

JANUARY
2010

*Mainstream Media's Response to
Radical Extremism*

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There seems to be broad agreement among analysts that Pakistan has never witnessed worse manifestations of violence fuelled by radical extremism than it does today.

Against this backdrop I want to focus on the mainstream media's role instead of talking about the fringe jihadi media.

It is obvious that the media cannot remain aloof from the developments taking place in society. We were taught in graduation studies that the media has the power to influence and shape public opinion. That role obviously attains added significance in turbulent times.

The current wave of violence by radical extremists and other terrorists has exposed shortcomings of the media on many levels. I would talk about some of the main ones.

Of course, media organizations lack the capacity to report from the conflict-hit area now with military operations going on in large swathes of the northwest, but when reports of violent extremism in the Tribal Areas and Swat first became known the media largely failed or chose not to give insight into the threat in a timely manner.

Subsequent coverage of the issues by the print and electronic media has for the most part been confined to reporting on the most recent suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks, casualty figures, and the amount of explosives used in each attack. The media's focus has been on breaking news first but there has been little follow-up or objective and in-depth analysis and only superficial comment, at best, about the dynamics of the Taliban-related terrorism. Until recently, most newspapers and TV channels seemed almost at pains not to dwell on the context of the emergence of the Taliban and other extremist elements seemingly out of thin air.

Many media experts would tell you that the newspapers and TV channels in Pakistan did not and perhaps still do not perceive the Taliban as a threat to the country or its people despite butchering thousands of men, women and children and flouting in the most blatant manner the rights and protection guaranteed by the constitution. Only a few months ago – before the launch of the military operation in Swat – countless newspaper reports and TV talk shows were opposing military action or justifying the illegal and unconstitutional demands of the Taliban when they had effectively ended the writ of the state in Malakand division and were quite literally slaughtering security forces personnel, public representatives and common citizens. At that time, there were many voices in the media either calling for reaching an understanding, or an agreement with the Taliban and ceding more territory to them, or generally writing and airing favourable reports, either out of fear or on the establishment's behest. It is painfully obvious why elements in the establishment would still be interested in a favourable press for the Taliban and other militant extremists.

Generations of Pakistanis have grown up seeing India painted as the enemy and India-bashing is considered fair game by the media. Indian media's portrayal of Pakistan is not substantially different. But when the Taliban were butchering civilians and security personnel they were not being publicised as Pakistan's enemies. There was no Taliban-bashing.

Today everyone talks about how the tide of public sentiment suddenly turned against the Taliban and how the masses rallied behind the military for the operation in Swat. Yet reports in few media organisations would admit that what really turned the tide was the emergence of the now famous video – which showed a young girl, pinned to the ground facedown by three Taliban hooligans, being publicly

flogged in Swat. A human rights activist had brought the video to light, and a number of TV channels had declined to air it before one finally agreed. However, the discussion in the mainstream media did not focus as much on the denial of human dignity but on the motives and agenda of those who had brought the video to light. The video was rubbished as fake. "It's an old incident, and it happened before the peace agreement," said NWFP information minister, as if the violation of citizens' rights and dignity was determined by the date of occurrence. "There are some elements who want to sabotage this agreement," the minister said. Thank God for those elements.

Amid unprecedented death and destruction caused by the terrorists, the media, which could have helped shape public opinion, remained far too occupied with terminology. Taliban were referred to as militants, insurgents, and briefly, terrorists.

A leading English language daily newspaper referred to the Taliban as militants in its coverage. Then one day someone asked the editor's wife if her husband's newspaper did not consider Taliban terrorists and if it did then why would it not say so in its reports. The following day that newspaper started referring to the Taliban as terrorists. The same week, the newspapers' reporters from Malakand and the NWFP pleaded with the main office in Lahore that the Taliban had threatened to kill them if the paper referred to them as terrorists once more. The next day Taliban had got back the tag of militants again.

This wavering coupled with the lack of a clear editorial line exposed the media's failure to give an organized editorial response, at the intra- or inter-organization level, in the face of growing militant extremism.

Doubts were raised about the ability and the willingness of the media to move beyond day-to-day reporting and about the motives for skirting the issue or not looking at the bigger picture in an analytical manner.

Failure of the media to give insight into the Taliban phenomenon also laid bare the media's perennial institutional weakness, both of capacity and priority, in the form of complete absence of organized investigative journalism.

Of course the media had much to fear. After all they were dealing with terrorists and murderers. Even media organizations and journalists far from the conflict zone had to contend with many threats and attacks. In October 2009, a Taliban group sent two letters to the Lahore Press Club - one on October 12 and the other on October 14 - warning that if the media "does not stop portraying us as terrorists ... we will blow up offices of journalists and media organisations". The list of threats and warnings individually sent to journalists and media organizations is a long one. But reporters working in the conflict zone were the most vulnerable. And media organizations, even those with considerable resources, failed their employees in the conflict zones, by not looking after them when they had been hounded out of the area by the Taliban on account of their profession or displaced during the military operation. Many were forced to quit journalism to escape Taliban wrath or were sacked by the media organizations.

I would cite just one example. In December 2008, an English language daily newspaper referred in its editorial to the head of Lashkar-e-Islam (LI), an outlawed extremist militant organisation in Khyber Agency, as a "thief". The militants immediately threatened the newspaper through phone, fax and email. They were very specific and said they knew the editor was abroad when the editorial was published and just wanted to know the name of the person who had authored the editorial.

That newspaper had also been banned by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in Swat – prompting refusal by newsagents in Swat to receive or distribute the newspaper. Readers found in possession of the paper had also threatened with dire consequences.

After the latest threats, the newspaper feared a similar drop in circulation in the NWFP. Meanwhile, the LI spokesman summoned a senior reporter from the newspaper's Peshawar Bureau. The reporter went to the spokesman and fell to his feet as soon as he saw the man. He remained at the militant's feet for over an hour and a half. The spokesman told the reporter that the Lashkar had no issue with him personally and merely wanted the name of the editorial writer. "Lahore is not that far away," the militant said. Sometimes the spokesman would again ask the reporter to give him the writer's name and then ignore him for a long time. All this while, the reporter could see a man sharpening a knife in front of him. Eventually, the spokesman asked the reporter to get up and leave. The newspaper had apparently been forgiven.

After that the staff at the newspaper's Peshawar bureau told the head office that their life would be in serious peril if a similar thing happened again. It was decided that anything "problematic" covering the region would only be printed in the future after getting the approval of the Peshawar bureau.

The reporter whose life was on the line for comments made in his newspaper was sacked a couple of months later in a retrenchment drive.

The civil society in Pakistan does not see the spread of the extremist ideology so much as the success of the militant media as the failure of the mainstream newspapers and TV channels. Irrespective of the reasons, the mainstream media has failed to inform the people about ground realities on the rise of extremism in Pakistan.

There is little doubt that militant elements still retain considerable support of state institutions. This support has also contributed to the shirking of space for the public discourse on the militarisation of Islamic doctrine in Pakistan. While militant propaganda has the field pretty much to itself today, the mainstream media has been scared into silence, to the extent that it now steers clear of any discussion which would present even a remote possibility of critically analyzing extremist tendencies. Views of objective experts are seldom sought if such issues are ever debated.

Freedom of expression, especially for the media, has historically been a tall order in Pakistan even at the best of times. Journalists say that commenting on militant extremism in the present circumstances is akin to venturing into a minefield and no one is quite sure what would set off an explosion. Such a course is best avoided, they hold.

As a consequence, the media has imposed a very strict self-censorship regime on itself. The mainstream media does not allow the counter-argument, which journalists voice in private conversations.

In a country with a low literacy rate, regional and national language TV channels obviously enjoy exceptional access to the population. The channels have either chosen not to use that reach to counter extremist tendencies and propaganda, either to appease extremists or because they subscribe to the same extremist ideology themselves. Even those that do not have been scared into silence for fear of personnel safety.

Militant extremists are probably the only elements in Pakistan today to enjoy absolute freedom of expression, with no prohibition of hate speech or the like. In April 2009, Sufi Muhammad, chief of an outlawed militant organization who was acting as an intermediary for Taliban's talks with the government, called the constitution and the judiciary, and even democracy itself, un-Islamic without any consequence. Any such utterance by journalists, or pretty much everyone else for that matter, would have invited instant charges of treason.

A senior reporter working for a leading Urdu news channel defended the flogging of the girl in Swat in a live programme and said the "punishment" conformed to Islamic injunctions. He slammed those who referred to the incident as barbaric.

The anchor of a religious programme on the same channel incited viewers to murder Ahmedis. Though two Ahmedis were shot dead the following day, no action was taken against the anchor, who did not express any remorse on his anti-Ahmedi tirade that led to the assassination of two human beings.

Many journalists point to the futility of government efforts to ban extremist media publication in Pakistan and say that the mainstream media had now become so sympathetic and compliant as to be jihadi media itself.

However, we, the audience of the media organizations, cannot heap the blame on the media without sharing part of the responsibility ourselves. It's a common enough phrase that in democracy you get the leaders you deserve. Does one also get the media one deserves? Mustn't we as readers blame ourselves for putting up with the choices the media makes?

The media could clearly have done more in the face of the Taliban onslaught. It failed use the little space available to form or lead public opinion. It only followed public opinion and that too in a cautious and belated manner.

One would not advocate imprudence or suicide, for Pakistan certainly does not need more media curbs or more journalists' assassinations. It already has plenty of both. One can see that there were hoards of reasons why the media would have feared speaking out against the Taliban and other terrorists. But that is why it was all the more important to speak out and assert the hard-won freedom of the media.

I am sure most people here have heard of 20th century German theologian Martin Niemoller, who is best remembered for his famous poem in which he criticised the inactivity and apathy of German intellectuals and society to the growing menace of Nazism. The poem concludes with the line: *"Then they came for me -- and there was no one left to speak for me."*

I agree with my colleagues in the media about the risks. I agree that speaking has consequences. But keeping quiet also has consequences.

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