

HOW A FREE AND CREDIBLE MEDIA CAN KEEP FAKE NEWS AWAY

MEDIA AND ELECTIONS: The Constitution of Pakistan calls for a State which 'shall exercise its power and authority through the chosen representatives of the people.'¹ These representatives are to be chosen through 'direct and free vote.'² The concept of 'direct and free' vote reflects fundamental rights and freedoms including freedom of speech. "Every citizen shall have right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law."³ Supreme Court of Pakistan has also interpreted free elections in terms of ability of free media to circulate political information and opinions without any discrimination.⁴ As a consequence, Elections Act, 2017, specifically provides for dissemination of all election related information through media campaigns.⁵ A few years earlier a landmark US Supreme Court judgement had declared that in electioneering "political speech must prevail against laws that would suppress it, whether by design or inadvertence."⁶ This is again in line with the UN upholding democracy for "providing an environment that respects human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in which the freely expressed will is exercised." The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights calls for elections "guaranteeing free expression of the will of the people."⁷ The Covenant further states that freedom of expression and opinion cannot be fettered being "essential conditions for the effective exercise of the right of vote." Similarly Commonwealth Charter (2012), recognising the "inalienable right in democratic process- - through fair and free elections" highlights freedom of expression, in Principle V, as a commitment to "open dialogue and free flow of information- - through a free and responsible media." Article 2 of Treaty of European Union is also an affirmation of democracy and freedom being equated with human rights.

It is therefore but logical that non partisan election observation missions assess quality of elections in a country like Pakistan on the basis of freedom of media and opinion, in addition to a host of other factors. The European Union Observation Mission to Pakistan in the 2008 elections found the media under heavy restrictions and victim of various acts of state censorship. In the 2013 elections, the EU Observation Mission noted curtailment of freedom of speech right before elections. Various militant groups and others from within official quarters were found threatening media houses and journalists from reporting on elections. Certain TV channels were forced off air, not only under threat from private groups but also on the orders of the government. Similarly, the EU Observation Mission in 2018 elections found the regime of media restraint unabated. "Concerted efforts to stifle the media were observed." Intimidating calls to editors, disruption and hindrance to broadcasts and distribution of newspapers was not uncommon. In the 2024 elections, the EU regretted its ability to depute a mission but did issue a statement on the level of media freedom pointing out restrictions to "freedom of expression both online and offline, restrictions of access to the internet- - "The British Foreign Secretary's statement on 2024 elections also highlighted disruption of internet on the polling day.

The question therefore is whether the media landscape in Pakistan is multi-dimensional enough to absorb the ethical and professional challenges posed by the requirement of freedom of expression in elections. Print media which has a legacy of 150 years surviving, and at times being nurtured by colonial administration, has once been described as 'press in chains.'⁸ Amenable to pressures on editorial policies and victim of individual excesses, print media has conveniently ceded its space to other media, particularly television, at crunch times.

¹ Preamble to Constitution of Pakistan

² Constitution of Pakistan, Article 51(6)(a)

³ Ibid, Article 19

⁴ Supreme Court of Pakistan, para 61, SC 681, Pakistan Workers Party

⁵ Elections Act, 2017, Section 12

⁶ Citizens United v FEC, 21/01/2010

⁷ Resolution 2002/46, UNHCR

⁸ Press in Chains, (Urdu), Zamir Niazi,

MEDIA LANDSCAPE: Currently, newspapers in Pakistan are estimated to have a very meagre readership of just more than 10 per cent of the population according to a report. Despite a decent number of 439 dailies and 56 weeklies, their circulation as per some official sources does not exceed 40 million copies, at best. A nationally representative survey in 2022 discovered that while 90 percent men and women across the country did not spend any time reading newspapers, only 5 percent spent one hour, 2 percent spent 2 hours and no one spent more than 2 hours going through newspapers.⁹ As a sharp contrast, “the print express in India is still chugging along.”¹⁰ While ‘India’s newspaper revolution’ was taking place in 1970s, particularly in the aftermath of the Emergency,¹¹ press in Pakistan was facing the worst censorship under Martial Law. According to sources, the total claimed circulation of publications in India in 2021-22 was approximately 400 million.¹² Overall newspaper readership in India, till a few years ago, stood at 39 per cent¹³ while it was as high as 54 percent in urban areas.¹⁴ In Pakistan, Radio has even less currency than print media. It is estimated that not more than 10 per cent population can be said to have radio audience. In contrast with other media, in case of radio, government control is still pervasive with the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation running 62 radio stations in the country. By 2017, Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority had granted licences to 143 FM radio stations in the country but their content is commercial and provision of entertainment only. Again, this is in sharp contrast to neighbouring India where radio ‘listenership’ is said to be around 70 percent.¹⁵ Just imagine a programme like ‘mann ki baat’¹⁶ having a regular audience of 230 million people! This can only happen in the biggest democracy of the world.

Decline in circulation of print media and radio outreach, among other factors, owes to an exponential growth of television in Pakistan. In this regard, back in 2002, it was Gen Parvez Musharraf, a military dictator who, ironically, cleared the path for the television industry, albeit, to weaken the power of an inimically poised print media. The number of television channels in the last two decades has gone up to more than 150 as a result of which state monopoly over the medium has been brought to nought. There are 4060 cable operators and 43 landing TV channels from abroad like the BBC, CNN, TRT, Aljazeera, DW, France TV etc. Across Pakistan, out of a total of 37 million households, 20.7 million households own one or more TV sets. Total TV viewership in Pakistan is estimated at 144 million which equates to 72 percent of the population.¹⁷ There are around 20000 TV journalists and more than 300000 associated workers employed by the television industry. Cumulative investment in the television sector has been estimated to be US\$ 4-5 billion according to the same source. TV viewership trends show that in 2021-22 daily average was 2.95 hours per person.¹⁸ Predominance of television in the media industry is obvious from its share in annual revenues basically accruing from advertisements. In 2022, television accounted for 44 percent share in the total advertising revenues of Pak Rs 80 billion. Print media has a share of 14 percent and radio has a paltry 2 per cent. Digital media with a share of 23 percent in advertisements revenues is fast becoming a rival to the television industry.¹⁹ This is a fair reflection of the possibilities of competition between what can be called as legacy media and the new media, to take place in the news market of Pakistan.

The so-called legacy media, including press and television, has a long history, albeit, chequered in terms of being vocal, and at times gagged. Its growth in sheer size and economy in Pakistan has given rise to what can be termed as media paradox. Despite its claims to being the the fourth estate, legacy

⁹ Gallup, Pakistan, 24/11/2022

¹⁰ Das, Biprorshee, WARC, 06/09/2022

¹¹ pp 544, India after Gandhi, Guha, Ramachandra

¹² Das, Biprorshee, WARC, 06/08/202

¹³ Sarma, Dibyajoti. PrintWeek, 19/01/2018

¹⁴ Bucholz, Katharina. Statistica.com, 18/05/2022

¹⁵ Digital radio mondiale, 23/01/2023

¹⁶ Modi, Narinder, PM India’s monthly radio programme

¹⁷ Maqbool, Nazam. Electronic Media Economy in Pakistan, PIDE, 2021

¹⁸ Aurora.dawn.com 13/05/2024

¹⁹ Ibid, PIDE, 2021

media has failed to be free at crunch times i.e elections. Failure of media, thus, to stand up and be counted can be ascribed to a number of factors.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS: The first and foremost is the legal infrastructure within which media is expected to survive in Pakistan. The most enduring press restrictions of the colonial past relate to crimes of opinion being punishable for sedition after the continuation of Section 124 A to the Indian Penal Code. The provision, till very recently, was part of the the Pakistan Penal Code reading “whoever by words - -brings into hatred or excite disaffection toward the government- -shall be punished with imprisonment for life- -“Defence of India Act, 1915, survived as Defence of Pakistan Ordinance to serve as a punitive instrument of common usage for journalists and politicians alike. The first Martial Law promulgated a Press and Publications Ordinance, 1960, to curb very heavily, any criticism of the legitimacy of the government. Under this law, all the major newspapers were nationalised, on the pretext of national security, to permanently neutralise the press. Most of the nationalised newspapers were clubbed under a National Press Trust. Associated Press of Pakistan, the major news agency, was also taken over by the government. In the military regime of 70s and 80s, journalists had to face draconian Martial Law Regulations prescribing punishment of lashes and imprisonment for challenging the writ of the government. In order to counter the growing influence of Television a new law Pakistan Electronic Media Authority, 2002, (PEMRA) was enacted rendering Television channels liable to government control. State authorities, under this law, have been empowered to penalise any channel for airing views detrimental to national security. Likewise, cable operators have also faced acute restrictions. Taking TV channels off air, restricting cable operations, prosecuting TV anchors and media house owners and revoking licences are but a few examples of unleashing the legal menace against the media. Back in 2011, Freedom House, had termed the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority as “License to Censor.”²⁰ The plethora of laws regulating, and prosecuting, media include but are not limited to Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act 2016, Anti Terrorism Act 1997, Contempt of Court Act 2012, Defamation Ordinance 2002, Censorship Rules, Code of Conduct for Cable Operators, Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance 2002. According to EU Observers Mission for 2008 Elections, the problem with freedom of expression in Pakistan is that constitutional guarantee under Article 19 is ‘subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or integrity, security and defence of Pakistan- -public order, decency or morality.’²¹ These exceptions provide the state, sufficient wherewithal to crack down on media whenever required. Even the Code of Conduct for Media prescribed in elections contains a number of restrictions on opinions impinging on national security, ideology, morality and public order etc. Courts in Pakistan keep on muddying the waters. Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2023, applying the “principle of proportionality” justified curbs on media being in proportion to the restrictions under the Constitution.

VIOLENCE: The second factor limiting freedom of media, in the context of elections, is frequent use of brute force and violence against journalists for suppression of news, and views. Zamir Niazi, a noted Pakistani press historian, chronicling incidents of violence against news persons in the 1960s and 1970s in Pakistan, had called journalism as a dangerous profession.²² Almost forty years on, in 2023, Pakistan was declared one of the deadliest countries for journalists by the Reporters Without Frontiers. The same report placed Pakistan at 176/180 as far as security of media persons was concerned.²³ Michael Kugleman, a well-known South Asian expert associated with the US based Woodrow Wilson Centre, recently remarked that “in Pakistan, journalism can sometimes can be a death sentence.”²⁴ According to an International Federation of Journalists’ white paper published in 2020, Pakistan with 138 reported murders of journalists (1990-2020), was declared as one of the most dangerous places for practicing journalism.²⁵ While killing of journalists is not very uncommon in

²⁰ Freedom in the World 2011, freedom house.org

²¹ pp 36, EU Observation Mission Report Pakistan, 2008

²² pp 11, Niazi, Zamir, The Press Under Siege

²³ Reporters without Frontiers, Pakistan, 23/05/2024

²⁴ Kugleman, Michael, Pakistan’s Press Enters a Dark Era. Foreign Policy magazine, 03/06/2021

²⁵ White Paper on Global Journalism, www.ifj.org, 10/12/2020

Pakistan, other violent incidents targeting journalists are an everyday affair. Physical attacks and targeting with firearms of a few top ranked journalists is well known. A Freedom Network publication of 2023, reported 248 such incidents of violence having taken place in the previous two years.²⁶ Situation becomes even scarier as these murders and acts of violence against journalists go untraced in most of the cases. Between 2012 to 2022, of the 53 murders of journalists, 96 percent cases remained unsolved. In 2022, as per Global Impunity Index compiled by Committee to Protect Journalists, Pakistan was ranked as the 10th worst country with 9 clueless murders.²⁷ Plight of journalists working in the peripheral regions of the country mostly goes unreported. Alarming, threat to journalists is no longer a local phenomenon as transnational repression is becoming common. According to a Freedom House finding Pakistan is among 26 countries whose journalists have reported being targeted and harassed in performing their duties during exile in foreign countries. The same report has highlighted digital threats, cyber attacks, surveillance etc as extraterritorial threats to reporting from exile.²⁸ It is obvious that the purpose is to create a climate of fear to force media outlets and journalists to desist from free expression of opinion. It is, therefore, obvious that failure to silence media and muzzle criticism by a variety of legal means, has led the governments in Pakistan to have recourse to violence and use of force. Jodie Ginsberg, President of the Committee for Protection of Journalists, has summed up the brutality of the situation, very aptly, by saying that in such countries "murder is the ultimate form of censorship."²⁹

BUSINESS MODEL: The third reason why mainstream media in Pakistan is alleged to be going soft on the governments is its business model. In 2023, Pakistan's caretaker Prime Minister declared that the business model of print media was flawed being heavily dependent on government for financial support.³⁰ He exhorted the media to generate its own revenues to be self-sufficient. As expected, newspapers councils and societies in the country rubbished the remark. Independent analysts, however, tend to endorse the view of the ex Prime Minister. Of the total revenue of Rs.80 billion accruing through advertisements, TV share is 44 per cent and print media gets 14 per cent.³¹ TV advertisements have other sources also but print media is largely funded by the government, in one form or another. Which media group gets what is usually wrapped in secrecy. In spite of this, an off and on divulgence is always on the cards. In 2021, a Senate Standing Committee was informed that the government in 2013-17 paid Rs 9 billion as advertisement charges to electronic media and another Rs 6 billion to the newspapers. (31) More importantly, lion's share of these advertisements went to the favourite media outlets or to those termed as 'good journalists.' In the said Senate Standing Committee it was also observed that news channels received far more advertisement amounts than entertainment channels despite huge viewership of the latter. The obvious inference is that political governments are more interested in winning over the TV channels which report events and form opinions than channels which cannot promote political agenda. In this sense, elections are covered by what can be termed as paid media. For instance, a few years ago media, particularly newspapers, on the morning of a joint opposition rally, chose to display pictures of the then Prime Minister patting his dogs. "Using ad revenue, the government is playing an image game as well as pulling a string to rein in the narrative," observed an opinion piece.³² Power of advertisement money can even defeat Supreme Court orders. A few years ago, the Supreme Court banned photographs of the Prime Minister or Chief Ministers in advertisements paid for by the government. Popular newspapers still came out with advertisements having these photographs except that the same were bought by a private Association of Builders and Developers. Political programmes of the government are widely advertised to be paid for by the government. An amount of more than Rs. 5.50 billion was paid to

²⁶ Justice for Journalists, Freedom Network Inquiry Report, 2023

²⁷ Pakistani Journalists Continue to Pay High Price, www.dawn.com. 03/01/2024

²⁸ A Light That Cannot be Extinguished, Freedomhouse.org. 03/12/2023

²⁹ cjp.org, 23/11/2023

³⁰ brecorder.com, 26/11/2023

³¹ PACRA Research, 03/03/2023

³² Naqvi, hassan, How Dependence on Government is Crippling Media, Profit, 20/12/20

advertise various flagship initiatives during 2021 to 2023 under two different regimes. With the monopolisation of media by a few groups it is even easier for the government to exercise financial control. Till not long ago, government used a system of 'press advice' for the print media to oversee news coverage. Now a so-called Television Rating Points system is in vogue for making favourite TV channels eligible for advertisement money.³³ This is an almost arbitrary way of determining which channels are more popular in order to receive more dole outs. Unlike India where apart from advertising, other sources like subscriptions, royalties, TV shows contribute substantially to the media revenues, Pakistan media has remained totally dependent on advertisements worth more than Rs.80 billion. The business model, as rightly pointed out by an ex Prime Minister, definitely, is faulty. Media industry which had cumulatively attracted an investment of more than 4 billion US dollars during 2002-17, suddenly started going bust come PTI's government in 2018 with its anti-media policies and the withdrawal of government subsidies and dwindling advertising revenue. But as has been rightly observed, "the government has for long been a big advertising client for the media. Money is often used as a censorship tool that brings short-term gains for corporate media but dilutes its relationship with media consumers, contributing to the crisis slowly killing off media."³⁴

CORRUPTION AND UNETHICAL PRACTICES: Control by the state in stifling media's credibility is not limited to the regulatory straitjacket or sheer violence but also to financial lure. In addition, however, there is a fourth reason why mainstream media has a weak case as far as trust of the public at large is concerned. This is an area where mettle of media in Pakistan is tested against questions of ethics. A noted journalist observed, many years ago, that "corruption within the media is spreading like a cancer, and there seems to be no antidote."³⁵ This observation was made after two prominent TV hosts had been exposed colluding with a mega real estate tycoon to 'fix' an interview. The same real estate mogul, as is commonly alleged in Pakistan, in the first instance lucratively bribed a large number of leading journalists and TV anchors and later on leaked their names to the media.³⁶ The largesse extended by the real estate tycoon consisted of hefty amounts and prize plots of land. The names of the recipients read like a who's who list of Pakistan media. Thus, sold out, media had never been able to expose, in true sense, the benefactor at critical junctures. Sadly, according to one Pakistani writer, "Pakistani media --- can never be considered fair and balanced whenever there is money involved."³⁷ This practice is a far cry from the dictates of the IFJ Global Charter of Ethics which is based on the right to have information and ideas reiterated in Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The IFJ Charter, para 13 has set the standard for financial integrity: "The journalist shall not use the freedom of the press to serve any other interest and shall refrain from receiving any unfair advantage or personal gain because of the dissemination and non-dissemination of information."³⁸ In one startling revelation, made in pursuance of a Supreme Court order, names of 282 journalists and their relatives were made public in 2013 for having received payments of Rs 177 million from what are called secret funds of the Ministry of Information. There was another list of 155 journalists who received similar payments and gifts from the Ministry. The Supreme Court, in the said case, remarked that Rs 300 million was paid to a TV channel from the secret funds of Ministry of Information.³⁹ What is, however, more unethical, and a larger question, is the phenomenon of monopolisation of media ownership in Pakistan. Credibility of elections is undermined if the media is controlled by the state, or by monopolistic commercial interests, in a manner that excludes or marginalises alternative voices and narratives.⁴⁰ Due to a lax, and perhaps collusive licensing regime, more than half of the mass media ownership is concentrated in only a few hands. This has made influence peddling very

³³ Rumi, Raza, State Control, Corporate Interests, and Media Independence in Pakistan, PIDE Discourse, 2024

³⁴ Rehmat Adnan, Why is Pakistan's Media in Crisis? dawn.com, 21/07/19

³⁵ Abbas, Mazhar, Can Pakistan's Corrupt Media Be Checked? cpj.org 29/06/2012

³⁶ Aaj News, 14/06/2012

³⁷ Adnan, Muhammad, Aaj News, 23/08/22

³⁸ www.ifj.org

³⁹ Express Tribune, 22/08/2013

⁴⁰ pp 55, Election Management, A Commonwealth Compendium,

convenient and common. Reporters Sans Frontiers and Media Ownership Monitor have declared Pakistan a 'high risk country' in terms of media pluralism because media concentration, in terms of both audience and ownership, is very high. The top four TV channels, newspapers, radio stations, news websites have a monopoly, in each of the four categories, of over 50 percent of the audience share. Cross-media ownership is also concentrated in a few hands. Top 8 owners cover 68 percent of audience across television, radio, print and online.⁴¹ Diversity of sources of information, necessary for media freedom, is possible only where media ownership is not concentrated in a few hands. Monopoly of dissemination and flow of information, thus, is systemically unethical in denying the citizens their right to truth in terms of Global Charter of Ethics. Public trust in legacy media in Pakistan is diminished when it fails to act as a watchdog and seen, rather as a collusive player.

'TURNCOAT PHENOMENON:' The fifth factor weakening media's capacity to be free, particularly in elections, is what is called 'turncoat phenomenon.' This phenomenon, essentially an unethical practice, is critical enough to be discussed as a distinct factor. Turncoats are as ancient as humanity itself but have come to be researched as a 'phenomenon' in Dutch journalism due to switchover of journalists to Public Relations (PR) roles. The unethical part of the phenomenon consists of justifying living in two mutually exclusive worlds. A journalist has to perform a 'public duty' while PR persons promote their client's particular interests. Instead of making politicians accountable, journalists choosing to act as their PR persons, for obvious monetary and other material benefits, can be a serious body blow to media's perception in a democracy.⁴² In Pakistan, the 'turncoat phenomenon' in journalism is neither new nor insignificant. Over the years, journalists and TV presenters noted for political criticism, are known to suddenly switch sides to become what the Dutch term as 'overloper.'⁴³ It is particularly evident during the elections in Pakistan when eminent journalists choose to join caretaker governments or even to head them as Chief ministers instead of holding the governments accountable. For instance, in the last three elections, caretaker chief ministers of the Punjab province were some of the leading professional journalists and media analysts. It is important to remember that the Punjab province alone yields almost 50 percent seats in the National Assembly. Whoever wins the Punjab, takes over the centre in Pakistan. Hence, importance of being Chief Minister Punjab. A number of journalists and a few media house owners are also known to have served as caretaker ministers, particularly as Ministers of Information. It is not only the caretaker governments which the journalists favour. One famous editor of the most authentic English daily, a few years ago, switched sides to become a cabinet member of a proper political government. Another sought after slot for some of the more influential journalists is heading the Cricket Board in Pakistan, considered very lucrative and glamorous. There are examples galore. This 'turncoat phenomenon' is serving as the proverbial last nail in the credibility of legacy media.

The five factors of restrictive regulation, violence against journalists, financial dependence, unethical practices and the 'turncoat phenomenon' have not only laid waste sacrifices of numerous valiant media persons but also discredited the overall status of media freedom in the country. According to Freedom House, 2024, media freedom in Pakistan is rated as 1/4⁴⁴ while World Press Freedom Index, 2024, published by Reporters Sans Frontiers has ranked Pakistan at 152 out of 180⁴⁵ countries. Freedom of media being thus in an unenviable position and the country sliding downwards in ranking from a 'hybrid democracy' to an 'authoritarian state',⁴⁶ where would the citizens of the country seek information from? Can the Pakistani voters trust the legacy media for free flow of information during elections? It was but inevitable that just as multi channel current affairs television sidelined print media in the country 20 years ago, the ever-pervasive internet and ubiquitous social media would replace television.

⁴¹ rsf.org, 18/07/2019

⁴² Kester and Prenger, Journalism Practice, volume 15, 2021

⁴³ ibid

⁴⁴ freedom house.org.

⁴⁵ rsf.org.country.pakistan

⁴⁶ tribune.com.pk 15/02/2024

DIGITAL LANDSCAPE: The space for social media to operate is vast enough if we have a look at the digital landscape. Pakistan, with a population of more than 240 million people, has in excess of 190 million cellular mobile connections which is equivalent to almost 78 per cent coverage of the population. With 110 million mobile internet users, at the beginning of 2024, internet penetration stands at 46 per cent. Out of this number, social media users are 71.70 million being 29.5 per cent of the population.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that total number of registered voters (above the age of 18 years) is 128 million out of which, during 2024 elections, around 59 million voters turned out to vote. An educated guess is that these 59 million voters are among the 71 million people who use social media. Till recently there were 52.3 million WhatsApp users in the country. The number of YouTube accounts is more than 64 million. In addition, there are 44.50 million people on the FaceBook, 17.30 million on the Instagram, 11.95 use FaceBook Messenger while another 12 million are also LinkedIn users. The number of Snapchat users is 30.21 million and that of TikTok users is 54.38 million while X (Twitter) has 4.50 million users. According to surveys 38 per cent of all ages spend at least at least 2 hours on smartphones every day.⁴⁸ It is estimated that around 73 per cent traffic is through mobile phones. Despite medium literacy rates in the country, Pakistan ranks 10th globally in mobile phones usage.⁴⁹ The digital landscape is varied and extensive. It can be safely inferred that large sections of Pakistani society thus socially connected via digital networks have access to sources of news and information other than what is sometimes referred to as legacy media. It is estimated that 33 per cent of news and information in Pakistan is gathered through social media platforms and internet.⁵⁰ It has been further reported that, in Pakistan, it is the younger population which is attracted to social media as a source of news.⁵¹ It is the same cohort of Pakistani population who comprise majority of voters.

Resultantly, incidence of social media usage in politics has become quite common as in the 2018 elections, particularly among the cadres of PTI (a political party) which consisted largely of younger population. Actually, success of this party in 2018 is generally ascribed to its social media strategy. It was, however, in the 2024 elections that a 'social media revolution'⁵² of sorts was visible in the country. Some people called it a 'social media election.' Again, it was the PTI which riding the tide of social media came out victorious. According to independent observers, social media in these elections, before and on the polling day, had a multi-faceted part to play. Firstly, it acted as a voice of resistance against censorship and restrictions against mainstream media. One of the leading journalists in Pakistan, and editor of the Dawn, Ms Arifa Noor decried the 'hollowness' of television journalism not telling the story of the people but only focusing on the politicians. According to her it was social media which was providing resistance and, hence, being considered as a new threat.⁵³ (ArifaNoor, YouTube 17/4/2024) Leader of the PTI, Imran Khan, who was in jail convicted in various cases had been totally blacked out on the television, and could not even be named on the television or in newspapers, managed to have a huge presence and following on the social media. After closure of his social media accounts by the authorities, his followers kept him alive on various platforms. Similar treatment was meted out earlier in 2017 to Nawaz Sharif and even before him to Altaf Hussain. They, however, did not have the benefit of social media. The second role social media played in the 2024 elections was that of a campaigning platform for the party. As PTI was not allowed by the authorities either to hold public meetings or canvass or display banners and posters while other parties were running their campaigns at full throttle, it was left to social media to come to PTI's rescue. "To counter abductions and arrests, we initiated virtual gatherings and rallies," said Khalil Jibran, a PTI social media manager.⁵⁴ Online public rallies were held as were fundraising campaigns only to be interrupted by

⁴⁷ Digital 2024: Pakistan, datareportal.com

⁴⁸ <https://gallup.com.pk> 24/04/2024

⁴⁹ thenews.com.pk 19/04/2024

⁵⁰ <https://gallup.com.pk> 11/11/2022

⁵¹ Nowsharwan and Huang, Global Media Journal, 2020

⁵² Shabbir, Saima, Arab News, 07/02/2024

⁵³ Noor, Arifa, YouTube, 17/04/2024

⁵⁴ PTI activist, Karachi,

internet breakdowns time and again. It was not only TikTok rallies, even party manifesto was launched online. The party made history by employing AI's generative power in campaigning online. According to a story by India Today, debates around AI in elections have been dominated by threats of fake news as in the polls of Taiwan and Argentina. In Pakistan's case AI has been used to overcome state curbs, according to India Today.⁵⁵ With the help of AI generated posters and voice-cloned speeches and AI generated videos of Imran Khan languishing behind bars, the PTI managed to engage with voters. Other parties also used social media platforms for campaigning but PTI made news because of perception of restrictions being faced by the party in contacting the electorate. The third facet of social media usage, basically by the PTI, in 2024 elections was preparing the candidates and their voters for the polling day. Multiple social media accounts and platforms were used for sharing polling stations details with voters because the Election Commission operated online facility for this purpose had been closed.

Information about election symbols of the PTI candidates who were disallowed to use official party symbols was conveyed to the voters. In order to maintain secrecy, identity of polling agents was conveyed to the voters on specially AI operated accounts. There were repeated instances of disruptions of connectivity, particularly on the polling day forcing candidates and workers to work through VPN. Fourth aspect of the social media very visible in the run up to elections and afterwards was the role of digital journalism. The way following of vloggers spiked in this period was sufficient evidence to prove that people had lost faith, and patience, with the mainstream journalists and channels. Wrath of the government which used to be the fate of a few vocal print and Television journalists, now befell the the new group of vloggers. A number of them were arrested or repeatedly arrested. A few went missing or faced violent reprisals. Platforms like X (Twitter) were disrupted constantly as were YouTube, Instagram etc.

On the flip side, the inevitable consequence of the so-called 'social media election' was an alleged environment of misinformation and fake news. According to government officials, false propaganda against national institutions and public figures had been launched in the garb of election campaign by a particular political party i.e PTI. In a case relating to ban on X (Twitter), the government pleaded in the High Court that the said social media company had failed to redress grievance of propaganda against the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Apparently, government response in handling the social media in the aftermath of 2024 elections is not much different from how it had been prone to deal with the legacy media in the past. On the legislative side, a new Defamation Bill 2024 has already been enacted to punish people for defamatory claims on social media and other platforms against private citizens and public officials. Another law is on the anvil aiming to create a Pakistan Digital Authority for curbing fake news and safeguarding digital rights.⁵⁶ A similar authority which was created in 2002 to regulate electronic media, has a history of being used excessively by successive regimes to stifle and censor the electronic media. It is therefore reasonable to believe that the proposed Digital Authority will not act differently. The other weapon the authorities are using against the social media is by trying to have a stranglehold over which content to be allowed and which to be blacked out. This is particularly happening in cases of certain vlogs on YouTube and other platforms by media persons who are in exile. The plan to block all such sites is apparently afoot. More vitriolic local vloggers have been subjected to prosecution, and at times persecution. All these measures of censorship, hacking and harassment are expected to put the digital media under financial and operational pressure. There is a growing body of literature to suggest that, at the end of the day, governments, particularly authoritarian ones, are better equipped to manipulate the so-called 'liberation technology' than political activists.⁵⁷ This strategy which avowedly is already in place in Pakistan will have ownership at the highest policy forum of Special Investment Facilitation Council (joint military and civilian leadership.) Keeping the social media on short leash will not be a big ask for the government which, according to its own submission in a High Court case, has the capacity to

⁵⁵ Saha and Sharma, India Today, 07/02/2024 .

⁵⁶ Express Tribune, 03/07/2024

⁵⁷ Chenowith, Erica, How Social Media Helps Dictators, Foreign Policy, November 2016

intercept communication of up to 4 million citizens with one click. The system has been euphemistically named as 'Lawful Intercept Management System.'⁵⁸ By the time next elections are held in the country, fire of the so-called 'liberation technology' will have extinguished. A country already categorised authoritarian will deny 'clicktivists' and activists any space on social media to hold virtual rallies, share voting day information and launch AI generated messages in elections in the face of legal and physical blockades.

CONCLUSION: To conclude, elections in Pakistan have been found wanting in transparency as per international standards and public perception due to a media not free enough over the years. Manipulated and strangled by the governments, colluding for self-interest at times, media has been co-opted by dictators and democrats alike for not telling what was socially and politically true. Restrictive legal framework, violence and exploitative business model have served the journalists and media houses to tow official lines. Unethical and corrupt practices, and opportunism, have been no less culpable. This has worked to the detriment of certain political parties and has benefited others, especially during the election days. A society where people largely are interested only in news and political happenings, the legacy media was no longer a 'go to' forum. In order to fill perceived information gaps, people, particularly the younger sections, found resort in social media. It worked well for one political party in the 2024 elections. Fake news and misinformation being indefensible, the authorities now know how to ring fence social media by various means. This will be the opportunity for newspapers, television and also radio to wrest back some of the lost ground. A newspaper which does not suppress a news, a TV channel which is fair in reporting and a radio which is heard everywhere will bring back the readers, the viewers and the listeners. This will need a strong professional code of ethics for journalists and TV presenters alike to build public trust in the institution. This does not mean that a strong, free and credible legacy media will disrupt or can contain social media riding the wave of Artificial Intelligence. This only means that the 'hype machine'⁵⁹ will not be allowed to disrupt our elections or our economy.

⁵⁸ dawn.com 03/07/2024

⁵⁹ Hype Machine, Sinai Aral, Published by Crown Currency, September 2021