



LAHORE (IPS)—Male and female television news readers can no longer be seen on the screen together if new media directives are implemented in Pakistan.

Television shows, news broadcasts, and even commercials showing soaps and detergents will have to be taken off the air.

“Just as television had started to open up, become more upbeat and contemporary, we’re hit with this,” commented a stunned viewer in Lahore, Pakistan’s second largest city.

ming,” he asserted. “The new directives are ridiculous. They want us to make interesting and creative programmes on civic sense, road safety, and how to say our prayers.”

Although no written directives were initially given to the state-run PTV, memos were sent to the semi-private NTM (National Television Marketing) channel, which in turn sent out a circular to advertising agencies.

“We were shocked at the directives,” Bashir A. Khan of

NEW TV restrictions shut women out

By Beena Sarwar

The new directives have come right from the top. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in a recent visit to Lahore Television Station, told the television producers to “clean up” their act.

The confused producers, worried about their jobs in the government-run Pakistan Television Corporation (PTVC), scrambled to oblige even before any written orders were given. “The Prime Minister has given verbal orders, so that is enough,” confided Ali Akbar Abbas, a scriptwriter at the station, apparently fully in agreement with Sharif’s point of view.

“His remarks were clear enough. We don’t want to compete with foreign channels, and Pakistan Television should promote educational programmes suitable for Pakistani culture,” he said.

But a producer who requested anonymity felt the prime minister had been misled. “There’s nothing vulgar about our program-

Manhattan Advertising in Karachi. “Our clients, especially the multinationals, are really upset. The emphasis of these new guidelines seems to be against women. It’s pathetic. Here we are on the threshold of the 21st century, and the PM (Prime Minister) wants us to cut down on the projection of women.”

According to the circular, female models are prohibited from blowing bubble gum or licking ice cream cones. They cannot be shown lathering their cheeks in soap commercials, or washing their hair in shampoo ads. Male and female models are not to be shown in close proximity to each other.

“It’s like a return to the Zia era,” said popular television actor Asif Raza Mir who also runs an advertising agency. He was referring to the days of martial law under Zia, who tried to justify his stay in power through a process of so-called Islamisation.

In 1988, all advertisements showing women were pulled off the screen and sent to the country's capital, Islamabad, for "re-censoring" after the then self-appointed President Zia made a speech about Islamic values.

The present clamp down is believed to have been triggered by the music programmes run by PTV and NTM which featured Pakistani rock and pop groups.

During his visit to Lahore TV, Sharif launched a tirade against "long-haired young men" and the "jean-jacket culture" and declared that "Pakistani culture" should be promoted instead.

Hugely popular with young Pakistanis, the modern music groups were immediately banned from appearing on television.

"What's more vulgar, 5,000 young people, boys and girls, peacefully singing along to a song that creates national harmony and unity, or millions of people denied education, health and basic human rights?" asked an angry Salman Ahmed of the popular rock band Junoon.

"What's more obscene, our music, or the loot and plunder of Pakistan by politicians? And will someone please define what our culture is, before the term is used as a trump card," he said.

"Culture and religious faith mean different things to different people, and governments should not even attempt to define them," said freelance journalist Jalees Hazir, who writes on media and culture. "In a country as culturally diverse as Pakistan, no single definition of Pakistani culture will do."

All the rock groups of Pakistan have "national" songs on their repertoires—an attempt to make themselves more acceptable to the establishment. Some of these songs are extremely catchy and popular and have helped instill a

new sense of national pride in Pakistani youngsters.

"Pop music has done for the youth of this country what politicians couldn't," asserts Shehzad Ahmed of Vital Sings, Pakistan's pioneering pop group whose national song, 'Dil Dil Pakistan,' has almost become an anthem for the young since it was first sung almost a decade ago.

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Sharif's edict, which came at a time when there was no political pressure for it, reflects the government's need to strengthen its political base at a time when it is facing a constitutional crisis. Sharif is at loggerheads with the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Some observers in Islamabad are convinced that the move is a precursor to yet another out-of-turn election for which the government wants to increase its vote bank.

Since it is seen as having lost the support of the business community which brought it to power, the government wants to woo back the religious right-wing element which it could earlier afford to ignore.

"This is an effort to strengthen the conservative vote bank on

which the government was losing its grip," said a senior television official in Islamabad.

Historically, whenever a government in Pakistan feels politically weak, it plays the "Islam" and "Pakistan nationalism" cards. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto did this in the 1970s, prohibiting the sale of alcohol to Muslim citizens, making Friday the weekly holiday instead of Sunday, and declaring the Ahmedi community as non-Muslim.

But as has been often pointed out, it did not save him. His successor, Gen. Zia, played the Islam card throughout his 12 years in power because he had no political base. However, his stint as head of state and government was due not to popular support but to his military standing.

After his death in a plane crash in 1988, when general elections were announced, Bhutto's Oxford and Harvard-educated daughter Benazir pulled a scarf over her head, began fingering prayer beads, and stopped shaking hands with men in public in an attempt to placate the religious right when she began her electoral campaign.

This did not in any way enhance her popularity or increase her acceptability in a constituency she can never hope to command.

"Those who supported her did so when she didn't have the outward trappings of piety, and those who were against her were never fooled by the prayer beads," commented an activist for women's rights. She adds that the new media restrictions are certain to backfire as Sharif loses further support among the business community he hails from.

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