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The Judge, the Media and the General

It is a complex cocktail, Pakistan's Chief Justice is sacked and the resulting protests present the greatest challenge since General Pervez Musharraf came to power almost eight years ago. Enter the media, including the internet, now reporting events that might once have passed unnoticed. Major forces have been unleashed in a country of critical importance.

AT HIS BOOK LAUNCH IN NEW YORK LAST YEAR, PRESIDENT PERVEZ Musharraf prided himself on his government's determination to encourage a free press. 'Ladies and Gentleman, I have done what no previous government has dared to do. I have set the press free,' he said. In television interviews, the President and his closest allies repeatedly point out that never before has the press operated with such a free hand, to the point where this has become the standard government response no matter what the query.

Private television channels have mushroomed in the last few years, providing a medium of expression, not just for the economically downtrodden or socially victimised, but also to a burgeoning young crew of rock and pop vocalists, models and artists, and at the other end of the spectrum, the mullahs.

However, when delicate subjects are touched, the media is often confronted with a controlling, rebuking authority. This draconian side of the government became especially apparent after March 9, when the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Chaudhry was suddenly removed from office on charges of corruption. Chaudhry had been a thorn in the government's side ever since he intervened in a privatisation case, deciding against government interests, but gaining esteem in the eyes of the public, who saw this as a necessary check on an uncontrolled form of capitalism benefiting only the wealthiest.

When the Supreme Court subsequently decided, after vociferous public appeals, to hear the case of people missing, apparently abducted in the name of fighting the 'war' on terror, it was too much for the government to risk. Besides which, the Chief Justice might have had a legal view on elections planned for later this year.

Not only was Chaudhry sacked, but members of the press reporting public protests in his support faced several obstacles. Hamid Mir of Geo TV was beaten up by police in his efforts to cover the story. When other news channels showed pictures of the scene, there was remorse from the government. Both the Information Minister and President apologised almost instantly, and Mir was back on television, cross-questioning government representatives with a vengeance.

As support for the Chief Justice grew and protests turned into widespread public rallies, the government issued notices to television channels against broadcasting the events in full, even disrupting transmission for hours at a stretch.

Some will argue that previous governments used more heavy-handed tactics on the press, whereas today Islamabad tends to back down in the face of journalistic pressure. For instance, Syed Talat Hussain of Aaj Television, one of the services suffering transmission disruption, was interviewed by other channels the same night. He spoke out vocally against government efforts to curb press freedom.

It was symbolic of a degree of openness that he was not obstructed from speaking, even after his channel's transmission had been disrupted. Such brazenness, almost irreverence towards the government, is new to Pakistan.

BLOGGING AWAY

The critics, often younger, born to an internet age, hunger for more. How can the government mandate a blackout of stories in the more traditional news media when blogspots such as pakistaniat.com carried pictures of the Chief Justice being unceremoniously removed from his home within hours of the incident? Surely the more conventional modes of journalistic expression – newspapers and television – need at least to keep pace with the internet-savvy youth and their candid blogs if they

are to maintain readership and respect. Frank discussion is a function of our era, rather than something for government to graciously grant.

In this age of omnipresent television and mobile phones with built-in cameras, the government must be extra vigilant or face public embarrassment. When pictures of the police manhandling the Chief Justice hit headline news, not only did the opposition latch onto the incident for full advantage, but lawyers marched out in protest and judges resigned in support of the judiciary. Not in recent history had Pakistan witnessed a protest so united.

The government quickly attempted to distance itself from the actions of the police and insisted politicians were misleading the public, trying to politicise a complex legal issue. People were not convinced.

Encouraged by the public response, Chaudhry, represented by Aitazaz Ahsan, one of Pakistan's leading constitutional lawyers, filed a counter-petition against the President challenging the constitutionality of Musharraf's move. They said that the president, prime minister and their associates had made no attempt to hide their displeasure when the Supreme Court considered six thousand human rights abuses cases. The government found it difficult to retain a respectable lawyer to plead its case.

Perhaps a free press is a catalyst for an independent and strong judiciary, but can the General handle it? Vibrant newspapers, dynamic television and a degree of social openness were all part of the legacy Musharraf intended to leave, but he seems to have met his match in a proactive Chief Justice.

Twice the government has postponed the hearing in the case against Chaudhry at the last minute. Hoping that with every postponement, opposition politicians would find it more difficult to rally the public behind the issue. But the tactics seem to have had the opposite effect.

SHOWING SOLIDARITY

Adding fuel to the fire, Chaudhry is travelling the country, north to south, addressing a dotting public, who garland him with rose petals and shout anti-government slogans. Lawyers have turned out in record numbers, showing solidarity, and hailing the Chief Justice as a symbol of the independence of the judiciary. For the public he is a hero because of his refusal to bow down to military command. While parliament is criticised for being the rubber stamp of an overly powerful executive, Chaudhry has taken a stand and the people appreciate his boldness.

Every rally turned out more people than the last. On May 5, thousands lined the streets of Lahore and an astounding fifty thousand heard the address, despite the traffic and complaints by political parties that many of their workers had been detained or arrested. The event was televised by private networks and speculation began about Chaudhry's strength.

Karachi was next on the itinerary, but the government could not bear another protest in a major metropolis. And so Chaudhry was confined to the airport, while opposition forces clashed with thugs apparently supported by the provincial government. Some forty people died and hundreds were injured, many innocent victims caught in the crossfire. The police did not intervene and neither did the federal government, staging its own rally in Islamabad instead, allegedly using taxpayers' money to hire support.

The government's plan, it seems, was to demonstrate that support for the Chief Justice would only lead to mayhem and unrest. But again it seems to have gone horribly wrong. Pictures of innocent victims lying helpless and ambulances

caught in road blocks were televised live on May 12, and even segments of the population which previously sided with the government began to turn against it.

Islamabad has looked callous, heartless and self-absorbed, while the Chief Justice's popularity has not diminished. A nationwide strike called by the opposition on May 14 left most of the country paralysed.

PARALLELS

Parallels are already being drawn with the end of the Ayub Khan regime nearly thirty years ago. Can this movement of lawyers have the same effect students opposing Ayub Khan had in 1969? Can this revolt turn into a revolution? These are the questions analysts of Pakistani politics are posing. Mistrust of the government is at its highest, and support at its lowest, since the present regime took over in October 1999.

The political landscape has been chequered with alternating civilian and military rule. But no soldier has been able to stay in charge for more than eleven years. Whether by coincidence or on reaching the tolerance threshold of the nation, both Ayub Khan and Zia ul Haq remained in power for eleven years. Musharraf reaches that moment in 2010, but in the aftermath of the carnage in Karachi, he may be lucky to last that long.

Opposition political parties appear more united than the government, as key ministers hesitate to appear on television or address meetings to defend it.

The international press remained remarkably silent about these events until they came to a violent head in Karachi. The consensus among the Pakistani intelligentsia was therefore that this newsworthy story was ignored because western powers have placed all their eggs in the Musharraf basket and fear a change in government may disrupt collaboration in the 'war' on terror. It is also believed that the influence of extreme elements is sometimes exaggerated by the present government to scare western powers about the civilian alternative.

In reality, both liberal and conservative forces are seeking greater political participation. Pakistanis often tend to welcome military rule at first, but a decade later their patience seems to run out. This desire for change and an unwillingness to let anyone rule forever without having to answer to the public, is a good thing.

Unlike Hosni Mubarak's Egypt, Muammar Qaddafi's Libya, Syria of the Assads and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, in Pakistan, the opinion of the ordinary person does matter a little and political parties are savvy enough to organise on the streets at least once every ten years. Will the President's boast about freeing the press serve the opposition instead? As with the Chief Justice, it may be too early for a verdict.



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