

Glasnost and the Pakistani Diaspora

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

Pakistanis had taken to free press like a fish to water. As a nation, it has always been our natural inclination to speak freely. Even during previous martial laws and times of restrictions, there was a pushing of the boundaries, a testing of the waters. "*Bol ke lab azad hain teray*," we were taught and we took it seriously.

In less fortunate countries, or perhaps I should say countries with not as solid a tradition of soul-searching, there is a tendency to cover up and defend that which is indefensible. I was aghast to find on a recent visit to the United States, for example, how unquestioning Americans are about the post 9/11 restrictions on civil liberties. Why? I thought to myself. Just own up to it; nobody is perfect. When I told a friend that the Wall Street Journal labelled Al-Jazeera "English Terror TV" and that the US had blacked it out and decided not to air it, she stood up to her left-wing credentials by accusing the Wall Street Journal but refused to acknowledge that the US would deliberately suppress information. I decided to rub salt into her wounds anyway by praising Europe, especially the UK, where not only were we free to watch Al-Jazeera, but also France 24, Russia Today, Chinese CCTV and Indian NDTV, not to mention, soon-to-be-launched Iranian Press TV--all twenty-four hour English news channels, and each with their own perspective. Let's just say that the conversation did not end too well.

Of course our ministers in government would probably lecture me to learn from her "patriotism" but I, truly Pakistani, refuse to be blind and obedient. Instead, I prefer the British way, where there are no pleasantries in the form of "Mr. President, could you please shed some light on our position in Iraq," but a straight-forward, "Answer the question, Tony!" (or, Gordon, as the case may be). Perhaps the English are a tad wiser, having been reduced from an imperial power to a tiny island.

America too will learn. The hard way. She will realize the pitfalls of imbedded journalism and a media more concerned with revenue and ratings than with integrity and objectivity. Repeatedly, in recent months, I heard senators and members of national assembly question anchors on Pakistani channels: how often does American media put body bags coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan on display? The answer is that had American media dared to do that, exhibited the courage to question its corporate bosses, perhaps there would have been fewer body bags. It is this precise theme in fact that is the subject of a newly-released Hollywood film called "Lions for Lambs."

In spite of our fondness for free speech however, when it comes to accountability, Pakistan is slow to get moving. The emphasis is more on cooperation and finding an out, rather than head-on confrontation. In his recent piece, "How to take a holiday in Pakistan," Hugh Sykes of the BBC notes that "driving in Pakistan is fast and sometimes chaotic, but not competitive. They even hoot politely," he adds. Perhaps that is all the Supreme Court was trying to do: hoot politely. The police officers had merely been suspended, not jailed. Important officials were only being questioned, not indicted. The verdict in the "dual office" case was yet to be delivered, and maybe, just maybe, the extended deliberation was an attempt to arrange an acceptable compromise solution while hooting politely with some bold remarks in the process. We will never know, though. Because we are now in a "state of emergency!"

The emergency is so severe that Pakistanis are no longer permitted to watch *Jawab deyh* on television, leave alone attempt to play it out in court. It's a bit like taking someone's dreams away. But our people are kind and complacent. When I sit in an air-conditioned car in the heat of the Pakistani summer and drive behind a poorly ventilated truck full of men huddled on top of each other all I see is smiles and a few funny faces, perhaps one of them will stick his tongue out in jest, but that is about the extent of it. Why don't they revolt? I find myself thinking often. Clearly, they outnumber the likes of me by at least one hundred to one. But so it goes.

In London, I throw myself headlong in the resistance movement, because I owe the less fortunate of my country at least this. And so, I make my way to SOAS, where Hina Jilani is speaking about the situation in Pakistan. It is raining cats and dogs, as London often is, so I order a cab. My driver is Turkish and asks me

if I am a student at SOAS. I explain to him the purpose of my visit and advertise our cause to the best of my ability. I am not sure he understands. We start talking about Turkey and he tells me that the Kurds are a bunch of whiners; that they have no problem but they complain. A Kurd can even become prime minister of Turkey he insists, to make his point. Here we go again, I think to myself, that same ill-conceived notion of patriotism. Had it been a Pakistani driver, he would, in all likelihood, have no qualms about telling it as it is in his country instead of putting a gloss over it.

When I get to SOAS, the atmosphere is charged. The speech is good. Jemima Khan drops in for a few minutes. There is plenty of chatter about building institutions, freeing the media, respect for the judiciary. I put in my two cents worth. And then it comes, the cynical question. “What are you fighting for? Were the democratically elected Benazir and Nawaz Sharif that much better? Were they democratic?” asks a man with a desi face but an American accent. Doesn’t he get it, I think to myself. Here we were, insisting that the rule of law and supremacy of the constitution were most important, emphasizing the need for a strengthening of the institutions, hardly anyone had mentioned the two leaders he was talking about.

But Ms. Jilani answered it well. “Yes, there is a lot of scum in our waters,” she said, “but to remove the scum, you have to get the waters moving.” That’s right, I thought, if the waters sit still, the scum sinks to the bottom and becomes impossible to eradicate. So the political parties may be the last to reform, but if other institutions are strengthened, eventually they too will improve. I left the meeting less depressed about the situation in Pakistan and more committed to the cause.

At home, I am inundated with emails, news from student publications like “The Emergency Times” out of LUMS and its expatriate counterpart, “The Emergency Telegraph” out of Harvard. Eye witness blogs, podcasts, and youtube videos of protests organized by Pakistani communities in Toronto, New York, Rome, even Athens flood my computer. I open one organized by the Pakistani students at Manchester. “*Amreeki dollar ki sarkar, nahi chaley gi, nahi chaley gi,*” an energized group of youngsters chants in front of the Pakistan Consulate. Our young ones are keeping the folklore of Faiz and Iqbal alive, even if they live miles away from home.

Far too often nations are duped under the guise of “national security.” Far too often, it is the weak and underprivileged who suffer the consequences, the poor soldier who dies at war or the unfortunate soul who does not have the connections for justice. As a patriotic Pakistani, I am proud of media personalities like Talat Hussain and Kashif Abassi who encourage us to question the origins and define the meaning of this “national interest.” In a recent piece for CounterPunch, a magazine that I frequently write for, Ralph Nader wrote a piece entitled “Pakistani Lawyers vs. American Lawyers” (reproduced in The News), in which he praised Pakistani lawyers for standing up for the principles of justice while criticizing American lawyers for their obsession with profits. A complementary piece, “Pakistani Journalists vs. American Journalists” would undoubtedly follow a very similar line of reasoning. Impoverished we may be, but a conscience we do have. Or, is our conscience a consequence of our shallow pocket?

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