his opinion that “actually the state has created so many states within the state and they have been handed over to feudal lords and bureaucrats” (Thatta focus group). So, this is how the focus group participants in Sindh caricatured the democratic political system in which they have been working. The attitude of the state towards the news media has varied according to the style of government. As one participant expressed “there has been a difference in the attitude of the army and the democratic governments” (Karachi focus group).

Defining the attitude of the military towards the media, three participants independently said that “during the Zia era there were many restrictions upon media” (Hyderabad focus group), whereas the second participant referring to all military governments in Pakistan expressed that “during the army rules the media have remained completely under control” (Karachi focus group), and lastly the third participant expressed his view that “during martial law there had been an extreme type of censorship” (Karachi focus group). Therefore, on the basis of the opinions expressed by these participants once concludes that the news flow and activities of journalists remained under the very close observation of the state during those undemocratic political times. And in regard to the level of censorship during army rule one participant at the metropolitan city focus group said that “even newspapers used to be checked before publishing” (Karachi focus group).

On the contrary, however, in describing the attitude of the state under democratic governments, two participants from the Hyderabad focus group registered the following opinions: one said that “during democracy the media have been free”, whereas the second participant drawing
a contrast between the preceding military rule and the present democratic government said, “compared to Zia era media are free now”. However in a similar context two other participants from Karachi focus group contributing their opinion, with a little variance that “during democratic eras it is better to some extent” or “in democratic rule to some extent the media are free”. The notable distinction in the opinions of these participants is that while attaching the adjectives of “better” and “free” to the attitude of state towards news media during democratic political systems, they have also qualified this with the phrase “to some extent” to indicate more precisely the different attitudes held toward the news media by the military and democratic governments.

2.2 Level of Freedom Under Democratic Governments
Moreover, regarding media freedom during the democratic incumbent government one Karachi focus group participant mentioned that “we can’t say that the media is absolutely free”. Two other relevant and similar views were received from participants at the focus groups of rural Sindh. As one opined that “though compared to martial law governments the media have remained freer during democratic governments, but it does not mean that they have granted freedom to the media” (Larkana focus group). Whereas, the other participant in the context of the incumbent democratic government shared his view that “whatever is happening in the country, cannot be reported freely” (Sukkur focus group).

In conclusion, the findings suggested that the attitude of the state towards the news media in Pakistan is directly proportional to the type of political system. To describe the attitude of the state during the period of military rule participants used phrases like “restrictions upon media”, “extreme type of censorship” and “completely under control”, while during the democratic rules the participants felt that the news media were “free” and the attitude of state “better”, however, “to some extent”. Hence, it may be implied that Pakistani news media and journalists have not yet seen absolute media freedom.

2.3 The Development of Electronic Media and the Freedom Granted Under Compulsion
The focus groups participants were of the view that the contemporary media freedom in Pakistan has been brought by the development of electronic media in private ownership in Pakistan. As two urban participants belonging with two different district focus groups said, regarding the prevailing media freedom in Pakistan, that “since electronic media grew (in Pakistan), the media have got such a freedom that news channels can now broadcast live coverage” (Hyderabad focus group). The other participant referring to the attitude of state before the development of broadcast media in private ownership added that “in the past the role of government had been very dangerous, many times curbs were imposed, but now after the arrival of channels, media are freer” (Karachi focus group).

In this way, the participants were of the opinion that the development of broadcast media under private ownership in Pakistan, which began almost ten years ago, has propelled the evolution of media freedom.

In Pakistan, broadcast media under private ownership had developed in the recent past - a decade ago. In addition, the incumbent political system is democratic. Therefore, compared with past media are felt freer now. However, the focus groups participants were of the view that the incumbent free to the media has been given in a compulsion rather than with full consent or happy. The evolution of “media freedom granted under compulsion” was further explained by five participants from three different district focus groups. These participants gave two main reasons which forced the state to lift restraints on the news media. As one participant said,

the development of media has compelled the state to change its attitude. Because, the state knows that, if they adopted the attitude of victimisation against the media then pressure will develop against it at international level. So the development of pressure at the international level has prevented the state.

(Hyderabad focus group)

The second participant also gave an identical statement, however in different words, by saying that “if the transmission of channels is banned through cable system, next day the whole world will turn against it and the ban will be lifted” (Karachi focus group). Still one another participant from Sukkur focus group gave a similar reason in his opinion that
they (state) do not want much advanced media, however, now the world has turned a global village, therefore, if there is any strictness against the media then it becomes an international issue. Otherwise they do not like that the media should have freedom to expose the failures of government. So, under compulsion they give some relief to the media.

These three participants tell us that the media has gotten “some relief” due to pressure on the state at an international level, pressure emanating from the public of other countries, which are the result of exposure to global media. In addition, two other participants identify other forces which, according to them, compel the state to give freedom to the news media. As one participant shared that “whatever freedom our journalistic circle feels it is not freedom. This is the policy of the government to let the media groom” (Karachi focus group).

Although this participant himself did not give any explanation for why the government or state would like to let the media grow? However, one possible explanation may be that before the current large-scale development of broadcast media in Pakistan, the public of Pakistan was dependent on India for its film and TV media through the dish culture. This phenomenon in and of itself posed a cultural threat to Pakistan on the one hand; and on the other it became apparent that India’s dominance in
broadcast media gave it the advantage in presenting its case at an international level on a wide variety of issues. This is the opinion of one participant as a reason why the state was forced to let the broadcast media development, in the following words that to counter the foreign channels the government was compelled to set up local channels and it was the plan of the government to counter the foreign media. As a result along with entertainment so many news channels were also setup, which took a step for their freedom as well. (Hyderabad focus group)

2.4 Overall Attitude and Expectations of the State From News Media

Even in spite of this liberalising trend in the attitude of the state toward media, participants agreed that there always existed friction between news media and state. As according to one participant “actual state never likes anything said against it in the media. In this context state and media are always supposed to be anti each other” (Khairpur focus group). Some other participants belonging to various district focus groups, using the exactly similar phrase “since beginning” in their opinion, also added that the “media have remained in a critical situation and government has kept all laws under its control” (Khairpur focus group). The second participant added that “the media organisations have remained under their (state) pressure” (Khairpur focus group), and lastly the third one said that “the attitude of the state towards the media has never been fair” (Sukkur focus group).

Moreover, the overall attitude of the state towards the news media was further explained by three participants in the following words. One said “either it is dictatorship or democracy the attitude of both has been aggressive and dangerous towards news media” (Thatta focus group). And the remaining two participants also shared very similar views as one was of the opinion that “during every era, either democratic or dictatorship, it has been tried to suppress the media” (Larkana focus group) and the other expressed that “either democratic or martial law set-up whenever media have impacted negatively to the interests of governments, they impose ban” (Larkana focus group).

In this way, the overall attitude of the state towards media can be further boiled down in the following words of two participants that “state has never accepted that media are the fourth pillar of the state and it should be honoured” (Larkana focus group) or “state has never accepted the freedom of the media” (Larkana focus group).

Regarding the state’s attitude the participants were of the view that the state has some expectations from the media to fulfill. In this way, some participants shared their perspectives that elicit more clearly what the state expects from the news media. As one of them, speaking in an urban focus group, said that “overall, the attitude of the state has been that the media should function on its (state”) beck and call” (Hyderabad focus group).

While, the other, also from an urban group, expressed his feelings in following words that the “state somehow wants control” (Karachi focus group). In a similar vein, in the views of three other participants from rural focus groups, it was revealed that the “state has tried to keep the media under control” (Larkana focus group). Or “state administrators want to have dominance over the media” (Larkana focus group). Whereas, the third one mentioned that “state likes that media which praise it (the state) and dislikes that media which exposes it” (Thatta focus group).

In conclusion, the consensus of the most focus group participants was that the state somehow wants to have “control” over the news media with the purpose to use it for favourable propaganda, irrespective of political system in the country whether it is military rule or democracy. And this is what one participant exactly stated that “always state administrators want that the media should work in their favour, propagate for them” (Hyderabad focus group).

CONCLUSION

Pakistan’s political history is checkered with both dictatorship and democratic political system. However, dictatorship could get its full bloom, whereas the democratic political system in the consideration of the journalists in Pakistan is not like it is conceptualized in European countries. Over here even during the period of democratic governments the feudal-lords are somehow patronized by the governments who use threatening strategies to browbeat the journalists when they try to report the social ills particularly in the rural areas, where the feudal-lords maintain their hold with the help of police and other district level government administrators or bureaucracy. Moreover, it could be accepted according to the findings that the attitude of state remains stricter towards media or journalists during the military governments in compared with during the democratic governments in Pakistan. The level of censorship during the dictatorship periods as was told by the participants could be summarized in the following words that there remained a close observation upon the flow of news.

Regarding the attitude of governments towards news media and journalists during the democratic political system the focus groups participants expressed their views in the following way that though not absolutely, however, to some extent media stays free. But all what happens could not be reported. Therefore, it could be assumed that in Pakistan news media and journalists have not yet been able to enjoy the best of absolute free and fearless reporting, either it is a democratic political system or dictatorship. Moreover, according to the views of the focus groups informants with the growth of the electronic media in Pakistan in private ownership, the level of media freedom has increased. However, such
change in the media policy of the government of that time was a compulsion; because they realized that the world has transformed into a global village. Therefore, it was getting harder to sustain the pressure at the international level when their attitude got harsher towards the media in Pakistan. On the other they also needed a well-established media network in Pakistan which could counter the negative propaganda against Pakistan and float their foreign policy; lastly, the state also felt a threat of cultural invasion from India through Indian electronic media due to satellite technology. In essence, unleashing the media, particularly electronic media, was not with consent. It was rather a compulsion to do so. Finally, even such liberalizing trend, the friction between news media and the state is always there at various extents depending upon the nature of issues.

REFERENCES


