Media-powered democracy: how media support has been pivotal to Pakistan’s latest democratization project.

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Prologue

Go to a trial court; why a media court? Why this smear campaign? There are laws... but we’re not to be tried by the law, we’re to be tried by the media. Because when you try someone by the media, people get confused. They’re not lawyers, they don’t know the rules... So try someone by the media, and then sentence them.¹

Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, 1996

Methodology and clarifications

The study of the news media as a monolith is indeed problematic – there is little collaboration, if not open animosity between different media houses in Pakistan. However, given the preponderance of the top few media houses in Pakistan (one could argue that this could be further narrowed down to the top media house in terms of reach and revenue, Jang Group), the final editorial product is, by and large (but certainly not always), monolithic.

This is compounded by the prevalence of cross-media ownership, which means print and electronic media have very similar editorial stances. Either smaller media houses follow the editorial model of the top houses in order to remain in the financial and viewership race or can be discounted in the larger analysis given that they exercise far lesser influence and have lesser reach.

Though the regional languages media in Pakistan are extremely vibrant, the ‘news media’ in this study has been restricted to an analysis of the Urdu and English media. There is no doubt that the impact of regional-language media is considerable – but it has been left out of this study given that it caters to specific regions and doesn’t necessarily reflect the general national-level political narrative or the national democratisation project. A study of regional language media and how different its editorial narrative is from the mainstream national media is another study altogether.

When we say ‘democracy’...

Proponents of substantive democracies have long argued that procedure alone does not define democracy, simply because the process of democratisation involves the many subprocesses of working towards transparency in the political electoral process, accountability of the government, institution building, division of powers between different branches of the state, access to justice, provision and protection of citizens’ basic rights, and the freedom of political choice and participation.

Indeed, democratisation is a long and complex process that does not simply involve the holding of general elections - the cases of Pakistan and Egypt since Mubarak’s fall being upheld as archetypes of systems that voted in popularly-elected governments, but fell well short when it came to basic democratic ideals.

However, the opening up of political participation, exercising political choice through universal adult franchise/suffrage and establishing popularly-elected governments through transparent elections can be categorised as the fundamental step away from totalitarian forms of government and towards democratisation – a transition to democratisation, as it were.

It is this initial procedural transition from authoritarian military regimes to popularly-elected government that that this paper deals with when referring to democratisation in Pakistan.
1. Introduction: Welcome to Pakistan

On May 11, 2013, over 46 million Pakistanis voted in a historic general election. It was historic for a number of reasons, but primarily because it marked the first time one directly-elected civilian government had completed its mandated tenure and handed over power to another directly-elected successor. The 55% turnout represented the highest voter participation in Pakistan's history since its partition, over four decades ago in 1971. During the time in between, the country had seen two periods of military dictatorship and two deeply troubled and aborted periods of democratisation marked by flagging voter interest, which fell to a lowly 35% in 1997.

However, the latest democratisation project – version 3.0, which began in 2008 – has seen a reversal of trends. Six million new voters were added to the electoral lists between 2008 and 2013, and around 11 million more people voted in the 2013 elections compared to the 2008 polls. This was despite facing a number of security threats by terror groups within Pakistan, who had warned voters against coming out to vote.

Thus far, democratisation v3.0 stands as the most successful project to date in a country in which popularly-elected civilian-led rule can best be described as fleeting: the country has spent 32 of its 66-year existence under direct military rule (that is, an army chief taking over and holding high political office after a military coup), and only 21 under a directly-elected civilian-led government. Thirteen years have been spent under vague special setups, including caretaker governments and indirectly-elected constitution-making bodies (particularly so in the first decade of its existence). Two earlier democratisation projects, from 1970-77 (v1.0) and 1988-1999 (v2.0), failed – ultimately resulting in military coups and extended military government.²

Most explanations for Pakistan's inability to sustain popularly-elected civilian governments revolve primarily around two theories: one is the interventionist role of a pervasive, all-powerful military and a well-entrenched praetorian bureaucracy, which together form the vague entity referred to widely as the "Establishment"; the other, the failure of directly-elected civilian governments and other political actors themselves to take substantive steps to ensure the continuation of the democratisation process following their election to power. International influences, such as foreign support for compliant military dictators, are often factored into this debate.

The role of another actor, the ‘Fourth Estate,’ remains generally unstudied. The relationship between news media and governments in countries across the globe has historically had a

² While there were elections in 1965 and in 2002, both of these polls took place under a military dictator at the height of their power – hence the two elections will not be counted as being part of the democratisation process.
profound impact on the process of democratisation and its consolidation – or lack thereof. In many cases, governments that are meant to be democratic have often been high-handed in their dealings with the media and the dissemination of information and have suppressed opposing political views; while on the other hand, news media in many new democracies have often been accused of being overly-critical and excessively negative, which is said to lead to political cynicism and the erosion of the legitimacy of fragile governments. Pakistan has witnessed both scenarios.

Any sort of a convergence of interests between the two had never been witnessed in Pakistan until Democratisation v3.0 – a period that also corresponds with an unprecedented opening up of the media scene in the country since the turn of the century. Today, the country’s media is larger and freer than it has ever been. But it is also very young, and hence unpredictable.

This paper is a closer analysis of the media’s development and changing line over the years, and how its behaviour during the democratisation projects has had a profound impact on the successes and failures of democracy in Pakistan.
2. White spaces: media repression from 1963 to 1988

The news media continues to expand in reach and influence in 2013, a year that saw the media exercise more influence on the political system than ever before. But the year also marks the 50-year anniversary of the one of the darkest laws in Pakistan’s media history, the Press and Publication Ordinance, introduced by the country's first military dictator, Field Marshal Ayub Khan. The Ordinance effectively stated that any sort of news publication had to be cleared by the government before being printed and disseminated.

The law remained in full force until 1988, which was when it was watered down just before the advent of Democratisation v2.0. It wasn’t completely removed till 2002.

Veteran journalist Zaffar Abbas lucidly remembers the days journalists had to physically carry the next day’s newspaper edition to the Press Information Department for the press officer to go through the stories and censor them. Now the Editor of Dawn, Pakistan’s most respected news publication and largely-circulated English daily newspaper, Abbas recalls that the government’s press officers would pull certain stories out and they would have to replace those spaces with other, often meaningless, stories.

Abbas is not the only seasoned Pakistani journalist to refer to those days at every given chance. Muhammad Ziauddin, a practicing journalist for over four decades, refers often to those days too. The military regime would ask journalists and publishers to bring every page that was to be printed to the Press Information Officer, who would, on a whim, take out any news item, and the publication would be forced not to publish it. Ziauddin, now the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune, an English daily paper in Pakistan that is the publishing partner of The International Herald Tribune, also recalls that in the beginning, the publications would fill those spaces with “inane, innocent news stories”... but after some time, they started leaving white spaces. The white space was a form of indirect protest.

“If you ask me to describe that law in one sentence, I would say that if any small little government official didn't like the colour of your jacket or tie, he can arrest you, he can confiscate your newspaper, seal your press and throw away the key and there would be no recourse to the courts,” says Ziauddin, who was a college student at the time the law was first introduced and participated in protests against it.

Democratisation v1.0

Democratisation v1.0, which saw the first general election, was not until 1970 – 23 years after Pakistan’s formation. And that government, too, was a product of a civil war: the party

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3 Though it was actually passed in 1960, it was amended in 1963, through which the state was given sweeping powers to deal with the media
4 Interview with the Editor of Dawn, Zaffar Abbas on 23/05/2013
5 Interview with the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune Muhammad Ziauddin on 18/05/2013
that had actually won the majority in the combined results of the 1970 elections of East and West Pakistan, the Awami League, went on to govern the seceded new state of Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan. That left Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) to form the de facto government in the remainder of Pakistan – initially as a transitional constitution-making system.

During Democratisation v1.0, Bhutto, Pakistan’s first popularly-elected civilian leader, did not repeal the Press and Publication Ordinance. In fact, Bhutto used it to ban a number of newspapers and threaten others. Public embarrassment of journalists was also commonplace under Bhutto, as was self-censorship. “He was as bad as any dictatorial regime as far as the media was concerned. Media was under pressure under Mr Bhutto’s time. His mindset was: You are with me or against me,” recalls Ziauddin.

Though Bhutto had successfully tamed the news media during his rule, the political instability that followed his 1977 re-election bid due to widespread protests by the combined opposition Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) was quickly picked up and magnified by the news media. Given Bhutto’s high-handedness, it is little wonder that he didn’t find much sympathy in the media. Browbeaten into supporting Bhutto since he took power, the news media took advantage of the opening caused by the political protests and turned on him one-by-one. Pakistan’s first popularly-elected civilian leader was overthrown following a military coup by army chief Gen. Ziaul Haq on July 4, 1977. If not openly welcomed, the coup was at least not criticised by the news media. Bhutto was eventually hanged in 1979.

Gen. Zia’s military govt

Things wouldn’t get much better in the years that followed, and Bhutto’s overthrow would provide no relief. “In President Gen. Ziaul Haq’s days (1977 to 1988), there was a law that actually said that if what you’ve written (affects) the national interest, even if it is factual, you’ll be liable to be arrested and tried,” recalls Ziauddin. In the mid-80s onwards, most of the news media was faced with a new sort of manipulation: falling into the grip of Pakistan’s infamous intelligence agencies, because of the first Afghan war, in which Pakistan, with the help of the United States, actively promoted the religious war initiated by Jihadist elements against the USSR.

“During this time, the intelligence agencies wanted the media to support it. And [aside from pressuring and intimidation] they infiltrated the media. They sent in very highly educated, foreign educated persons into the media. And got them to create a kind of favourable mindset among the people (obviously there were no TV channels). They wanted [the media] to take a favourable mindset regarding Pakistan’s position vis-à-vis the first war Afghan war,” says Ziauddin.

Effectively, in order to build legitimacy for totalitarian rule, media manipulation was the set standard up until that point. The media did talk politics, and sometimes did mention the D-word (democracy) – but it talked more about other things, particularly the security situation. They would talk about mis-governance, but in a subtle way because of the law.
They would focus on social issues during the period because “politics was banned.” To give a poignant example of the sort of restrictions that were in place under the Press and Publications Ordinance, the news media were not allowed to report court proceedings or even parliamentary proceedings; they were only to publish a pre-authorised press release, which they would, in entirety.

That is not to say that journalists did not struggle against the repression of the military regime. Indeed, it would be inaccurate to suggest this. Some of the most famous cases of highhandedness by the state against journalists came during Gen. Zia’s military regimes, such as the public flogging of ‘non-compliant’ journalists. However, those were matters of individual defiance or fringe media houses, and were isolated cases rather than the general norm. As a matter of general practice, the ownerships of mainstream media houses were not nearly as defiant or deviant as their journalist employees – at least not overtly. Critical journalism was indeed there, but restricted to fringe publications run mostly by social and political activists of the time.

Gen. Zia died in a plane crash in 1988, and shortly after his death, Pakistan would hold elections to put into place a directly-elected civilian-led government.

However, an important change occurred between the military dictator’s death and the return of civilian rule: the transitional government watered down the controversial Press and Publication Ordinance (it was only removed completely in 2002) allowing the media a lot more breathing space compared to the stifling environment present over the past two-and-a-half decades.

This played an important part in what was to happen during Democratisation v2.0, wherein the new directly-elected civilian-led governments would now have to deal with a less-restricted news media – one that had been muzzled and contained for years. And it would show.

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6 Interview with the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune Muhammad Ziauddin on 18/05/2013
7 Ibid.
3. The nervous ’90s: Media manipulation in democratisation v2.0

On August 6, 1990, Benazir Bhutto, then serving her first term as Prime Minister of Pakistan, was sitting in a casual gathering with journalists, including one named Kaleem Omar. Soon the news would break that her government had been dismissed by President Ghulam Ishaque Khan under Article 58-2(b) of the Constitution – a sweeping and powerful provision that had been inserted into the Constitution by military ruler Gen. Ziaul Haq (the government lasted less than two years). The charge against the government was of corruption, nepotism and general mis-governance. Prominent among the dossier of charges was an article titled "Take the money and run," which pertained to allegations of corruption against Benazir Bhutto and her spouse Asif Ali Zardari. One of the two authors of that article was Kaleem Omar.

Democratisation v2.0, referred to widely as the ‘Decade of Democracy,’ saw an expanded role for a relatively unbridled news media. From 1988 to 1999, four directly-elected civilian-led governments were elected, and none of them survived more than three years – three of them controversially dismissed by a president under military-era laws and one dismissed directly by a military coup (1999). According to a number of interviewed journalists and academics, the news media in this era had wittingly or unwittingly played a role in the creation of an anti-politics and anti-politician environment favourable to the dismissal of the civilian governments. In fact, their reporting on corruption and mis-governance formed the direct basis for the dismissal of at least two governments (in 1990 and 1993).

“During Benazir’s days, the media took lots of liberty with the regime,” recalls Ziauddin. “When Benazir [Bhutto] came in (in 1988), she took a lot of criticism but, by and large, tolerated it.” The following elected government of Nawaz Sharif was also dismissed in the same fashion (1993), by the same person, under the same circumstances. Ziauddin’s stories were also part of the evidence dossier against Benazir as well as against Sharif.

Before she and her government were sacked, Benazir’s corruption dominated the media. “The public’s mind was made. The same was the case when Nawaz Sharif was kicked out; the same media created an image of Nawaz Sharif as an immature, illiterate and corrupt prime minister. Again when Benazir was kicked out (1996), the newspapers played into the hands of the [anti-democratic forces] and created an image of her being corrupt. When Musharraf kicked out Nawaz Sharif (1999), the newspapers were full of stories about Nawaz Sharif’s kickbacks and all,” says Ziauddin.

The use and impact of the media was not lost on the political actors. In a documentary produced and broadcast by the BBC, titled a suggestive “The Princess and the Playboy”
Benazir may have referred to it as “confusion” but the actual effect was closer to disillusionment. All four elections in Democritisation v2.0 were marred by low participation in the political process, which showed a declining trend as the years went by. In 1988, the turnout was 43.07%, in 1990 it was 45.46%, 1993 40.28% and 1997 35.42%. How much the media contributed to this disillusionment is clearly debatable. But it certainly couldn’t have helped, and at worst would have only contributed to an active campaign to paint civilian political leaders as inept and corrupt.

It was the decade of anti-politics.

This is not to suggest that the stories on corruption and mis-governance were always imagined, but to point out, as before, that these stories only came out during periods of civilian rule and that an otherwise ideologically-charged news media’s silence on the subsequent dismissals was questionable. Also, as is true with journalism all over the world, a story can be incorrect and correct at the same time – that is, by highlighting select portions of an investigation, ignoring others entirely, and framing it to fit a certain narrative: in Pakistan’s case the anti-democracy, anti-politician one. Context is important to journalism. It should also be pointed out that many of the larger stories of corruption have, to date, never been proved in a court of law.

Though it can be argued that, in a continuation of the trend of years past, the media was used by anti-democratic forces, what was clear is that journalists were clearly freer to report on issues such as corruption and mis-governance – particularly compared to the 11 years under military strongman Gen. Ziaul Haq. And the government was relatively helpless to act against it, given that the laws had been watered down just as the civilians had entered into government. What the media did with this relative freedom was telling.

For their own part, the directly-elected civilian-led governments, which were almost instantly confronted by a barrage of ‘investigative reporting,’ did their best to stymie the media’s attempt to grow. Buoyed by its relative freedom, the media pushed for more space and growth, and the civilian governments resisted in retaliation.

“There were four democratically-elected governments up until 1997, and we had campaigned with Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, asking them to liberate

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the media and to allow television channels. When they were in the opposition, they were all for it. The moment they stepped into the Prime Minister House, their policies changed. They continued to rely on using the state-owned Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan for propaganda purposes,” recalls Abbas.

Though few reasons are offered for this reluctance, perhaps the directly-elected civilian-led governments, themselves fragile, were wary of further empowering a news media that had already been so hostile towards them: indeed, the television platform has greater reach and more instant effect than print.

What is certain is that there was a struggle for preponderance between the two.

The media would not relent in its highlighting of the civilian governments’ supposed ineptitude – all the way up to yet another military intervention in 1999. On October 8, the then army chief General Pervez Musharraf executed Pakistan’s third military coup.
4. The Musharraf years and the rise of TV

A few years after taking power, Gen. Pervez Musharraf began to consider opening up the media. Though there is still intense debate over Gen. Musharraf’s motives, it remains an irony that it was he, a military strongman, who ultimately did what no other had been willing to do before him: open the doors for the electronic media in Pakistan.

While there is unanimity in the belief that the proliferation of electronic media was critical for the democratisation project, views diverge significantly on why such a shift took place. Perhaps it was due to the compulsions of the time. Ziauddin argues instead that the General was compelled to do so because of the rapid advancement of technology: “Technological progress had made it impossible for the Musharraf regime to obstruct the private sector from coming. Geo was already beaming from Dubai... By Musharraf’s entry, technological progress, both telecom as well as satellite technology, had made it impossible for any government or administration to put curbs on flow of information.”

Abbas’s comments on the matter offer an interesting explanation on why Gen. Musharraf may have taken this gamble: “If the international scene is anything to go by, you can have a look at the media scene in Saudi Arabia or, for that matter, in Iran and in many other countries. I mean, Al Jazeera can go on talking about the rest of the world, but they cannot discuss what is happening in Qatar. Al Arabia can talk about what is happening in the world, or Khaleej Times can write about anything from the UK to Israel – but not a word about the UAE.” In the end, it did not work out that way.

Perhaps because military regimes in the past had been able to enjoy effective control over the media, Gen. Musharraf felt confident that the media would toe his line. For the most part, what seems to have been a gamble by Gen Musharraf, possibly based on past amenable relations between military rulers and the media (for a large part), paid off. The General was free of criticism for most of his tenure, and any criticism that did exist was muted. But that would change – steadily at first; prodigiously towards the end.

Whatever the reason may have been, three years into his coup, on August 14 (Pakistan’s Independence Day) 2002, Pakistan’s first local private news television channel, Geo News, was launched. That was the game-changer. From having no privately owned television news channels, and only the one state broadcaster, Pakistan Television (PTV), up until 2002, the country saw the issuing of no less than 89 broadcasting licences in a matter of eight years. No less than 29 of these licences were for 24-hour news channels. The media industry

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10 Criticising Democracy or Criticizing Government? S Akbar Zaidi, Economic and Political Weekly (EPW) Vol - XLIV No. 09, February 28, 2009
11 One private television channel was broadcasting entertainment programming and CNN in the ‘90s for a few hours a day, but it ultimately closed down a few years later
12 Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority in-house powerpoint presentation, procured through sources in the body
exploded, riding on the wave of the proliferating electronic media. Along with TV, local cable operators, who would run these channels, also proliferated. Journalists and media owners suddenly found themselves with a new, much larger audience than they ever had when operating on the print platform in a country with a low literacy, and hence readership, rate, and where newspapers were a luxury for a large chunk of the population. Privately-researched estimates, such as that of Gallup Pakistan in 2009, put television viewership at around 86 million, of which the viewership of private channels was around 38 million (this dichotomy is because of the inequality of access to cable television between the urban and rural centres of Pakistan – but given the growing trend and urbanisation, the figure of 38 million would only have risen over the last four years). Never had private media in Pakistan had such reach – which had both financial and journalistic implications for the profession and the business – and, of course, the Pakistani public.

The talk show phenomenon

The wave of television gave birth to a new phenomenon in Pakistan: the political talk show. The rush to fill these spots was as greedy as the proliferation of such shows. An information starved but public lapped it up and a new public intellectual elite was born: the talk show host – highly paid, highly watched and highly rated.

According to one survey published in 2012, the highest television viewership in Pakistan was recorded during the 8 to 10 pm slot. The format of most, if not all, television news channels places a current affairs talk show at the 8 to 9 pm slot. Social scientist Akbar Zaidi, writing in English daily newspaper Dawn, points out that:

"Pakistan's new public intellectuals are television talk-show hosts, so-called analysts and journalists. These individuals have both an eager public listening to their observations, analysis and insights every day, often many times a day, and they have the extremely powerful medium of television, which has become the new public sphere."

The potent effect of the television medium, relative to its print counterpart, is widely recognized in media studies across the globe. In their paper Political Communication – Old and New Media Relationships the authors quote academics as having already recognized, back in 1970, that television had a sort of transformative power – both on society writ large as well its understanding of, and relationship with, politics. Perhaps more importantly, television had a profound impact on the relationship between politics, power and the media.

Another seminal study in this regard is the 1968 Chapel Hill study\textsuperscript{17}, which traced the agenda-setting powers of the mass media – contending that, while it cannot be proven that the media tells the public what to think, it certainly does determine what they think about. These are decades-old theories, but for Pakistan, where private television is still a new socio-political phenomenon, they resonate poignantly.

“Part of what has happened in Pakistan in the last 12 years is that the TV media has emerged. If I were to use the term loosely, I would say it is the Americanisation of Pakistan, in that sense: 24 hr TV: war is on TV, violence is on TV, and everything is on TV. And people watch it. It does form a big part of people's lives, particularly how public discourse is shaped. Especially within concentrated urban conglomerates, of which we have quite a few now. every household has a TV, and everyone has got their TV on at night. Images and narratives and ideas are being beamed into the household, and the next morning you wake up and read the newspaper, and more or less the same version of what you heard at night is there as well. Especially the Urdu print press,” says Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, a professor of history and political economy at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.

“It is the kind of power that the corporate media has exercised in many western countries, particularly the United States, for many decades now. So this is our coming of age, in that sense.”\textsuperscript{18}

For Pakistan, and indeed Gen. Musharraf and the subsequent wave of democratic transition, the impact of a growing media would soon become apparent.

\textsuperscript{17} “The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media.” Maxelle E McCombs and Donald L. Shaw. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1972

\textsuperscript{18} Interview with Dr Aasim Sajjad Akhtar on 19/3/2013
5. Front and centre: The media’s coup against Musharraf

On March 9, 2007, Gen. Musharraf, who had since his coup taken on the office of the country’s President and was at the height of his power, suspended the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, on charges of nepotism and misconduct. However, the real reason behind the move to oust the judge was widely believed to have been his willingness to take on sensitive cases against the military ruler and his government.

What should have been a routine high-handed move for a military ruler turned out to be anything but. As The New York Times reported:

"A political and legal maelstrom has emerged since Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf, unceremoniously suspended the country's chief justice last week, a step that lawyers and rights activists have called an assault on the independence of the judiciary.

"The suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, who did not shy away from taking on cases that challenged the government, has set off immense controversy and threatens to spiral into a constitutional crisis, according to lawyers and analysts here.

"Thousands of lawyers across the country have boycotted court proceedings, staged hunger strikes and organized protests. A growing wave of public sympathy has swelled behind Chaudhry."\(^\text{19}\)

Initially, the mainstream news media, particularly television, by and large, treated the coverage and the “public sympathy” cautiously. Some took a critical line in the coverage, but there were immediate steps taken by the administration in an attempt to nip the deviant reporting in the bud.

“Two private television channels were reprimanded by the government and taken off the air for a few minutes after they showed Chaudhry trying to march toward the Supreme Court amid a melee between supporters and the police.”\(^\text{20}\)

While the general perception of Gen. Musharraf was of a benevolent military ruler supportive of a free media, his regime’s swift action against media houses was a stark reminder of the highhandedness of military regimes past – and a clear sign that the General was only a benefactor as long as the media toed his line. But as Musharraf moved to act, this time around, there was one big difference in the equation: television. Though military rulers


\(^{20}\) ibid
had faced numerous crises in the past, and survived most, this was now being beamed live to millions.

A seminal moment for relations between the military government and the media was March 16, 2007, when the Islamabad office of the country’s largest television channel, Geo TV, owned by Pakistan’s biggest media house, Jang Group, was attacked by security personnel for giving live coverage to pro-chief justice protests. The group up until that point had been the most reserved in its coverage of the movement that had already entered its 7th day. The final “turning” of the largest and most influential media house was a Rubicon of sorts:

"Although satellite TV and FM radio continued to extend their reach, only when Musharraf sacked Chief Justice Chaudhry did their importance reveal itself. As thousands of black-suited lawyers took to the streets in open defiance of Musharraf’s increasingly autocratic rule, satellite TV was there to cover it. The harsh treatment of the lawyers coupled with the government’s crude effort to control the judiciary quickly caught the public’s attention as millions across the country for the first time watched live as citizens risked all to challenge the power of the state.”

The situation would calm down for a few months, and the chief justice was reappointed to his position – but the battle lines had been drawn: between the judiciary and the regime, and, more importantly, between the regime and the news media.

As a sort of cold war brewed between the regime and the media, another key event would take place, during which the news media’s ubiquity would be confirmed: the storming of a seminary, known as Laal Masjid, in Islamabad, by army commandos. According to the paper *The Media Take Center Stage*: “The bloody, week-long drama showed […] private TV’s increasingly central role.” A young news media had its share of problems covering the event: “The young TV stations and their crews had landed suddenly and unexpectedly on the frontlines of a violent struggle in the country’s capital, yet without the experience to cover the conflict adequately, or to put it into its social, economic, political, and cultural context.” But the spotlight was well and truly on the television news media. The experience would be critical for what was to follow later in the year.

**The November Emergency**

The Chief Justice issue would erupt again once he decided to take up a petition challenging the constitutional status of General Musharraf and his eligibility to run for president. They were desperate times for the president – and his subsequent actions would show just that. At the stroke of midnight, 3rd November, 2007, Gen. Musharraf appeared on state television to impose Emergency Rule in the country. Under the guise of emergency, the military strongman sacked the Chief Justice of Pakistan once again. Interestingly, his speech

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22 Ibid.
justifying the imposition of Emergency was also rife with warnings to a “negative” media. Aside from his words, he would also act against the news media writ large.

This time around, the media threw caution to the wind from the get-go. Initially, the consequence was an indirect blackout of television news channels, both local and international (including BBC and CNN) – made possible by the manipulation of cable operators through which the channels were transmitted into millions of households. The regime then insisted that the owners of media houses sign on to a “code of conduct.” In a poignant portrayal of the mood of the regime, the then prime minister, Shaukat Aziz, had this to say about the terms: “The government is going to decide what the parameters are.”

This was just the start, and a warning of sorts. CNN reported:

"Less than a day after Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency and scolded the country's media for being too "negative," police stormed the offices of a television station early Sunday, AAJ-TV's director of news and current affairs said.

"Armed with guns, the two dozen police said they had orders to take the station's equipment, including a van that the station uses to broadcast live coverage, Talat Hussain said.

"The police didn’t have proof their demands were legitimate, he said, adding the officers said only that they had orders "from the highest authority." The raid followed a government directive to the media, warning journalists that any criticism of the president or prime minister would be punishable by three years in jail and a fine of up to $70,000, Hussain said.

"The media could not lend a helping hand to improve the situation," Musharraf said, describing "the situation" in Pakistan as fraught with tension and constrained by the spread of terrorism. "I said frequently that the media should not be negative," Musharraf said." 24

Pulling the plug on the news media would prove to be the breaking point. "I personally think what really changed the atmosphere, and was Musharraf’s big blunder, was when he imposed emergency he also tried to pull the plug on the television channels and tried to impose censorship in the country. That pushed the entire media into the lawyers’ camp. After agitation, the television channels’ services were restored. But, by that time, it was too late. By that time, the media had taken a position: ‘This person is anti-media; this person is against freedom of the press and expression.’ That is where the media had formed a position and that gave the biggest boost to the lawyers’ movement,” says Zaffar Abbas.

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The media’s public approval coup

While the arm-twisting by the regime did undoubtedly have its effects, and many media house owners even caved under the government’s demands due to the financial strain of being blacked out, the reality was that the news media had public perception their side, particularly after the unprecedented live coverage of a number of crises, including the high drama of Laal Masjid.

IRI surveys conducted from September 2006 to Jan 2008 showed a continuing increase in the media’s approval ratings. The ratings of the traditionally most powerful and ‘respected’ institution, the Army, was neck and neck with the media till about June 2007 (interestingly enough, traditional political actors, even those in strong opposition to the Musharraf regime, such as the PPP and PML-N, were well behind.) It was in June 2007 that the Laal Masjid Operation was telecast live on television. At this point, there was an explosion in the approval ratings of the media. By late 2007, the media’s positive approval rating stood at a towering 88% - compared to 65% for the Army, 60% for the Opposition, and a dismal 29% for the Musharraf-backed government.25

The media’s position atop public opinion would be reflected in another poll. In a survey conducted on the (November) Emergency, 26% supported it, while 70% opposed it (56% “strongly opposed” it.) Most telling in this survey was that the ban on the media aspect of the Emergency had the highest disapproval rating (77%) - higher than the suspension of the Constitution (70%) and even a ban on political rallies (71%).26

The media’s defiance during this period in the face of a military strongman is notable in its stark contrast to its shrinking in the face of similar threats under the dictatorship of Gen. Ziaul Haq, and indeed Z.A. Bhutto, the civilian prime minister, before him. Though much had changed, for the media the principal difference was that they had technology on their side in an age where information could be broadcast through a number of mediums even in light of a state-imposed blackout.

"More than 80 million people—about half Pakistan’s total population—have mobile phones. Nearly 20 million enjoy regular Internet access. Although Internet-based news remains a small part of the media landscape, during Musharraf’s imposition of "emergency" rule from 3 November to 15 December 2007, when the government shut down most private TV and radio news programming, the Internet served as a lifeline for news and information. In addition, like others in Asia, Pakistanis are


increasingly using mobile-phone text-messaging via Short Message Service (SMS) and other modern information technologies to stay informed and organized."

It should be noted that even the alternative form of information dissemination was, in most cases, spearheaded by legacy media houses. But that is another story.

**Musharraf’s ouster**

After months of tumult, which included the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, elections were held on 18th February, 2008, which resulted in the Musharraf-backed government being swept out of power through elections. The Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), whose leader, Benazir Bhutto, had been assassinated less than two months earlier, as was expected won the most seats in the elections. The PPP was followed by the party of Nawaz Sharif – the same man whose government was, in 1999, dismissed by the same military general who currently occupied the office of President (Sharif would go on to return to power in the 2013 polls).

Democratisation v3.0 began with a huge potential handicap: despite the new government, Gen. Musharraf continued to occupy the Presidency and still held sweeping powers to dismiss the popularly-elected government. In fact, a determined general seemed to have reached some sort of understanding with the new set up regarding his continuation or, at worst, for an honourable exit (this was apparent through contentious presidential decrees such as the National Reconciliation Ordinance). With a military man (albeit recently retired) still at the helm of affairs, the new order faced a precarious situation right at its outset – one that, given Pakistan’s history, could have lasted for a while. However, the general would continue to be targeted by the news media, which amplified calls by fringe political players to try him for treason and subversion of the Constitution, among other things. Ultimately, the fringe view became a mainstream one.

Emboldened by a persistent and uncompromising media, the new set-up began threatening Gen. Musharraf with impeachment, and he would eventually be forced to resign in August 2008, less than six months into the tenure of the new government. The movement was officially complete, once again aided, in no small part, by the news media.

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6. 2008: Renewing a rivalry

Democratisation v3.0 was different from the previous two versions, most notably because of the presence of a vibrant electronic media, which, as mentioned in the last chapter, previous civilian governments had not allowed. After the initial euphoria following the ouster of Gen. Musharraf, the relationship between the civilian political forces seemed to return to the same adversarial one that marked Democratisation v2.0. This surprised, even disappointed, many. Writing in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2009, Akbar Zaidi held that:

There is no denying the fact that for a number of reasons the elections held in February 2008 were preceded by mass protest, which culminated in one of the few political and democratic movements in Pakistan’s very troubled history and were not just a routine electioneering process reminiscent of the 1990s: this was genuine and real participation, and democracy. Given this process, what has been most surprising is the way the incumbent democratically elected government has been repeatedly attacked in the media even by writers who were actively involved in the movement for the transition to democracy in Pakistan against General Musharraf, since March 2007.28

This editorial line by the media revived the spectre of the media’s supposed antidemocracy/anti-politics effects – a charge that was first levelled as a result of the instability of Democratisation v2.0, wherein the news media’s central theme was mis-governance and corruption in almost all its political coverage. Fears grew that this version of democratisation would be no different from the last, one that would be marred by instability, turmoil and, ultimately, disruption.

Those defending the media’s “negative” coverage through Democratization v2.0 and the start of v3.0 pointed to the fact that it was the government that was being criticised and not democracy itself – an argument which does have its merits. After all, one of the media’s most important roles is to act as a watchdog, and by reporting stories, they were only fulfilling this fundamental duty.

Yet, clearly, it was not only the government or ruling party that was frustrated by the media. On March 6, 2013, the country’s highest forum, the Parliament, passed a resolution pertaining to the conduct of the media.29 There are two telling aspects of the resolution. First: It was directed at “anchor persons” – referring to the hosts of highly critical and


29 The resolution stated: “This House resolves that all anchorpersons who are telecasting programmes against Parliamentarians and other entities without verification of the facts for some personal agendas or for some ulterior motives or for some unlawful gains or such anchorpersons who have been exposed for their non-professional conduct, this House strongly condemns such anchorpersons and demand from the owner of the media houses to expel them forthwith besides other due actions.”
populist political talk shows that dominate the airwaves at prime time on all television news channels. The second important factor was the support that it got across the aisles in an otherwise deeply fractured Parliament. The ruling coalition and opposition have been at odds at almost every juncture since the return of the democratic government in 2008. Yet, the resolution was presented by members of all parties, and passed unanimously. It wasn’t just the government that was perturbed by the media – it was all civilian political parties.

In any case, the problem with attempting to distinguish between criticism of the incumbent civilian government and democracy in Pakistan, and its eventual anti-politics effect is summed up impeccably by Zaidi:

Given the historical, political and institutional context of Pakistan, the failure of an elected government is perceived to be a failure of the democratic system as well, something that every general who has usurped power, and the technocrats who have supported the army have used as justification for the coup. What Musharraf in his biography calls the “dreadful decade of democracy”, beginning in 1988 [Democratization v2.0], or the “lost decade” in the words of one of his faithful technocrats, are terms that are coined where the distinction between government and the system under which it functions is blurred.30

Less than a year into its term, the new civilian set up found itself under siege by the news media. Most agree that it was deserved given the government’s inefficacy when it came to direly needed policy initiatives, but, keeping in mind history, many questioned whether the media, notwithstanding its professional compulsions as a watchdog and stated noble intentions, should be more cautious about unintended outcomes (interestingly enough, this cautiousness was seen later when the criticism of the 2013 election process was peppered with qualifiers such as ‘but this does not mean democracy should be derailed’). After all, “[u]nlike other countries where democracy is now well entrenched, Pakistan’s nascent and weak democracy, not surprisingly, does not endear itself to many people and there is always the military option available.”31

This threat didn’t seem to be playing on the mind of the media from 2008 to 2012. The urgency and breathlessness created by the new culture of incessant “breaking news”, almost always rife with stories of mis-governance and corruption by the government, worked in tandem with Pakistan’s now-saturated political talk show scene, where newly-empowered populist pundits would hold forth on the government’s shortcomings on prime time television.

“To a large extent, the media did play a kind of negative role, if you like, in assessing the performance of the government. This doesn’t mean that the government was performing quite well and that the media was unnecessarily criticizing it. I would say that the previous government [2008-2013] was never given a fair chance by the media. To some level, not by all the channels and newspapers, the general theme that was coming out was that this

30 Criticising Democracy or Criticising Government?, S Akbar Zaidi, Economic and Political Weekly Vol. XLIV No. 09, February 28, 2009
31 Ibid
government is corrupt; this government cannot perform, and that it has done nothing for the people. The issues that were being discussed largely were all of the local council level: You know: that they didn't do anything about controlling the prices of food,” says Zaffar Abbas.

The new government would hit back from time to time – though, unlike military regimes, only through rhetoric. Overall, most agree that the civilian government remained patient with the news media – which slowly had an effect on the media.

Though anchors of current affairs talk shows came in for a majority of the criticism for regularly going after soft targets such as a young civilian government, the editorial line on some important events from 2008 to 2012 slowly started to show flashes of an alternative side – one that, for the first time, called into question other hitherto untouched power centres. Criticism of the security establishment of the country, particularly the all-powerful military, started to find its way onto the airwaves. These were periodical flashes – up until the Dr Tahirul Qadri episode, which occurred towards the end of 2012 and continued till the early part of 2013, which was, in many ways, a coming-out party for Pakistan's news media.

The timing was critical. At the end of 2012, Pakistan found itself on the verge of history. A popularly-elected civilian-led government was about to complete its mandated tenure, put in place a caretaker set up, which was to hold elections and hand over power to another government. But there were hurdles ahead, and in many ways, this period saw the highest level of political uncertainty since 2008.

**Turning point? Enter: Dr Qadri**

On December 23, 2012, a cleric-cum-politician named Dr Tahirul Qadri landed in the city of Lahore, the capital of Pakistan’s largest province, Punjab. Awaiting him at the historic site of the Minar-e-Pakistan was a welcome rally of tens of thousands of people. Qadri, a man with little political experience, had sought exile, and had been living, in Canada since 2006. Towards the end of 2012, he announced a much-publicised return to Pakistan with a mission to cleanse Pakistan's politics of what he termed was rampant corruption and mismanagement by political players in the country. “Save the state, not politics,” was his populist rallying cry. Of course, this less-than-flattering view of the politics and political actors in general and current political government in particular was, as has been described earlier in this paper, already widespread on the news media – and had been for decades.

Qadri’s sudden emergence and the airtime he was getting on national television immediately gave birth to fears that the democratisation process was being set up for another intervention. Not only had he landed out of the blue, but seemed to have a lot of

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32 Interview with the Editor of *Dawn*, Zaffar Abbas on 23/05/2013
33 Though this had technically happened in 1977, too, then under Z.A. Bhutto, the elections held at that point were heavily controversial for a number of reasons. Also, the elections were held with the incumbents still in power (as opposed to under a caretaker set up), and the Election Commission, the body responsible for holding free and fair elections, was appointed with little or no consultation with the opposition – rendering the entire process questionable. Ultimately, that formed the basis of the 1977 military coup.
money to spend, apparent from a plethora of ads on primetime television airwaves, billboards across the major urban centres of the country, as well as from his organisation’s ability to fund his political gatherings (such as hiring thousands of buses to ferry people to his rally). His rhetoric, centred around his desire to throw “criminals” out of politics, was not aimed at any political player in particular, but seemed to target all and sundry – a view that was suspiciously close to that of Pakistan’s traditional intervener, the military.

Given that the country was on the verge of making political history, Qadri’s underlying message that the elections should be postponed and that some sort of cleansing process initiated before going to the polls again was deeply disturbing. “Elections without reforms will be meaningless and people will reject results if they are held under the existing system,” he had said upon his arrival.

The cleric’s rhetoric closely matched the general theme of what was being said on the media for over four years, and during the tumultuous period of Democratization v2.0 before that. It was only natural that his voice would find a lot of takers in the media – particularly the country’s talk show hosts. Qadri announced a protest march from Lahore to the capital along with his supporters. He pulled off the march, and then, with tens of thousands of ‘supporters’ organised a sit-in outside Parliament until his demands, most of which were unconstitutional, were met. If anything were to happen as a result of the protest (he had already said that he wanted to turn the spot into the “Tahrir Square of Pakistan”) the media would have had to be onboard to mobilise mass opinion and consensus. The civilian government was under siege and bait was there – but the news media would not bite this time.

“[The media] could have gone either way (on Tahirul Qadri). They could have taken Tahirul Qadri’s stand. Nobody liked the People’s Party, that’s clear, even in the media. But they all said that this (Tahirul Qadri’s stand) is nonsense; that this is anti-democracy. The media turned it. Who knows where it could have gone. It was the test: What do the media want? But the media said, ‘this is not happening; we are not going to derail democracy. Elections are coming; this cannot happen.’ Maybe if it happened two years earlier, they would have said “OK’. But they didn’t. They said, “This is not allowed; it is against the rules’, “ says Akbar Zaidi. “I think Tahirul Qadri was a turning point (other events such as the lawyers movement, Laal Masjid, Memogate and the Abbottabad raid was the beginning).”

Zaffar Abbas echoes this view: “The media can be used by different forces in the country. But the media has matured enough that whenever they feel this particular movement can really roll back the democratic process in the country – whether that is in the form of the sacking of the judiciary or disrupting the electoral process – they do take a tough stand; they have started to take a tough stand. That is where the anti-Tahirul Qadri position comes in. They genuinely thought that this was an attempt – whether it was by Qadri or by some

36 Interview of S Akbar Zaidi on 19/05/2013
outside force or the army or whatever you want to call it. They did take the position that disrupting the process was not acceptable.”

Ultimately, Qadri’s protest would fizzle out – and he shook hands and came to an understanding with the same government that he had been so heavily criticising only a few days earlier. How much the media’s portrayal of his protest had to do with this is a matter to be questioned separately. What is important however, is that media chose to not to play up a movement that could have resonated within its ranks given its policy up to that point. This coming out to save the system by the media would segway well into the next few months in the build-up to the historic 2013 elections.

37 Interview with the Editor of Dawn, Zaffar Abbas on 23/05/2013
7. Campaign for democracy: Elections 2013 and the media

What adds to my anger is the fact that when I told some young men of how I have been robbed of my happiness they did not understand. They have not known the joys of the election mela (festival). If we do not revive the festival, our children will be poorer than we are.

- Excerpt from an article by ‘An Unknown Voter,’ front page, Dawn, 2008 (printed on Election Day, February 18) 38

After months of speculation and uncertainty, the 13th Parliament of Pakistan officially became the first in history to complete its tenure and was dissolved on March 16, 2013. The Express Tribune, an English language daily, dedicated its entire front page to the achievement under a banner headline, “One giant leap for democracy”. A caretaker government was set up in the next few days to hold elections within 60 days of the dissolution; within one week, the date was set for May 11, 2013. There was no formal start date for the beginning of the election campaign in 2013, but political parties were widely reported to have begun their campaigns around the middle of April.

Given the looming threat of terrorist attacks on the ground, the platform of the media was even more important to electioneering than it would be in most other countries.

Scanning the content

To provide a snapshot of the news media’s editorial line during the 2013 polls, this chapter will take a closer look at the portrayal of the elections and democracy in daily newspapers and on television.

Television

On the television side of things, this analysis will look at the prime time news bulletin on May 10, 2013, the eve of elections – effectively the last thing most viewers would have seen before going to bed and awaking on Election Day. The bulletins will be of Geo TV, Express News and Dunya – which are regarded as the top three channels in terms of viewership and ad revenue.

Geo News

The country’s most viewed and influential channel by some distance, Geo News’s coverage of the elections was particularly positive – peaking on the eve of elections. The editorial policy was in line with the other arms of the channel’s parent company, Jang Group, the largest media house in Pakistan.

38 http://archives.dawn.com/2008/02/18/top13.htm
TABLE 1: The headlines of the 9pm Geo News bulletin (translated from Urdu in order of appearance)\(^{39}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTRO</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[Audio: Celebratory music (not usual headline music). Audio/visual Countdown “5... 4... 3... 2... 1...” VISUAL: Shots of fireworks, blended with man casting his ballot paper in the ballot box.]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAIN STORY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“The chaand raat of elections is here. Tomorrow must be observed like Eid. You have to vote. The ballot papers have reached, the (polling) officers have reached – the wait now is for the armies of voters. Every vote will strengthen democracy.”</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“269 national assembly and 573 seats of the four provincial assemblies will be voted on by over 85 million voters for a five-year term... the Chief Election Commissioner says that if the turnout is 60%, our destiny/future will be changed.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY 3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Message 8300 and find out your polling station... the mobile phone service might be suspended in the morning. PTA says the service will be closed in Sindh, then a little while later said it won’t be suspended.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY 4</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Religious and secular parties have united in a bid against women’s voting rights... In Lower Dir, an agreement to bar women voters has surfaced between the PPP and JI... But Malala Yousafzai has said that women should take part in large numbers... they must vote at all costs (laazman).”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY 5</th>
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</table>
| “In many cities, the distribution of polling apparatus has been hit by mismanagement... officers and polling staff made to wait for up to 16 hours. And there was no arrangement for food either. In Karachi, the election commission’s achievement: Those who cannot see or hear, they are presiding officers.”

[INTERVIEW OF ‘ELECTION OFFICIAL’]

Q: “What responsibility have you been given here in the elections?” A: (man doesn’t understand) “What work? (Looks to another man, who then gestures and uses painfully slow words to apparently explain the question). Oh, yes election work...” Q: So you don’t know what you’re meant to do? A: “Whatever work it is, we will and can do it”

[CUT TO INTERVIEW OF ANOTHER ‘ELECTION OFFICIAL’]

A: “I can’t read Urdu, let alone English...” |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STORY 6</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“In Gujranwala, firing between supporters of two candidates leads to the death of 2 people ... Blasts in Dera AllahYar and Swabi... in Karachi, Muhajir Qaumi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\(^{39}\) Bulletin archive accessed at http://www.zemtv.com/2013/05/10/geo-news-9pm-bulletin-10th-may-2013/
### Movement candidate Shakil Ahmed killed in firing, polling in NA 249 and PS 95 delayed/suspended.

### STORY 7
(Unrelated to elections: An ongoing story about a blaze in Lahore’s LDA plaza that has claimed dozens of lives)

### STORY 8
“No information has been received on the abduction of a candidate from Multan, Ali Haider Gilani. Former Prime Minister Gilani has asked the ISI for help in the recovery of his son.”

### STORY 9
(Unrelated to elections: Story about annual religious occasion at a sufi shrine)

The message and festive imagery (fireworks) used at the top of the bulletin and in STORY 1 is categorical and unabashed. In addition, the allusion of “chaand raat” and “Eid” to describe the eve of elections and Election Day respectively is particularly notable given its socio-religious significance (chaand raat is the night before the holy Muslim festival of Eid, where people go out with their families to celebrate). The urging to go out and vote and the message about the effect the vote will have, i.e. strengthen democracy, is explicit. In STORY 2, it is notable what point the story of the Chief Election Commissioner’s talk is pegged on, i.e. ‘changing of the country’s collective destiny’ through participation in the voting process. There is extra stress on the 85 million voters and the five-year term. In STORY 3, viewers are beseeched to get all their voting details before going to bed so that there is no confusion in the morning that could lead to them not voting. Historically, confusion about where a voter should and can cast their ballot has been a big hurdle for already low participation and turnout – and there is an effort by the channel to clear this hurdle by appealing to voters to check now. STORY 4 is an interesting one. It talks critically about an effort to bar women from voting in a remote region of the country and the involvement of mainstream parties in the bid, but adds a message from Malala Yousafzai, the young female student from Swat who gained international attention after the Taliban attempted to assassinate her. A negative story of the suppression of women’s voting rights is juxtaposed with a positive and inspirational one – i.e. an international icon famous for standing up for her rights. All four top stories are, in one way or another, urging viewers to vote and get ready for the elections.

Unlike the top four stories, headline numbers 5 and 6 are negative. STORY 5 talks about the polling apparatus being hit by mismanagement while STORY 6 is about the continuing wave of election-related violence across the country (one candidate has been killed in Karachi, and it is placed down at number 6). The placement of both these stories down the pecking order of the headline ‘rundown’ is significant. Stories on violence and mismanagement were the focus of the news media’s election coverage during the 2008 elections – particularly on television. Though not related to the elections, STORY 7 is also a negative story – about the death toll increasing to about two dozen in a tragic building fire in Lahore. The story is a developing one (the blaze had erupted a day earlier); but, in any case, it is another negative story that finds itself down the pecking order. STORY 8 is a negative story indirectly related
to the elections, and is about the continued inability of law enforcers to trace the abducted son of the former prime minister, and his father beseeching the country’s top intelligence agency to help locate him. The rundown concludes with STORY9 an innocuous story about an annual religious pilgrimage/festival at a Sufi shrine. Through the rundown, there is a clear divide of the positive and negative stories.

Dunya News

TABLE 2: The 9pm headline rundown for Dunya News (translated from Urdu in order of appearance) 40

| INTRO | “Let’s look at the world of elections from Dunya News...” |
| STORY 1 | “Only 11 hours left for the competition to change the country’s destiny ... the nation will decide the fate of 15,000 candidates for 842 seats.” |
| STORY 2 | “The caretaker government and the election commission are ready, the election paraphernalia has arrived – the polling staff is also active/ready... tomorrow morning from 8am to 5pm, there will be polling without any interruption... the dawning of a new sun is hoped for.” |
| STORY 3 | “The borders from neighbouring countries have been sealed... the Army is alert. Sensitive polling stations will have 50 troops each deployed there.” |
| STORY 4 | “Firing in Karachi leads to the death of three people, including a candidate for the provincial assembly ... in Gujranwala, firing on an independent candidate’s office leads to three deaths.” |
| STORY 5 | “In Mianwali, Ayala Malik’s protocol is fired upon. Four bodyguards are injured. In Abbottabad, the activists of two parties clash, leaving four people injured.” |
| STORY 6 | “In Sindh, the decision to suspend cellular services across the province till 5pm was taken back shortly after the decision was made... residents first worried, then amazed.” |
| STORY 7 | “----independent analysis and political opinion, you’ll get everything in Dunya News’ Election City, and a bouquet of beautiful programmes

HOST 1: Type your ID card number...
HOST 2: Here you go
HOST 1: Now you send it to 8300
HOST 2: A-ha, I got it

40 Bulletin archive access at http://www.zemtv.com/2013/05/10/dunya-news-9pm-bulletin-10th-may-2013/
HOST 1: This is your polling station, OK? And above that is your vote number

HOST 2: A-ha! And look, they even told me in Urdu... I think the NADRA people know that I have an MA in English Literature

| STORY 8 | Since the advent of electronic [records], 28-year-old turnout record set to be broken. Youth and women ready to play a decisive role in the electoral results. |
| STORY 9 | LDA Plaza story – more bodies removed from the debris. Death toll hits 22. |
| STORY 10 | Imran Khan’s well-wishers camp outside Shaukat Khanum Hospital in numbers... prayers for his recovery. |
| STORY 11 | In Karachi, upper Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, the weather will be pleasant... definitely come out to cast your vote. |
| STORY 12 | [Indian movie clip quote]: “Films are successful for three reasons: Entertainment, entertainment, entertainment” [collage of political leaders]... “And in this bulletin, we’ll show you comedy, tragedy and action-packed election film, electo-tainment.” |

Similar to Geo News, Dunya News, which is rated the second-most viewed television news channel in Pakistan, starts off its bulletin in STORY 1 by describing the elections as an opportunity to “change the country’s destiny.” This is followed by a similar tone in STORY 2, which talks about the possibility of the “dawning of a new sun” as a result of the elections. STORY 3 is also a positive story on the elections, and conveys an important message in the context of the security situation prevalent at the time: The build-up to the elections, as mentioned earlier, was marked by a number of attacks by militants on political gatherings and the campaign offices of political parties, and STORY 3 talks about how the security forces, including the highly-trusted Pakistan Army itself, are on “alert” on the eve of the polls and have taken steps to stymie any further sabotage on the big day itself. The story appears to be looking to assuage fears among voters. Interestingly, the one step highlighted is the “sealing of borders,” implying somehow that those responsible for the attacks were foreign elements coming from neighbouring countries, such as India or Afghanistan. The placement of the reassuring story about security measures is also important as the next two stories, STORY 4 and 5, which are about election-related violence (both, like in Geo News’ bulletin, are placed further down the order). STORY 7 uses a clip from one of the most popular shows in Pakistan where the hosts of the show are discussing how to clear any confusion regarding where they would have to vote, which, as mentioned earlier, has been a deterrent for potential voters in elections past. Interestingly, the clip is from Hazb-e-Haal, a political satire show – a format that has risen in popularity over the last few years as a result of the saturation of serious current affairs talk shows. Here the satire show is used to communicate an important message to potential voters.
STORY 8 is another positive story. It terms the Elections 2013 as being historic and set to break previous records. In a bid to add an additional feel-good factor, it also mentions that “youth and women” are ready to play a “decisive” role. STORY 11 is also interesting. If a sense of security and history isn’t enough to convince potential voters, the story points out that the weather will be “pleasant” in many parts of the country, and hence urges voters to “definitely come out to vote.”

Express News

FIGURE 3: The 9pm headline rundown for Express News (translated from Urdu in order of appearance) 41

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTRO</th>
<th>Starts with clips of speeches from NS, IK, BBZ, Altaf, CPE, AW...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STORY 1</td>
<td>The political arena is ready… whose lottery will come out, who will lose… the decision will be given by the public tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 2</td>
<td>Polling agents will spend the night at polling stations tonight. Amy deployed at sensitive polling stations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 3</td>
<td>In Karachi, candidate for PS 95, Muhajir Qaumi Movement’s Shakil Ahmed murdered. Various terrorist strikes claim 4 lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 4</td>
<td>The election commission says that voters should set aside their fears of danger from their minds and make their mark on their destinies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 5</td>
<td>In Sindh, the notification ordering the suspension of mobile phone services has been withdrawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 6</td>
<td>The smallest mistake could result in the wasting of your vote… we will tell you how to vote in the bulletin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 7</td>
<td>Rain in Lahore Multan and Faisalabad among other cities … the weather will be favourable tomorrow, too</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 8</td>
<td>LDA plaza fire has become a national tragedy… the flames have erupted again. The death toll has hit 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 9</td>
<td>After Sanaullah, the Indians brutally torture Abdul Jabbar. A mother prays for their safety along with flowing tears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 10</td>
<td>One day has passed, but there is no trace of Ali Haider. Yousaf Raza Gilani ask</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

41 Recording of bulletin provided by Express Media group via Google Drive on May 24, 2013
### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>STORY 11</td>
<td>In Bangladesh, a girl comes out alive from the debris of a fallen building after 17 days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STORY 12</td>
<td>Music... 10 years have passed since the passing away of renowned poet Kaifi Azmi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In terms of pro-voting language and editorial framing, Express News, which competes with Dunya for the spot of second-most watched channel in Pakistan, is the most neutral of the three television bulletins. No overt or special appeal is made to voters in the bulletin, as was the case with Geo News and Dunya News. Relative to the other two channels, the top 3 stories are neutral in language and content. However, there are still a few stories that fit the pro-voting bill. Though they appear lower down the bulletin order, STORY 4 and STORY 6 are of interest to this paper. STORY 4 pegs the Chief Election Commissioner’s press conference on his appeal to voters to overcome their fear of violence, and is placed right after a story on election-related violence across the country. STORY 6 is an entire segment on the voting exercise – a sort of public service message that warns voters that the “smallest mistake” could “waste” their vote, hence they should be careful. It states that it will educate viewers on “how to vote.”

In many ways, Express News’ bulletin, in its relative neutrality of language and content, shows how far Dunya and Geo went out of their way to extol the virtues and importance of voting and the elections.

### Newspapers

Among the daily newspapers, this analysis will take a look at the top three most widely-circulated Urdu papers, *Jang*, *Roznama Express* and *Nawaiwaqt*, as well as the top three most widely-circulated English papers, *Dawn*, *The News International* and *The Express Tribune*. The analysis will be of the front pages of all the aforementioned papers on Election Day – May 11, 2013. The day has been chosen given that it would provide a microcosm of the newspapers’ election coverage.

*The conservative: Dawn (English)*

The most widely-circulated, respected and oldest English newspaper in Pakistan, *Dawn* has over the years developed a reputation for being reserved in its coverage and editorial line during fast-changing political situations in Pakistan – at least relative to its newer competition. While it has undeniably remained relatively non-partisan, the paper, during times of tumult, is said to have chosen to maintain a distance from politics. It covered “social issues” instead of getting entangled in political ones – unlike other papers who were either supportive of military regimes, such as Gen Zia’s, or critical (with consequences).

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42 Accessed through *Dawn’s* archive library
Even when they did cover the fast-changing political events, they were more reserved in their editorial line.

By the time of the 2013 election campaign however, *Dawn*'s coverage defied this perception. A good example of *Dawn*'s break with tradition came on the front page of the paper a day before Election Day. While all other papers carried the abduction of former prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani’s son as their lead story, *Dawn* gave it only a single column. Instead, Dawn’s lead pertained to the official end of the election campaign – which indicates the sort of importance it was attaching to the polls, and that it didn’t want to distract its readers from the larger picture, despite the fact that the incident had cast a dark shadow over the polls. On May 11, 2013, the day of the elections, *Dawn*'s front page carried an eight-column banner headline, “NATION KEYED UP FOR HISTORIC POLLS” (caps theirs). While the rest of the front page was relatively conservative, the tone of the lead headline and the use of the word “historic” are of great interest, given the paper’s reputation.

It wasn’t a matter of simply reflecting the mood of the times. Throughout its coverage there was an attempt to say that if people came out in large numbers to vote, regardless of which party they vote for, anti-democratic or other forces would be given the message that a majority of the people of this country are for democracy and a parliamentary system, and not any other system.43

The ideologue: The News International (English)44

The Jang Group, the parent company of *The News International*, has never been one to hold back its opinion from its news coverage. The Group also owns the most widely-circulated Urdu daily, *Jang*, and most-watche news channel, Geo News. And like its sister concern, Geo News, *The News International* went all out to promote the act of voting and elections on its front page.

The paper’s lead headline, captioned “People make or break leaders today”, put the onus of the event on the voting public. Supplementing its lead headline, the paper pegged the news story of the Chief Election Commissioner’s press conference on his appeal to the voting public: “Today is day for people to show power: CEC”

However, that was only a small part of its advocacy onslaught on the front page. One story was captioned “Prominent Pakistanis, opinion makers ask people to vote” – a compilation of messages from famous personalities, including those from showbiz, urging people to go out and vote (The quotes were not collected statements made by these personalities otherwise, but solicited by the paper’s journalists). An even more interesting highlighted news item that also appeared on the front page was captioned, “Please vote: questions & answers” – and asked the following “questions”:

“If Pakistanis don’t care, why should anyone else?“

“If we don’t speak up, who will know what we want?“

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43 Interview with the Editor of *Dawn*, Zafar Abbas on 23/05/2013
"If you want peace and rule of law, if you want an end to extremism

"If you want energy, jobs, education and healthcare

"If you want a future for yourself and your children, then say so.

"Go out today, force the change you want; make your views count.

"Vote.... Our future depends on it."

The stories were a part of a campaign by the Jang Group titled “Come out of your homes; vote for Pakistan” – which was carried by all its publications and television channels (see also analysis of Jang’s front page). The News International carried a logo of this campaign on its front page, too. The group’s campaign was in stark contrast to the reputation it had developed among many politicians, fellow journalists and civil society activists of playing the lead role in destabalising the nascent democratic order just as Democratisation v3.0 begun. This reputation was a direct result of the group’s often sensationalist coverage of political events or, as the case may be, non-events – and aggressive editorial line against the new government from 2008-2012 in its publications, news bulletins and current affairs talk shows.

Young blood: The Express Tribune (English)45

A subsidiary of the Express Media Group, The Express Tribune is a publishing partner of the International Herald Tribune and prides itself on its “liberal” leanings. It is the most influential online English news source from Pakistan, and hence also has the youngest audience in Pakistan – a country where the under-30 age group make up the majority of the country’s population and would mostly be voting for the first time.

On Election Day, the paper’s banner lead headline read “DESTINY CALLING” (caps theirs) – portraying the elections as a moment that would change the country’s destiny. Other aspects of the front page were also interesting. The paper’s masthead quote, usually reserved for the quote of the day, or to give prominence to a story on the inside pages, was of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the man called the founder of Pakistan. The quote, extracted from a speech made over 60 years ago, read “The govt will function with the will of the people.” There was also a front-page analysis titled “Getting here was quite a ride.” The introduction to this analysis, written by a senior member of the editorial staff of the paper, read:

[T]o call this election ‘landmark’ and ‘historic’ may be absolutely clichéd, but it is also absolutely true. Getting here was quite a ride; it was full of pain, bitterness and thwarted hopes but along with all the despair is also a faith that simply refuses to die.

The leader: Jang (Urdu)46

The flagship paper of the largest and most-influential media house of Pakistan, Jang's front page was a near replica of its sister concern, The News International. Its lead story headline

45 Accessed through The Express Tribune’s online archive, available at www.tribune.com.pk
focused on people-power, reading “Whose throne, whose --- The people will decide today.” Interestingly, the lead story had a strip above it containing a sort of ‘how-to’ public service message, reminding voters of the voting technicalities: “National Assembly ballot paper will be green, provincial assembly’s white.”

Other interesting aspects included two editorial ads, one reading “Get out of your homes, vote for Pakistan” and “Vote for Pakistan.” There were also a translated versions of the “Prominent Pakistanis, opinion makers ask people to vote” and “Please vote: questions & answers” stories that appeared on the front page of The News International (see section on The News International for details). The appearance of these stories are notable given that, as mentioned earlier, the editorial line and message strength has traditionally varied among Urdu and English language papers – even those owned by the same group.

The contender: Daily Express (Urdu)

The sister concern of The Express Tribune and Express News (TV), Daily Express has long been believed to be the second largest Urdu publication in Pakistan (there is no way to verify this given that circulation figures in the country are murky and often inflated). It has often been the case that the editorial line of Daily Express has been, to varying degrees, opposed to that of its principal competition, Jang.

However, the editorial line in this case was the same. The paper’s lead headline read, “Tiger (PML-N), Arrow (PPP) or Bat (PTI)? The decision will be made today.” Almost exactly like Jang, the lead story had a strip with it reading “National Assembly ballot paper will be green, provincial assembly’s white.” While it did not have a campaign like the Jang Group, the Daily Express did have some editorial political messages on its front page. There was one picture on the front page of wall graffiti that read, “I am proud of being a voter.” There was also a picture and quote near the masthead of global icon Malala Yousafzai that said, “Women must vote for true change.”

The Hawk: Nawaiwaqt (Urdu)

Though currently the Daily Express is viewed as the market leader Jang’s principal competition, historically it is the Nawaiwaqt-Jang rivalry has been reflective of the true divide of political opinion in Pakistan. Nawaiwaqt has always represented the hawkish strata of Pakistan’s political opinion – pro-military, militantly nationalist and deeply sceptical of civilian preponderance. The paper has always been, to varying degrees, supportive of military regimes, and was also the principal rival to the first democratically-elected civilian leader of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto during the first period of democratisation. Later, for the most part of the second period of democratisation, the paper was supportive of civilian leaders that were more supportive of, or associated with, the military – such as Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N.

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47 Accessed through Daily Express’s online archive, available at www.express.com.pk
48 Accessed through Nawaiwaqt’s online archive, available at www.nawaiwaqt.com.pk
However, even *Nawaiwaqt* joined the election euphoria in 2013. The lead headline on Election Day, similar to that of *Jang*, focused on people power: “Who will be the next rulers? The people will decide today.” Other interesting aspects of the front page included an editorial message “Voting is the public’s due: Definitely go out and vote today.” In addition, there was a picture with the caption “Even women in Peshawar are gathering polling apparatus (preparing for polls).” To top it off, and perhaps the most telling sign of the organisation’s stance on the elections, was a big advertisement on its front page regarding the coverage of the elections by its sister concern, *Waqt News* – a 24/7 news channel. The advertisement read: “Elections 2013: Only elections are revolutions.”
8. 2013 election coverage: A post-mortem

The statistics on the 2013 general elections are telling: voter turnout increased by 11 million from 2008, which translated into 55% of registered voters participating – the highest turnout since 1970, when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan. The 55% participation is up from the low point of the 1997 elections, which clocked a dismal 35%.49

Though a definitive causal relation between the news media’s campaign for democracy and the turnout cannot be drawn, all interviewees agreed that the media did play a big part in creating a sense of euphoria around the 2013 election. Interviews also established that this was the first time that such pro-democracy campaigns had been carried by the media writ large, which makes the trend even more interesting.

“They’ve never done it before (promoting the elections in this manner). Even in the 2008 elections, I thought the media was lukewarm. Media was not at all in the forefront, let alone asking people to come out and vote,” says Ziauddin, who has been a practising Pakistani journalist for over four decades now.

The positivity aside, the media’s coverage of the elections was far from perfect and impartial. A quantitative analysis of the political coverage by the mass media over 30 days in the lead-up to the elections shows that one party, the PML-N, which ultimately went on to win the elections, got by far the most editorial airtime and column space, and was followed by the PTI.51 This was despite the fact that the PPP was by far the biggest advertiser on the electronic and print media52 – which opens up the question as to whether simply throwing money at the media in Pakistan guarantees you more airtime or preferential treatment.

Many can, and do, argue that the coverage of Elections 2013 was disadvantageous to the outgoing government and its allies – given mainly that the theme adopted was of “change.” Also, with the incumbents, the PPP, MQM and ANP, being the direct targets of militants53, and hence their public campaigns restricted, there was no way for them to answer charges levelled at the media in terms of editorial content (other than paid advertising). There was

49 According to the official results of the Election Commission of Pakistan, available on ECP.gov.pk
51 European Union Election Observation Mission, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, General Elections 2013, Media Monitoring Results
52 Ibid
53 Taliban-backed militants had directly threatened the PPP, MQM and ANP – all three of which suffered a number of attacks during the campaign on their election offices which left many of their activists and leaders dead.
no attempt to give these parties any sort of extra airtime either – whether or not this should have been the case is debatable.

In any case, Abbas, the Editor of the largest English daily in Pakistan, points out that there has been a major forward movement. According to him, there are indeed major issues with the way the media does coverage, but it has come a long way. “There is great hope for the Pakistani media. I have never compared the Pakistani media with the western model of objectivity. I look around the region: from the Middle East and Gulf to the Far East, and in most of the Muslim countries, and then I look at the Pakistani media. There is absolutely no comparison. We are not only free, we have a kind of freedom that can be compared to freedom in many other countries.

“The shortcomings – well, over a period of time, with in house exercises; with self-criticism, they will improve; they are bound to improve. People are not going to accept irresponsible freedom for a very long time. Self-correction is needed. It will come. There has been a debate over a code of ethics etc – but where the media is today is a great thing for Pakistan. And I have great hopes for the media in this country.”

The interviewees also recognised and highlighted the profound impact that political forces such as Imran Khan’s party, PTI, had on the electoral process in terms of bringing a new demographic group to the voting process. According to Abbas, it was the first time that such a potent third force had entered the country’s political spectrum and had targeted the youth of Pakistan in its campaign – which had a huge part, perhaps even the main part, to play in the euphoria surrounding the 2013 elections on the ground and in the news media. In fact, Ziauddin adds that the PTI’s activeness pushed traditional political players such as the PML-N, which ultimately went on to win the elections and form the government, out of their complacency and onto the streets in mass-contact political rallies.

However, the media had a big hand in enabling, and some would say supporting, PTI. Few will argue with the contention that Imran Khan used the news media, particularly television talk-shows, as a platform to kick-start his previously moribund political career. The spike in his political career serves as a good example of the sort of impact the news media can have on the political dynamics of a country – particularly in developing democracies where entrenched political players and family dynasties serve to exacerbate a sense of farcical inevitability amongst the voting masses’ general perception of popularly-elected government.

Though all interviewees differed on the motives of the news media, they were, however, unanimous in the opinion that the general perception created by the media of the electoral process and the need for democracy in general was positive – particularly relative to past coverage of elections – and that it did have a mobilising effect on a dormant and statistically dying voter base in terms of both registration and actual participation.

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54 Interview with the Editor of Dawn, Zafar Abbas on 23/05/2013
55 Ibid
56 Interview with the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune Muhammad Ziauddin on 18/05/2013
The news media managed to position itself as an ideologue of democracy - in itself a shift from an activist bent that was seen during the downfall of Gen. Musharraf. At a time when postponing polls was the convenient (and regressive) option, the media influenced voters' decisions to head to polling stations. The media was also successful in transmitting the notion of "change" through democracy.
9. Beyond procedure: What we know and where it’s heading

The news media in Pakistan has come a long way since the country’s independence – a journey laced with struggle, cooption and transformation - one which continues to inform a now battle-hardened news media’s relation to power.

From being heavily suppressed up until 1988, the news media featured prominently during Democratisation v2.0 and has an even greater role in v3.0, thanks to the expanded platform of television. In both v2.0 and 3.0, civilian-led democratic political orders found themselves in a state of flux, beleaguered by uncertainty due the perpetual threat of political upheaval and eventual military intervention (direct or indirect). In the past, the media have taken full advantage of the relative helplessness of civilian rule during the tumultuous days of democratic consolidation. The general perception is that critical journalism during these periods played a sort of antagonistic role in the survival acts of fragile civilian governments – in a way creating conditions favourable for upheaval.

In an act of redemption, the news media, which had never in history been as powerful and influential as it today, came out in open and strong support for a directly-elected civilian-led system in 2013. This was most clearly on display during its political coverage in the lead up to the elections. Not only did the news media actively campaign in favour of the continuation of the democratic process, but most, if not all, media houses, for the first time, actively promoted the act of participating in the process.

The news media’s growth and the successes of the current democratisation process have shown many signs of interdependence. The news media has benefitted over the last few years from the patience of a directly-elected civilian government, which let the media function undeterred despite often being besieged by critical editorial lines. In fact, the biggest setbacks to independent journalism in the country during this period of democratisation continue to come from undemocratic quarters, as was the case with the brutal murder of investigative reporter Saleem Shahzad in 2011 and the abduction and torture of another investigative reporter Umer Cheema in 2010.°

In the words of Ziauddin: “Media takes liberties when democracy is in place. It is because of democracy that the media is so free. Perhaps in a military regime, most of those stories would not have seen the light of day. But they did because it was democracy.”°

The animosity between the news media and the last government notwithstanding, there is a realisation among interviewed journalists that the PPP-led government was very tolerant in the face of extremely aggressive journalism – the consequences under any sort of non-democratic regime are apparent throughout history, as has been touched upon in this paper. Furthermore, while it was indeed the military regime of Gen Musharraf that finally opened

° Both reporters had published incisive reports about the Pakistan military and its relation to militants just prior to their abduction
° Interview with the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune Muhammad Ziauddin on 18/05/2013
the door for private television in Pakistan, the highest number of television licences, no less
than 30 in total, for a single year were issued in 2008 – the year the PPP-led government
came into power.59 The media may have been opened up by a military general, but it has
thrived journalistically and financially under a democratic order.

In the media, democratic forces have an ally that would be pivotal in the effort to stave off
any intervention – direct or indirect. This was apparent in the Tahirul Qadri episode. The
entrenchment of democratic values in Democratisation v3.0 owes itself to a vibrant media
that utilized its increased space to deepen the utility of the voting process among both the
traditional and new demographic groups who promised to vote. It is true that the media has
a long way to go in terms of its journalistic responsibility, but this is a steady and often
painful process, as it is with democratisation. Pakistan’s history has shown that the
democratisation process needs the news media invested in the project.

The battle for perceptions is particularly pivotal in Pakistan given its unique demographic
spread. Pakistan has a very young electorate; according to a 2009 report, half its population
is still under the age of 20, while two-thirds is under 30.60 According to the report, “the
disillusionment (of this age group) with democracy is pronounced”: 10% of the young
electorate have confidence in the national government, compared to 60% in the military.
Furthermore “Just 2% are members of a political party, while only 39% voted in the last
election (2008) and half are not even on the voters’ list.” A young demography presents
both an opportunity and a challenge for democracy in Pakistan. Convincing Pakistan’s “next
generation” of the positives of a fully-functioning democracy will be decisive in the future of
the system in the country.

In terms of critical coverage, this paper does not argue that the media should, in any way,
hold back. There is a way to continue its watchdog role that centres on being suspicious of
government by separating criticism of the government and questioning the system of
democracy – two issues that are easily conflated and used by anti-democratic forces to
create an anti-politics and anti-democracy narrative. History shows that in a country where
a large part of the population is still wary of civilian leaders and democracy, such a
distinction is critical. There already seems to be a realisation of this differentiation: one of
Pakistan’s highest-rated talk show hosts, Hamid Mir, carried out a series of programmes on
irregularities during the election process after the 2013 polls. In each case, Mir stated
openly, on more than one occasion, that his criticism was aimed at bettering the system, not
at calling into question its veracity – and also kept adding that the continuation of the
system was critical for Pakistan’s future.

It also remains to be seen how the new government deals with the media, and, more
importantly, how the media deals with the new government. The current ruling party did
enjoy better relations with media houses during the tenure of the last government, when

59 Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority in-house powerpoint presentation, procured through sources in the body
Generation-Report.pdf
they were in the opposition at the centre. However, historically, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is known to be a lot less patient with the media – and had a famous run-in with the country’s largest media house during one of his premierships in Democratisation v2.0. The media was largely supportive of him during the last government’s reign, but with his party in power, it is likely that the media will take a less forgiving line. How Sharif and his party will deal with this eventual onslaught of criticism will be a litmus test of how things will progress in the country.

The new government will be faced with the continued expansion of the private media’s reach. Consumption patterns have shown that the private media has a strong urban bias in its audience, and increasing urbanisation in Pakistan means a growing market. “The country is a burgeoning market for the media industry with its 180 million population and a rapid trend towards urbanisation, which builds up people’s dependence on media for information and entertainment,” according to a study on the growth and regulation of the Pakistani media.61

In addition to an increased audience, the media will be further empowered as new information platforms open up with the spread of technological advancements such as the internet and increased penetration of mobile phones in Pakistan. This could be potentially dangerous for a system still struggling for legitimacy. The pitfalls of an overreaching media and its adverse effects on actual governance after the ‘revolution’ have been written about widely in critical works such as Media Democracy: How the media colonise politics.62

Despite all the positivity in the air, Ziauddin’s warns that relations between government and increasingly influential news media could sour, and sour fast. “In the United States, the Obama Administration had the phones of 100 journalists tapped without permission. The media around the world is in flux. Look at Britain… they have the Leveson inquiry and the hacking saga. There is going to be a problem now. Governments of the day would like to regulate the media, and the media, with all its new weapons, thanks to technological advancements, will try to resist and expand. There is a state of flux. And I am worried.”63

Whether or not the government will move to undercut the media’s growing influence remains to be seen - but the media’s allying with democratic forces means that there will be a backlash from undemocratic quarters, which will include an attempt to discredit it widely as was done in the past with civilian democrats. Signs of this have already begun to appear. One particularly worrying and recent example of this came in the form of a television show on July 18, 2013, in which the Pakistani media was attacked by guests while the host, Fareeha Idrees, stoked this criticism.64 One of the guests, Zaid Hamid, an “analyst” known to be funded by the military establishment of Pakistan, said on the show, among other things, that “journalism had turned into sedition” and that “a few journalists should be hanged by the state” to push the media to be more nationalistic. He had said:

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61 Consolidation in the Name of Regulation: PEMRA and the Concentration of Media Ownership in Pakistan, Azmat Rasul and Stephen D. McDowell, Global Media Journal, Spring 2012, Volume 12 Issue 20
63 Interview with the Executive Editor of The Express Tribune Muhammad Ziauddin on 18/05/2013
If [Gen.] Musharraf can be tried for treason, then journalists should also be tried for treason. In this country, there is a need to hang 100 terrorists and at least two to four journalists.

Hamid also warned about the “Egyptian model” wherein the military would be “forced to intervene” as state organs and even the media were “failing.” Hamid is known for his wild theories and suggestions, but he does represent a particular line of thought in the country – however small it may be – and is known to parrot the extreme views within the Pakistani military establishment. The belief that the media is, somehow, working against the interest of the state is steadily finding more takers – particularly on alternative information-disseminating platforms such as social media. It is not a coincidence that this view has grown following the media’s criticism of the military establishment, which has remained beyond reproach since the country’s inception. Furthermore, other guests on the show in question, including a controversial journalist, fired salvos at the “foreign agendas” of the larger media houses. It is also interesting to note that the show was aired on Waqt News, a television channel that belongs to an ultra-nationalist media house widely held to be very close to the military establishment.

All is set for the next phase of Democratisation v3.0 – and it is shaping up to be a pivotal period for the sustainability of not only democracy, but of the media’s continued growth.
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