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Status of Media Freedom and Democracy in Pakistan: Perception of Journalists and Politicians

Abstract

This research paper analyzes the status of democracy and media freedom in Pakistan as per the perception of top political leaders and journalists. The Libertarian Theory and Democratic Participant Theory guide this research. Data has been collected through intensive interviews of notable politicians of Pakistan belonging to three major political parties and senior journalists respectively. Data was analyzed by using the technique of thematic analysis. The study results reveal that a majority of the journalists believe that media freedom has been compromised and controlled during regime of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf. Some reporting areas have been declared as no go areas for national and private televisions. Journalists as well as politicians believed that democracy has been weakened in the country as compared to Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party led government. They believed that media and democracy has strong relationship and that democracy is not flourishing during the current regime. The study finds that with more control on media and massive use of the anti-graft body against politicians and journalists there is a kind of 'return of the hybrid democracy' with involvement and influence of the non democratic forces in the major decisions.

Keywords: Media freedom, media control, democracy, political parties, journalists, Pakistan

Introduction and Background

Democracy is considered as an indicator of development universally. Democracy is basically a culture which is considered as a pathway for the development of any society (Lynch, 2013). Democracy is largely considered as the finest form of government (Dahl et al., 2003). As per as Pakistan is concerned, it has only two direct elected governments (2008-2013 Pakistan people's party, 2013-2018 Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz). These two democratic governments have completed their tenures. No democratic government before this has completed its tenure. Pakistan democratic system has been shaking since independence (Sarwar, M. S., & Ali, S., 2019).

NAB held Mir Shakil-ur-Rahman for nearly eight months on fabricated allegations stemming from a 34-year-old private property matter (Dawn, 2020). The rapid rise of media firms in Pakistan is seen by Pakistani government circles as a way for huge media corporations to gain political clout, raise revenues, foster cross-media ownership, and cheat taxes (Naseer, 2010).

Journalism, in particular, is considered as inextricably linked to democracy. It plays an important role in developing our identities as citizens, allowing for the crucial debates and deliberations between and among citizens and their representatives. To put it another way, news is "the substance that makes political action possible" (Park, 1940). It is commonly accepted that the media's role in maintaining democracy is what gives it legitimacy (Franklin 2004; Herman and Chomsky 2008).

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Talking about Pakistan, media has been under government control since the country's independence in 1947. It is primarily because the country has remained dominated by autocratic administrations for the most part. Even under the intermittent civilian government, the media were subject to rigorous regulatory frameworks; as a result, the number of publishing enterprises operating at the national level was limited.

Even during the decade of democratic governance, most regulatory constraints remained in place, and media policy remained largely unchanged from that of tyrants. In Pakistan, electronic media has grown at mushroom rate since 2002. In the country, there has been a mushroom growth of new television and radio networks. PEMRA is collaborating with the country's expanding media business. The PEMRA's mandate includes improving the quality of informational, educational, and entertaining content, as well as encouraging the launch of new media houses so that, populace could have a choice (Gul, Obaid, & Ali, 2017).

Abbas (2021) in his column "hybrid democracy vaccine" highlighted the term hybrid with democracy. In his writing he describes the involvement of institutions in Pakistan politics. He indirectly discussed the several non political elements in the process of democracy"

The ruling junta in Pakistan, on the other hand, holds the Pakistani Authority's i.e PEMRA neoliberal policies responsible for the country's unprecedented progress in the media industry, which prepared the path for media owners to have unrestricted political power and ownership concentration (Rasul & McDowell, 2011). In reality, the Pakistani government is considering revising its policy on media control and licensing, and PEMRA has lately been encouraged to take a hard line against huge media companies (Cheema, 2011).

Media and democracy ideal relationship is most important topic to discuss since 2002 in Pakistan. Freedom of media, politicians' role for democracy and hurdles in journalism is significant task to study. If media would be independent then democratic system would be flourished in. Indicators of democracy are considered to be different among countries across the world. All over the world the meaning of independence of media has its own nature. There are many benefits of freedom of expression for development of any country. Suppression of media is the menace for the democratic process. Article 19 allows freedom of speech and expressions in Pakistan. Politicians are powerful segment of society as they are part of legislation and executive. The media, on the other hand, play an important part in the growth and maintenance of democracy in today's liberal democracies (Lipset & Lakin, 2004).

Literature Review

Ashraf (2014) exclaimed that indeed media is a part of democratic process and can accelerate the democracy. Media must be appreciated as it is a tool for societal change. But there are many concerns associated with the media as it could be unfair as well. In a democratic society, the media's active and alert engagement is critical. The belief that the media speaks for the people, represents society's interests, and acts as a check on the government is crucial. This procedure ensures that the government is transparent and responsible. The media plays a role in ensuring effective governance through this function. However, in today's changing social environment, the sacredness of media has been called into doubt in every community. It is extremely concerning in India, as the world's largest democracy. The threat of paid news is the most recent and widely discussed moth-eaten condition in the country's mainstream media. The concept of 'paid news' extends beyond individual journalists' and media organization's wrongdoing. How can the media fulfill their watchdog role in a democratic system under this situation?

Many of the arguments in the discussion that came from the phone hacking incident at the News of the World and the Leveson Inquiry were founded on normative theories of the press. These ideas were primarily motivated by the notion that the media is entrusted with information power, and it is very important to discuss that that power is exercised has implications for democracy. Most debates concerning media policy in Western democracies are based on normative conceptions of the press (Christians et al., 2010). These arguments are based on the notion that the media is entrusted with information power, and how that power is used has implications for democracy (Stromback, 2005). The neoliberal form of libertarian theory and the ideology of social democracy are among the normative theories (Ogbebor, 2020).

The distinctive characteristics of the Malay polity, with its government policies of support for Malays as opposed to persons of Chinese and Indian descent, are explained as a necessary background to comprehending media control techniques. Alternative viewpoints struggle to be heard in the news due to a mix of political party ownership of the major papers and extremely strict licensing rules. In the case of broadcasting, a substantial state sector is supplemented by commercial firms owned by ruling party associates. The government now faces even greater challenges as a result of the Internet. Despite the fact that the primary local ISP works closely with the government to track internet activity and that there have been examples of persecution as a result of this spying,

opposition forces have had some online triumphs. Along with the web of ownership, the government has a slew of legal tools at its disposal to exert control over the media. Ministers have the ability to license the press and broadcasting, and they do not have to present a justification if they decide to cancel a permit. The Internal Security Act, which was bequeathed by the British and is still in effect today, is the most severe of all (Kim, 2014).

Social media as a new platform for politicians raised concerns for the politicians as well traditional media because its access for everyone. Democratic issues that arise when privately owned social media platforms are used as digital public squares by elected officials in the United States, five communication experts in the multidisciplinary roundtable conversation were there to discuss this matter. This discussion takes place in the background of ongoing court proceedings challenging politicians' attempts to exclude certain interlocutors and prevent them from participating. Deal with the tension between politicians' use of social media to propagate their own messages as a form of publicity and citizens' demands for politicians to be transparent online by allowing voters to question or even criticise them. In a cultural environment rife with socioeconomic inequity, it is must to know the weigh the importance of exercising one's right to criticise the government and its officials against the realities of abusive content on social media sites. (Sobieraj et al., 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Media can provide information on a wide range of topics ranging from lifestyle to political issues. The function of the media in the maintenance of democracy is at the top of the spectrum of the media's importance to society (Christians et al., 2010). Thus, it is necessary to explore the role of media in democratic societies that to what extent media is helping the democracy to grow. By highlighting the role of media, it can be suggested that to what extent media is playing its part in Pakistan (a democratic society) or is there any need to improve that role to sustain the democratic system in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

In this research, the researchers with the application of libertarian theory and Democratic participant theory will study the phenomenon of role of media in the eminence of democracy. Libertarian press theory (Siebert, 1963) was an extension of liberalism to the press. Libertarian theorists say information equals knowledge and knowledge equals power. This also suggests that media must be powerful enough to provide knowledge to common people. This thesis suggests that all forms of authority, censorship, and control must be eliminated. Democratic participant theory suggests that media should support democracy and less criticize the policies to support government.

Research Gaps

By evaluating previous literature researcher observed that many researchers have not studied the sensitive issues such as involvement of institutions in the progress of democracy and media freedom. Status of democracy and media freedom in the current regime has not yet studied deeply as this study did. Media freedom was considered as the major issue back in 2008. Many research studies have done in that regime. Media freedom is also important issue in this regime. There is gap of many years as researchers do not highlighted this issue. Previous studies separately studied democracy and media freedom as they are closely related to each other. By studying previous studies researcher find that top leadership of political parties was not taken as population or sample. That is why researcher taken top journalists and politicians as sample of this study.

Significance of the Study

As military influenced increased in media this study will suggest the role of media in a democratic process. This research will highlight the existing the status of media in current regime. This study will analyze if there is an enabling atmosphere for the Pakistani media to play positive role in democracy.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the freedom of media in view of journalists in this regime.
2. To find out the opinion of journalists about the status of democracy in Pakistan during current regime.
3. To analyze the politicians' view regarding freedom of media in Pakistan.
4. To study opinion of politicians regarding status of democracy in Pakistan.

Research Questions

RQ1. Do journalists think that media freedom exists in this regime?

RQ2. Do journalists believe democracy strengthen during current regime as compared to PML (N) and PPP regime?

RQ3. To what extent politicians think that media is free in PTI regime?

RQ4. To what extent politicians think that democracy is flourishing in Pakistan?

Method and Material

This study is qualitative in nature; a qualitative approach is considered more appropriate for it to be applied. By adopting qualitative approach, it had become possible to assess this phenomenon in detail that how media

<i>Respondent</i>	<i>Media freedom</i>	<i>Democracy status</i>	<i>General</i>
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participating in the protuberance of democracy. A research method is a tool, or processes that is adopted and used to investigate the problem.

Research method of intensive interview is used in this study and is mainly concerned with perception of participants' role of media in the development of democracy and media freedom aspects.

This study inquires status of democracy and media freedom in Pakistan. According to objective and need of the study, researcher has selected senior political players of PML-N, PTI and PPP from Punjab as population for this study as one group. Researcher has selected two respondents from 3 political parties, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf which is ruling party, Pakistan Muslim league Nawaz and Pakistan people's party. Researcher had chosen out only those respondents who had enjoyed the power as remain as in government and who had part of opposition as well. Government and opposition members as respondent help researcher to analyze the democracy and media freedom.

Another group of population consisted of senior journalists having experience more than 25 years. Journalists who have strong relationship with democracy and work as upper hierarchy of media can respond perfectly about democracy and media freedom. The size of sample is chosen from two group i.e. senior journalists and politicians. Research for this study has selected six politicians and four journalists. Total 10 respondents will be study through intensive interviews.

Thematic Analysis

The goal of a thematic analysis is to find patterns in the interview material. Thematic analysis is a prominent method for analysing qualitative data in a variety of disciplines and fields, and it may be used in a variety of ways, on a variety of datasets, and to answer a variety of research questions.

Table 1

Political players Interviews themes

Mian Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif (PML(N))	No Media's freedom is not allowed.	No democracy in Pakistan	Khan is a cruel leader for the media.
Syed Yousaf Raza Gillani (PPP)	Media is suppressed in this regime.	No democracy in Pakistan. Media and democracy are interlinked	Ownership was given respect in our regime
Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar (PTI)	Free media is priority. No restrictions on media in these days.	Politicians are free to speak	PEMRA is a free body
Azma Bukhari (PML(N))	Imran Khan suppressed media. Undemocratic politicians use media for their publicity.	Political governments are better for media.	Unemployment increased in international index.
Samsam Bukhari (PTI)	Politicians use media for power. Some journalists are good but some are biased.	Journalists should work by self-made regulations	Criticism in ethical way must be welcomed.
Syed Hassan Murtaza (PPP)	Opposition is answerable to media and court. Media and politicians are partners.	Some selfish politicians use media for their own benefits.	Democracy uproots after every ten years. Common people do not trust politicians

Table 2

Journalists' Interviews themes

Respondent	Media freedom	Democracy status	General
Suhail Warraich Senior editor daily Jang	Media cannot criticize on every issue. Members of society must be included in PEMRA.	Dictators and politicians both want democracy. Media sacrificed a lot for democracy .	Journalist cannot criticized everything News broad or publish is not in its original form
Sabir Shakir Bureau chief Islamabad ARY news	Journalists should follow ethics. No absolute media freedom in world	Opposition has strong relationship with media.	Every Government affects media. Media has strong impact in political affairs
Mian Tahir Mehmood Director News channel24	Censorship is strict nowadays Journalists get unemployed in this regime. Current government stops advertisements.	Hybrid democracy. Political parties never supported media.	Media unveil hidden facts. Democracy is best political system. News is not in its original form
Ahmed Waleed Director news UK 44	Journalists' lives and jobs are in danger. PEMRA is mouthpiece of government.	Current regime suppresses media very much. Democracy is not flourishing. Every government wants to suppress media	People don't trust media. Journalists disseminate fake information for the politicians.

Discussion and Analysis

The thematic analysis of the study answered all four research questions.

RQ1 was *Do Journalists think that Media Freedom Exists in this Regime?* Journalists have feared to lose their jobs if they report about certain areas and issues. Media economic recession in the form of the decrease in public sector advertisements is another pressure and fear for the journalists in the country. Advertisements have been controlled and decreased besides banning some renowned journalists including Hamid Mir – exerting a pressure on media owners and other journalists to cause an increased self-censorship. There are many restrictions on media houses when they are broadcasting or publishing news. Every media house has made some shift in its policy to sustain and survive.

Amnesty International reported in *Pakistan: Escalating Attacks on Journalists* that on 25th May, 2021, three unidentified guys forcibly entered Asad Ali Toor's apartment in Islamabad and abused him. Toor was chained and gagged, and he was severely beaten. Absar Alam, a television journalist, was shot and wounded outside his home in Islamabad on 20th April, 2021, by an unidentified assailant. Absar Alam has long been a vocal opponent of the government. Matiullah Jan was kidnapped in Islamabad on July 21, 2020, by an unidentified assailant. After speaking at a protest in support of Asad Toor on May 29, the news station Geo "suspended" Hamid Mir, one of Pakistan's most well-known television talk show hosts (Amnesty.org, 2021).

RQ2 of the study was: *Do journalists opine that there is democracy in Pakistan?* The study found that democracy and democratic forces including politicians and journalists were facing pressure in Pakistan. PEMRA is under the government control and used to control and regulate electronic media in the way which suits the government and the establishment.

RQ3. To what extent politicians think that media is free in PTI regime? The analysis of the semi-structured interviews of politician concluded that in every government wanted to suppress media. Politicians belong to opposition benches argued that no media freedom existed in the country because the government was afraid of free media. Politicians believed that many news reports were not being broadcasted in original form, rather the information filters operative fully for necessary checks and balances in accordance with the Chomsky (2002). Media has a strong power that affects government performance. Anchors and journalists are influential characters in Pakistan. Politician and journalists use each other for their benefits. However, the politicians belonging to treasury benches argued that media was enjoying freedom more than India and other neighbouring countries. However, the decrease in public sector advertisements was fixing it to the size as the PML-N and PPP government had issued advertisements out of proportions.

RQ4. *To what extent politicians think that there is democracy in Pakistan?* Political leaders have different perceptions about different events as some political leaders argued that media is suppressed in this regime. The PPP government strengthened media very much. Media freedom is not absolute because it could be harmful for government. Criticism must be in some ethical way. Advertisements are stopped by government many times. Many journalists were fired from originations that lead journalists toward economic problems. Ownership is under pressure in this regime. Uncertainties in PEMRA status as a respondents say PEMRA issues notice to media without consistent reasons.

In the view of respondents, current regime is the worst regime for media freedom. Many respondents argue that there is no absolute freedom in world. International regulatory system is more balanced as compared to other bodies. Journalists have developed some friendly relationship with media. Bribes are taken by the journalists whom they called as “lifafa journalism”.

People do not trust politicians because they think that they are unable to sustain democracy. Ethical journalism must be adopted to perform duties. News is not presented in its original form as it passes through different barriers such as policy, ownerships, and security concerns are considered. Democracy is not absolute as many hurdles are generated by democratic process. Criticism must be in an ethical manner, otherwise hatred could be spread among government and media. Media and politicians do not trust each other. When government is in power, they put sanctions on media. Same government party when is in opposition has friendly relationship with media.

Media freedom is not possible due to blackmailing, criticism and many issues. Politicians and journalists are biased as per opinion of journalists. Every government oppressed media through PEMRA. Opposition has better links with media. Often politicians use media for their benefits. PEMRA is under government control that's why it is not a regulatory body. Uncertainty in politicians about the future of democracy is present because the process disrupted many times. Media is strong since privatization of channels. Many politicians use the term “undemocratic and hybrid democracy” for this regime. Almost all politicians believed that there is no true democracy exists.

Conclusion

There is not absolute democracy finds anywhere in the world. A series of events and activities have occurred, demonstrating that there are both hopes and obstacles in Pakistan's path to democracy. We can expect that the complete democracy or struggle to achieve would be fruitful. Pakistan's democracy has been marked by both hopes and challenges since its founding in 1947. Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, was keen to establish a democratic structure in the country. Democracy is a time taking process. Since 2008 to 2018, two consecutive assemblies have completed their terms which are very helpful and welcomed process in sustaining democracy. Sustaining of democracy is a matter of concern for politicians as well journalists.

Media and democracy are dependent upon each other. So, that media freedom is necessary for the democratic process. According to this research, media freedom cannot be completely achieved. Journalists of Pakistan do a lot to achieve complete democracy in Pakistan. The law of Pakistan, as specified in its constitutional amendments, protects the freedom of the press in Pakistan. Many respondents of this study raise a question that international index of media freedom has declined in Pakistan. The RSF ranked Pakistan 145 in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index.

Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors many times raises voices for the media freedom. The All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) has denounced the decision by the federal government, as well as the governments of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to discontinue issuing advertisements to the Dawn and Jang groups calling it a violation of press freedom principles back in first half of 2020.

Both politicians and journalists welcomed every step towards democracy. Media must be free but under some rules and regulations. Ethical journalism is the first step toward the responsible journalism. Ownership and government must develop friendly relationships with each other for the progress of country. PEMRA is a regulating body, it must be freed according to international standards. Political parties coordination is very important for legislation process. Media must highlight every aspect of government either negative or positive.

Suggestions for Further Studies

1. Researcher has used intensive interviews as the technique for data collection. Future researchers could use other methods of data collection.
2. Further studies can be conducted on common people who cast their votes and used media.
3. Sample size can be increased for further studies.

Limitations of the Study

1. Democracy is a vast topic; researcher could cover few aspects of it only.
2. Sample is limited as compared to the broadness of topic.
3. Qualitative studies have the biasness of the respondents which is the flaw in the research.
4. Researcher has collected data from three major political parties, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz and Pakistan Peoples Party. One is currently in government and the other two are in opposition. It has disrupted the balance between opposition and government points of view.
5. Sample size is small.
6. Researcher could be biased while collecting data because it is a qualitative study.
7. Many respondents were reluctant to give answers due to suppression they faced from their high ups.
8. Many politicians were not willing to give time that's why answers were short.

Ethical Considerations

This is purely an academic research and no funding has taken from any organization.

Primarily proper permission was taken from politicians as well as journalists for publishing their interviews in this research. Study instrument was approved by departmental doctoral committee of Superior University.

Mr Muhammad Jawed Aslam reviewed and monitored overall research. Mr Shabbir Sarwar reviewed the research, apply thematic analysis and help in extract a research paper. Mr Usman Ahmad Bhatti conceptualizes the idea and collected data from politicians and journalists. Ms Sadia Shakoor worked with original text.

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