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*Militants' Media in Pakistan: Political
Etymology and Professional Craft*

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I have refrained from using the term radical media, as was suggested by our worthy hosts and have chosen the nomenclature “militant media”. Why I do not use the word “radical” to describe the dominant trends of the current media in Pakistan needs some explanation.

Radicalism, as we have come to know it throughout history, stands for the marginalized, vulnerable and numerically challenged segments of society. Radicalism denotes unpopular socio-political causes. It supports new philosophical positions. It embraces a forward-looking approach to pull society out of its bottlenecks. Radicalism stands for egalitarianism. Radicalism promotes the civil right to tap avenues that have hitherto fore been untapped.

Ironically, what is being dubbed as radicalism in Pakistan of today is a doomed attempt at revival of what is socially dead, economically untenable and politically destructive. A radical journalist in Pakistan today is one who espouses the so-called Muslim causes. With 97% Muslim population (which is semi-literate and highly indoctrinated) in Pakistan, what is radical about protesting against the invasion of Iraq while we turn a deaf ear to the cries coming from our own cities and towns like those of Christians in Gojra, Shia Muslims in Parachinar and Dera Ismail Khan and Ahmadi citizens in Rabwah. What kind of radicalism is it that fails to see the flagrant discrimination in laws against women of this country while we blacken page after page for the Muslim women in France being barred from wearing Hijab. Is it radical journalism that we brazenly deny the veracity of a young girl publicly flogged in Swat while referring to a certain lady named Dr Aafia Siddiqui, detained and being arraigned in the US? Do we consider our respectable journalist a radical who went on to quote verses from the holy Quran while the point in contention was that a group of citizens had taken the law into their own hands and committed a heinous crime against a young lady? Our home-spun version of radicalism is politically conservative, undemocratic, irrational when it come to scientific methodology, negates the basic civic rights like the right of expression and academic freedom. Instead of promoting engagement with human fraternity, it propagates antagonism and alienation. It accentuates differences in the name of identity rather than highlighting cultural diversity. While trumpeting the cause of the poor, it protects the worst forms of vested interests. In fact, the people of this country have seen scores of journalists turn into tycoons, power-brokers and become a part of the dilapidated socio-political structures that they condemn day in and day out.

In Pakistan, the advent of religious militancy and the mushroom growth of media (especially electronic media) with accompanying crescendo for the freedom of press coincide not only chronologically but also in a structured political framework. It is important to understand the broader spectrum and the dominant mindset of the current media personnel and establishments in Pakistan.

In order to comprehend the features of the phenomenon called “militant media”, I have divided this write-up into two broader parts:

1. Political etymology of militant press
2. Methodology of militant press

Political Etymology of Militant Press

The tradition of press, in this country, has largely been a populist approach instead of responsible education of the public opinion. However, with the advent of independence and the emergence of a country with a hugely homogenous religious profile, the scope for populist journalism increased

exponentially. Whatever restraints observed during the foreign rule went out the window and a two-pronged policy was adopted for self-aggrandizement:

- (a) Narrow nationalism with a heightened emphasis upon differences with India.
- (b) As the partition had arguably been won through the plank of religious identity, the nascent nationalism in Pakistan bore a heavy, though somewhat ambiguous, religious character.

With the arrival of the John Foster Dulles doctrine (national security state) and the failure of democratic experience in the new country, the extreme right-wing forces crept into the power equation. Media was not far behind. The famous Munir Inquiry Commission Report into the anti-Ahmadi disturbances in Punjab in 1953 delves into the role of press at length. It was clear that the press was more than willing to play ball with the undemocratic forces. The journalist was hardly loath to lend a hand in whipping up religious frenzy. Further, it was evident that the undemocratic establishment was out to offer financial rewards to those who followed the prescribed tune and the journalists (individuals as well as media establishments) were only too keen to gulp down the bait.

History (recent and remote) was re-written with retrospective effect. A culture was invented that suited the establishment though it hardly existed anywhere in the country. The Mullah was offered a set of appeasements through legislation, policies, monetary perks and a virtual impunity to tamper with the social structure and the private lives of citizens. Hate speech from the pulpit was overlooked. Incitement to crimes, against individual or groups, was condoned.

Whether it was the campaign for birth control or Family Laws Ordinance (1962), the Mullah was allowed to flout the writ of the state. As early as 1950, the clerical crowd had the temerity to hold a rally in front of Prime Minister's House in Karachi and mouth the worst possible indecencies against the first lady. The Mullah not only enjoyed the liberty to re-write the history of the freedom movement, they were encouraged to meddle with matters that were strictly constitutional (separate electorate) and statecraft (women's right to vote or education.)

During all this, the progressive, liberal and democratic forces were being hauled on coals. The progressive elements were pilloried under the garb of communist threat. The liberals were denounced in the name of so-called oriental traditions and a non-existent conservative culture. The democrats were targeted for demanding democracy which had been the bane of both the civilian and military rulers. The newspaper editorials scribbled to welcome the military coup of 1958 have survived and can be a good curriculum in sycophancy and self-destruction of press freedom. A famous Director General of Radio Pakistan, the virtual steward of the national culture, for decades went as far as to reject the traditional music in favor of what he believed was truly Muslim and Pakistani music. A territorial conflict with a neighboring country was turned into such a sanctified subject that six newspapers wrote the same editorial verbatim, demanding the banning of the Civil and Military Gazette for publishing a rather innocuous news item about Kashmir. This was the making of the militant press that would jump to kill every vestige of dissent and rationalism. There were voices of dissent such as publications of the Progressive Papers Ltd. but they were largely marginalized and muzzled at first opportunity.

Low intensity warfare (ostensibly by non-state actors) was introduced in 1962 and inevitably culminated in Operation Gibraltar of 1965. This was a war entirely fought and "won" through newspapers and radio, a classic example of hoodwinking a zealot, frenzied, ill-informed and indoctrinated populace. The 1965

war denotes the point when the press realized that it could enjoy inordinate power (and accompanying financial benefits) in the country if only it espoused a conservative collective narrative.

The soldier may wield the gun but it is for a civilian community to furnish a political and social narrative. The framework considered suitable for Pakistan only pointed towards the Mullah to outline the socio-political features of the set of governing rules. The Mullah, with his centuries old dream of wielding political power and unfathomable hatred for all that signified modernity, pounced upon the opportunity. The Mullah's preferred tool was propaganda and press was the vehicle for this propaganda. Hence, there emerged a bond between the press and the Mullah, each with an eye to his own pound of flesh. The rules of the game, set by the Mullah and accepted by the press, lock, stock and barrel, were as follows.

- a) To turn the majority religious faith into a political ideology and term any disagreement with that political ideology as a travesty of faith. Conflate faith and politics to the point that religion gets precedence over purely political issues. When outwitted politically, hide behind the sandbag of faith and accuse your opponents of insulting the faith. Take the whole nation (state institutions, civil bodies and citizens) hostage in the name of a faith turned ideology. Either permeate all civic, social and state organs or paralyze them through relentless denigration.
- b) To support the establishment (read all those who usurp power through gun and disregard the people's mandate) against democratic forces, especially those whom the people entrust with their mandate.
- c) To undermine the dictates of statecraft and democratic discourse by crafty use of modern resources. Contest for legislative assemblies even if you do not believe in the fundamentals of democracy, namely equality of citizens, will of the people and legislation through public reason. Stack gunpowder of faith in the laws, policies and institution to undermine the very fundamental framework of parliamentary legislation and democratic working.
- d) To employ state of the art technology like printing press, microphone, camera, video, expensive vehicles, modern weapons even if you do not believe in the basic postulates of scientific methodology.
- e) To promote a non-liberal ethos at home and an aggressive militancy abroad. Sexually frustrated people lose the will to fight for a better life. They fight for tracts of land, articles of faith and the redemption of a non-existent honor. Mendacity in personal life leads to aggression in public. Eulogize militancy, war and the assumed peculiarity of your collective self. That presumed peculiarity bestows a false sense of superiority that offsets the drabness of unproductive, non-creative and incompatible existence at the bare-minimum of living standards.

The bond between the Mullah and the journalist had been established by the early 1960s and the military – the arbiter of all political power – was a partner by default. The press and the Mullah were solidly behind Ayub Khan when he went for an ill-considered adventure in Kashmir in 1965. The press and the Mullah were the best support for Yahya Khan outside his own garrison constituency when he decided to conduct a bloodbath in East Pakistan. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto might not have been without some glaring shortcomings in his mode of governance, but his actual crime was to garner votes from the people. The vote was supposed to be an irrelevant factor in governance. Mr Bhutto did a lot that could be considered a continuity of the previous civilian rulers but his rule was essentially an interregnum after which the military had to re-assume the reins and steer the nation like a legitimate heir to the throne.

Under the self-righteous rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, the single-most prominent development was the Afghan issue. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan allowed the Western powers to avenge Vietnam and they did it skillfully. The matrix of the Afghan campaign brought in several extraneous actors to this theatre but the most significant development at home was the solemnization of the nexus among the military, Mullah and the media. This Greek tragic-comedy had a double-tier stage, both planes intrinsically inter-twined: Islamisation at home (forcible conversion of society into a primitive model of quasi-theocracy) and Jihad abroad (a covert military operation couched in religious diction). The Mullah and the press were protagonists in both scenes with the men in uniform calling the shots. When this drama drew to a close in the late 1980s, the global scenario had undergone a qualitative change. The Cold War paradigm was over. In Pakistan, the military, Mullah and the media refused to change costume. They were so well synchronized and the benefits were as attractive as the uncontested hegemony over the sixth largest populace of the world. They decided on the sequel even when the original script writers had withdrawn. For ten years, the next theatre was Indian-administered Kashmir and a proxy prize fight between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the form of sectarian killing at home. A vast edifice of non-state actors with the not-so-covert official patronage was being built. During the years of mock democracy, the press was an effective instrument in the make and break of governments while the Mullah, heavily engaged in the exercise of militancy on the eastern and western fronts, was a convenient expedient to swell a scene or two when the political drama so required.

During the Zia era, the shrinking ranks of the liberal, progressive and democratic journalists, writers and intellectuals took a heavy drubbing. Many left the country and the remaining few were forced into oblivion. Hundreds of eminent journalists and writers were banned on state-run media. Heavy censorship was in place and the private newspapers were too afraid to hire those who had incurred the wrath of the soldier-turned Mullah as well as the Mullah-turned-soldier. So liberal and democrat writers were forcibly kept out of the business while their political, ideological and professional competitors were furnished with a walkover. Pakistan, from 1977 onward, has been a classic example of a security state where invisible characters rule the roost.

It is difficult to distinguish a soldier from a Mullah and a Mullah from a journalist; their roles are so deceptively overlapped. More often than not, one person is all three. In the morning, he is a soldier, dispensing with his professional duties. In the afternoon, he holds consultations with the bearded characters and fine-tunes the nuances of the policy to steer the world towards godly ways. Later in the evening, the same person carouses with the journalists and delves in nitpicking about civilian leaders with animated zeal. As Pasternak would have us believe, such situations are ideal for characters like Chamrovsky, the wily politico in 'Doctor Zhivago', who believed that every government found him useful since he had no compunctions at all.

Pakistan, in the wake of 9/11, has two paramount realities: one, the long-standing establishment has no desire or intention to relinquish its hold on power and let the elected representatives formulate the policies. Two, in order to accomplish the first goal, the omnipotent rulers do not afford to shed either the Mullah or the pliant pen-wielders. In the 1960s and 70s, students held the key to political wheeling and dealing. For a brief period, lawyers came in handy. Lawyers' role was critical but short-lived and due to their rather limited approach, could not be relied upon for long.

Media (especially electronic media) has the outreach, the permanence and the sway required to mould the public opinion in accordance with the need of the hour. In Pakistan's indoctrinated ambience, nothing works better than a journalist with a belated awakening of the holy truths. There are dozens of religious

and Jihadi publications but their influence, taken together, cannot match a single mid-level daily or a mediocre anchorperson, especially if he can wail and fulminate alternately. Most senior journalists today learned the tricks of the trade in the late 1970s or 80s. Apart from their religious persuasion under de trop indoctrination, they understand only too well who the real decision-makers are. They are averse to let go of prized tracts of land, coveted professional assignments, clandestine privileges and of course direct access to information that turns them into a sought-after media person overnight.

Methodology of Militant Press

It is incorrect to place all militant media men in the same basket. There are diehard zealots who act to establish a godly system as a divine mission. There are opportunists who act as horses for courses and will stick to their present colors till they see the end of the tunnel. And there are so-called Jihadis who may agree with some points of the imposed narrative but may diverge at certain points if they meet a persuasive argument. However, in today's Pakistan, media is predominantly militant, anti-west, Islamist and anti-democracy. They support the covert game being played in the mountains of Hindukush and plains of the Indus valley. Pakistan's garrisoned legions and the Mullah have a stark possibility of divergence, though at the moment remote. Men in uniform have a nationalist agenda, at the most a regional one. However, the pedigree Mullah has a global, rather cosmic agenda and will not lose time in ditching the soldier if he believes that the moment to move forward has arrived. Here, the militant media, too, may experience internal fissures. However, the force of faith may hold the sway because a mind immersed in dogma is prone to disregard nationalist considerations.

The tools, employed by the militant media, are classic propaganda tools of a group with an ideological mission, i.e. denial, deception, diversion and variations of emphasis. The projection or suppression of a certain piece of information is of primary significance. The placement and the use of a peculiar diction also carry subtle messages, especially for a readership or audience that is already converted to a standpoint. Indirect indoctrination can be very effective, especially when repeated in different contexts.

It is interesting that the legions of militant media men drill one point at a time and thus create a sense of urgency about the issue at hand. For example, when they speak of the Kerry-Lugar legislation, dozens of pieces appear in the media in a day or two. Naturally, it becomes the talk of the town. Then they pick Article 6 of the Constitution (high treason) and all media is abuzz with Article 6 and the dangers of ignoring it. The militant media has a convenience that they need to drill in just the doctrinal part and cannot care less about facts and figures. Figures and data can be refuted by counter arguments with sources of data and figures. Doctrine is invincible. It is just to drum what is already accepted by the recipient populace. The lack of facts and figures is compensated with an anecdotal style. Anecdote, verifiable or not, can be catchy and also relieves the writer of the burden of analysis. For the sake of brevity, given below is a set of values promoted by militant media as against normal democratic values:

Preferred value framework of militant media as against desirable values		
1.	Global expansionism	Nation State
2.	Territorial revisionism	Peace
3.	Theocracy	Democracy
4.	Moral policing	Human rights and freedoms
5.	Uniformity / regimentation	Pluralism / diversity
6.	Disregard for global norms	International order
7.	Rule by fiat	Public discourse
8.	Opposition to education and healthcare	Quality of life / human capital
9.	Exploitation and extortion	Production and trade
10.	Prejudice / violence	Tolerance
11.	Hierarchy / discrimination	Equality
12.	Submission / conformism / tradition	Dissent / innovation
13.	Hawkish nationalism	Patriotism
14.	Revolution (read eruption)	Evolution
15.	Physical power	Knowledge
16.	Hatred / polarization	Harmony
17.	Fear / intimidation	Security
18.	Morality	Ethics
19.	Deception	Transparency
20.	Authority	Participatory debate

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