

Pakistan Media Under Religious Extremism

By Zohra Yusuf

Perhaps, the most tragic example of the hazards faced by the media operating under the heavy cloud of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan is the kidnap and murder of *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. The South Asia bureau chief was apparently targeted for both his western origins as well as the story he was pursuing. Pearl, who was kidnapped in January, was investigating a story about the 'shoe bomber' Richard Reid's links to militant organisations in Pakistan. It took investigators five months to recover his body from a deserted place in the outskirts of Karachi on 17 May.

Murder, it is said, is the ultimate form of censorship. Since Pakistan's involvement in the war in Afghanistan in the early eighties, journalists in Pakistan have remained at serious risk. For Pakistan, the fallout of the war in Afghanistan should be seen in the context of the geopolitics of the region and the role successive governments chose to play. The country's support of the extremist forces in Afghanistan—initially of reactionary leaders such as Gulbadin Hikmatyar and later of the Taliban—has had serious consequences on Pakistan's internal situation.

Pakistan supported the Taliban through an ill-conceived policy of securing a friendly government on its western borders. Its neighbour on the east is India, with which it has gone to war three times over the territory of Jammu and Kashmir, along the western Himalayas. The Taliban's fanatic commitment to Islam and

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jihad has given Pakistan's intelligence agency the opportunity to send its own recruits for *jihad* training in Kashmir. In doing so, these *jihadis* sent by Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), already indoctrinated by the local *madressas* (religious schools), acquired a skill for violence to add to their reli-

gious fervor. Ultimately, they turned their weapons against their own compatriots—and journalists were among those in the firing line. None of the journalists have been killed, but some have suffered threats and attacks.

Pakistan invoked the cause of Islam to legitimise its own involvement in the war in Afghanistan, in the process fostering an environment where the space for democratic principles and values shrank steadily. Journalists have not been the only victims. Women and minorities face the brunt of discriminatory laws now exploited to settle personal scores. Discriminatory laws also contribute to growing intolerance, with more and more groups taking on the role of moral guardians of society. The war has also made the procurement of weapons as simple as shopping for groceries.

Today, a visit to any major newspaper office gives one a sense of the

fear that journalists in Pakistan work under. The once 'open door' policy has been replaced by an intimidating system of security checks at various points, carried out by armed guards. This makes newspaper offices inaccessible to most people and hinders the role they should play as the voice of the citizens. However, bunkered in and barricaded, journalists have continued to write courageously against the forces of extremism. The office of *Dawn*, the most influential English-language newspaper, has been the target of terrorist attacks and bombs. In November 2000, a woman suicide bomber apparently sent by a religious group angry over what they perceived as 'obscene' advertisements published by the newspaper attacked the Karachi office of *The Nation*.

Pakistan's notorious blasphemy laws have also been used to persecute journalists. Introduced in the 1980s by a military dictator, General Ziaul Haq, the law was further amended to make the death sentence mandatory for anyone convicted of blasphemy against the Prophet Muhammad. However, as with other Islamic laws, the blasphemy law has been liable to misuse, and to whip up popular emotions. The 2001 annual report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan includes the case of *The Frontier Post*, a respected newspaper published from Peshawar. In January last year, *The Frontier Post* was closed down by the provincial administration for the publication of a letter considered to be blasphemous. Five staff members were arrested, in spite of an apology published on the front page. A sister



Zaffar Abbas, BBC correspondent in Karachi, was attacked by the MQM.

publication, the Urdu-language *Maidan*, was also banned. The administration did nothing to prevent an angry mob from setting on fire the newspaper's printing press. Following a judicial inquiry, the newspaper was allowed to resume publication in September 2001.

In a similar case, another Urdu-language newspaper *Mohsaib*, published from Abbottabad, was shut down in June last year for a column on the Islamic sanction of not keeping a beard. On the complaint of a militant religious organisation, a case was filed, and the editor and publisher of the newspaper were jailed for

over a month. Recently, a *Dawn* columnist has come under attack (mercifully, verbal, so far) by a relatively unknown religious group for criticising the country's Islamic laws. The group has attempted to sway popular sentiment on the basis that the columnist is non-Muslim. The group has demanded that *Dawn* stop the publication of his widely read weekly column.

Newspaper offices have also been subject to senseless attacks by protesting mobs. On 19 May 2000, following the assassination of a religious leader in a busy part of Karachi, a large crowd of his supporters went on

a rampage, setting on fire the offices of *The Business Recorder*. A few years ago, *The Frontier Post's* equipment and furniture were ransacked when, in an issue, the paper published a painting depicting Christ to commemorate Easter. Since Muslims accept Jesus Christ as one of the prophets and visual depiction of religious figures is considered to be un-Islamic, an over-charged mob took it upon itself to express its displeasure with the newspaper.

Extremist religious groups have not been the only ones threatening and attacking journalists. A major ethnic party, the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM)—or Migrants' National Movement (now known as Muttehida Qaumi Movement or United National Movement) has a track record of intimidating and attacking journalists and newspaper offices in the late eighties and early nineties. A coalition partner in the provincial government of Sindh, the MQM is known to have pursued terror tactics against journalists critical of the party. Even imagined snubs became the basis for the boycott of certain newspapers. Major newspapers of Karachi lived in dread of the MQM in its heyday. In 1990, the home of the publisher of *Jang*, Pakistan's largest circulated Urdu-language newspaper, came under fire from MQM activists in protest against reports critical of the party chief. Also, attacks on newspaper sellers effectively led to a boycott of the newspaper.

The strength of MQM's fascist policies vis-à-vis the media came to

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light with the attack on the BBC correspondent in Karachi Zaffar Abbas. When *Dawn* published a front-page report of the attack with photographs of the injured journalist, a boycott was called against *Dawn*. The party's street power was so effective that the newspaper could not be distributed and, for the first time in its history, *Dawn* had to cease publication for a few days. MQM's power base was broken after the army launched action against the party leadership in 1992. Most of the leaders fled the country. Other political and religious parties, depending on the muscle power of their activists, have intimidated journalists and publishers.

While religious groups are primarily responsible for denying space for pluralistic thinking and limiting the scope for democratic development, some newspapers in Pakistan are themselves involved in promoting intolerance in society. In Pakistan, there is a peculiar dichotomy in the press

and, consequently, in the values they support. The English-language press, by and large, is known for its consistent support for the rights of women, minorities and other disadvantaged sections of society, as well as for peace with India. The Urdu-language newspapers, read by far more Pakistanis, look upon these issues as contrary to the country's interests and Islamic values. They have assumed for themselves the role of super-patriots and keepers of the 'ideology' of Pakistan. The vernacular press also plays a dangerous role in stirring up emotions against India, which often results in persecution of non-Muslims who comprise a very small minority in Pakistan.

The other section of the press in Pakistan whose editorial content remains unchecked is the *jihadi* press. In spite of Pakistan's ostensible crackdown on Islamic militants, the publications of these groups continue to be circulated, even though they contain highly inflammatory material such as calling upon Muslims to kill westerners, particularly Americans. They also call upon young men to take up *jihad*.

Today, the forces of extremism are a major threat to the fragile state of freedom of the press in Pakistan. The country urgently needs democratisation and adoption of secular, liberal values as elements of state policy to effectively check the dangerous trend. ☞

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