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The Inside Pages: An Analysis of the Pakistani Press

The Tongue-tied Press of Pakistan: Comparing English and Urdu Newspapers

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Pakistan's press enjoys a wide measure of freedom, though unofficial norms backed up by informal pressure restrict criticism of the Pakistan Army. The Urdu press provides a window on the views available to a mass audience in Pakistan that should worry U.S. policymakers. Compared to the more elite-oriented English press, the Urdu newspapers are more domestically oriented and more antigovernment. Opinion pieces present over-the-top, fiery criticisms of the United States and India and recycle dramatic conspiracies in terms that make them appear as fact. This snapshot underlines the urgent need for a public diplomacy approach that will humanize the outsized and diabolical image of the United States that is daily fare for most Pakistanis.

Despite four military dictatorships and several flawed democracies in its 63-year history, Pakistan today has a vibrant and flourishing news scene. Ironically, the recent boom in Pakistani media and the emergence of numerous privately owned newspapers and news channels, along with a more emboldened generation of journalists, result in part from the freedoms allowed to the media by President General Pervez Musharraf. During and since his time in power, the print and electronic media have been remarkably free to criticize the government, though some subjects (notably the army) remained unofficially but effectively off limits. Musharraf would later come to regret having encouraged a livelier media. Despite his belated efforts to repress news outlets and journalists, the media played a significant part in his eventual political downfall.

The Pakistani newspaper scene: The print media continue to be integral to Pakistan's public life. To provide a snapshot of today's Pakistani press, we have looked at three English-language papers, *The News*, *Dawn*, and *The Nation*, and three Urdu dailies, *Jang*, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, and *Mashriq*, for September and November 2010. The Karachi-based *Jang* and *The News* are sister publications, as are Punjab-based *Nawa-i-Waqt* and *The Nation*. *Mashriq* is a regional newspaper based in Peshawar, while *Dawn* is an internationally known newspaper with its roots in Karachi. *Jang* is the most widely read newspaper in the country, with an estimated daily circulation of 850,000, followed by *Nawa-i-Waqt* with 500,000. *The News* ranks first in English newspapers and fifth nationally, with 120,000 papers in circulation. *Dawn News* is second in the English category and sixth in the national with a circulation of 109,000.

The English newspapers can be read by just 11 percent of the population, while the Urdu newspapers cater to a much broader national audience. Widely accessible vernacular television channels have recently begun to play a large role in informing a public that is about 57 percent literate. However, the major Urdu newspapers go back to well before Pakistan became independent and have thus played a more significant role in shaping the Pakistani middle class.

Breadth of coverage: Urdu newspapers are more regionally focused than their English counterparts are. *Nawa-i-Waqt* caters to a predominantly Punjabi audience, while *Mashriq* covers the Khyber-Pakhtunkwa region more thoroughly than anyone else does. *Jang*, with its multiple bureaus in all four provinces, is

somewhat of an exception to the rule. In contrast, the English newspapers cover all four provinces with relative equality, with their print and online versions dedicating a page to each province.

Similarly, Urdu papers focus much more sharply on domestic news, reporting widely on issues affecting the everyday lives of citizens such as power shortages and price hikes, with the occasional report on an international event that has direct repercussions in Pakistan, such as President Barack Obama's visit to India. The English papers devote more attention to international affairs.

English reporting and Urdu reporting of hard news are comparable in quality, although there are certain religious undertones that can be found in the latter. The front pages of all three Urdu papers we examined feature a Quranic verse of the day, sometimes complemented by the day's prayer timings. When reporting on issues that are potentially blasphemous in nature, such as the planned burning of the Quran by Pastor Terry Jones in Florida, a bracketed "God forbid" prefaces the report. *Nawa-i-Waqt* can sometimes lean to the religious extreme, most recently for endorsing, in its editorial section, a 500,000-rupee reward to kill alleged blasphemer Aasia Bibi. The Pakistani Christian, accused of making disparaging comments about the Prophet Muhammad, was recently pardoned by the government after being embroiled in a blasphemy case for a year and a half. Following the announcement of the award by the Imam of Peshawar's Mahabat Khan mosque, the *Nawa-i-Waqt* editorial praised the Imam's message as the just way to punish Aasia for her sins.

The starkest contrast between English and Urdu newspapers lies in their opinion sections. Both sets of newspapers boast columnists and contributors who are well known (and sometimes notorious) in Pakistan's political, cultural, and journalistic arenas. Examples include *Nawa-i-Waqt's* staunchly Punjabi academic and religious figurehead Dr. Ajmal Niazi and Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan of atomic fame, who writes for both *Jang* and *The News*. English opinion pieces often express strong views. But the Urdu columnists are much more strident, writing with particular vitriol against external actors like India and the United States. Conspiracy theories run rampant in Urdu columns. These run the risk of being taken as reality due to the legitimacy granted to well-known writers as a consequence of their fame. Opinion columns in Urdu papers seem to be subject to less editorial oversight than those in the English press. One result is that there is no restraint against blurring fact and fiction. (The editorial oversight in the English language press can act as an informal restraint on press freedom. One well-known commentator noted privately to an American visitor that his column had been massively rewritten, leading him to threaten to cancel his column.)

The Urdu press against the status quo: *Jang*, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, and *Mashriq* all highlight their criticism of the current government and especially of President Asif Ali Zardari. He is subject to the usual slur of "Mr. Ten Percent," his morality comes under sarcastic judgment by columnists, and he inspires particularly creative criticism. Some highlights include disparaging poetry on the state of the government by *Nawa-i-Waqt's* Riaz ur Rehman and a spoof anecdote on a Mr. "Wazif Madari" by *Jang's* Amir Jalil. (The name has no particular meaning; it serves only to act as a gossamer veil over satire against the president.)

Jang puts the Pakistani judiciary in the spotlight as a counterforce to the current Pakistani government. News on the Supreme Court frequently makes it to the front pages of *Jang*, reminding readers of the struggles of the Lawyers' Movement and Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. The media, especially *Jang* and its affiliated publications and channels, had galvanized national opinion in reporting the initial sacking of the chief justice in 2007 by then-president General Pervez Musharraf, leading to nationwide protests. The new Lawyers' Movement that grew out of this crisis eventually brought about Musharraf's downfall and Chaudhry's reinstatement.

The Punjab-based *Nawa-i-Waqt*, on the other hand, complements its criticism of the current government with lavish coverage of the opposition Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) party and its leaders, Punjab's two most prominent politicians—former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and his brother, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif. *Nawa-i-Waqt* will at times pump up somewhat insignificant news on the PML-N that other papers may not consider newsworthy or may not afford the same level of importance.

Camouflage in the media—the Pakistan Army in the Urdu press: The portrayal of the army in Urdu newspapers is somewhat muted, mostly due to the fact that the army monitors and regulates the publishing of military news through the Office of Inter-Services Public Relations. What little is published in the regular news expresses appreciation for the military *jawans*, young soldiers on the ground participating in humanitarian relief efforts, most recently in the aftermath of the Pakistani floods. There is not much mention of the army's activities, apart from mentions of Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Kiyani's various diplomatic meetings and visits.

Coverage of Pervez Musharraf decries his undemocratic rule and his legacy of corruption, especially in recent columns commenting on his return to the Pakistani political scene. The articles chronicling Musharraf's bid to regain power include some throwaway, between-the-lines criticisms of the army's political ambitions to gain power within the Pakistani bureaucracy, but nothing more than that. Columnists too tend to write personal criticisms of Musharraf rather than slights of the army. Of note, however, the Inter-Service Intelligence is hardly even mentioned, let alone criticized, in Urdu papers.

Some direct disapproval of the army can be found in the writings of some bold columnists like the well-known journalist Hamid Mir, who writes a column for *Jang* and who has had a long history of being censored and intimidated by military and civilian governments alike for his inflammatory writing. Even so, the quantity of reporting on the Pakistani military is limited, and columnists who choose to take the risk of publishing pieces against the institution are few and far between.

More daring coverage of the Pakistan Army has appeared mainly on television channels and the Internet, which affords some degree of anonymity. The regulation of the news by the Office of Inter-Services Public Relations limits what goes into the public realm, and columnists become the main news-providers on army activity.

The Hostile neighbor—India: Unsurprisingly, India is a favorite whipping boy for Urdu press reporters and columnists alike. Both Urdu and English papers front-paged reports of last summer's clashes between stone-wielding Kashmiri youth and Indian security forces, with great emphasis placed on Indian aggression and oppression against powerless Kashmiris. The Urdu press goes a large step further. Columnists there likened the Kashmiris to Muslims on the holy pilgrimage of Hajj, who overcome Satan—represented by the Indians—by throwing stones at him. Some of the more religious-minded columnists paint the Indians as idolatrous heathens whose “defective religious beliefs...caused them to spill the blood of Kashmiri martyrs.”

By contrast, there is practically no newspaper reporting, negative or positive, on militant groups with historical relationships to the army and a long record of anti-India violence in the name of Islam, like Lashkar-e-Tayyaba or Jaish-e-Mohammad. Despite the fact that Indian authorities blame these groups for inciting violence not only within disputed Kashmir but also within India's own borders, the telltale silence on these groups persists.

November 2010 brought a cascade of reports and columns in the wake of President Barack Obama's much-publicized state visit to India and, in the Pakistani press, his equally well-publicized decision to defer a trip to Pakistan to the following year. The India-U.S. relationship has been portrayed in the media as a cause of great concern to Pakistan. The Urdu press, far more than the English papers, depict India as conniving and scheming not only to topple Pakistan from the status of America's most important ally in South Asia, but to “completely erase Pakistan” from existence. India, according to the Urdu columnists, is trying to distract the American president from important issues like Kashmir by seducing the United States with economic incentives and by exaggerating the terrorist threat posed to it by elements within Pakistan. The two countries are, according to numerous columns, conspiring to take Pakistan down together as part of a wider conspiracy against Islam.

Although the Jang Group of Newspapers has launched the “Aman Ki Asha” (A Hope for Peace) initiative for Indo-Pakistan peace, its pages still contain opinions that paint a starkly negative picture of India. The

anti-India sentiment is strong within the Urdu press and continues to shape the mentality of the Pakistani populace.

Embittered alliances—the view of the United States: Negative attitudes toward the War on Terror are widely shared in Pakistan, as is criticism of the United States. In the Urdu press, however, this criticism comes across with breathtaking bitterness. It is perhaps the columnists' favorite subject to write on, with no limits to how acrid they are in their criticisms and how outlandish in formulating conspiracy theories. Dr. Ajmal Niazi of *Nawa-i-Waqt* wrote, for example, that 9/11 was “America's reward for its own deeds,” declaring that the US “was the biggest devil...the real terrorist,” especially for the way it bullied Pakistan into doing its bidding. In another column, the same writer declared that it was “the naked truth that the events of 9/11 were the Americans' own doing,” a conspiracy theory quite commonly believed within the Pakistani middle-class circles. The fact that more than 18 billion American dollars have been given in aid to Pakistan since 2001 is brushed aside either as a weak U.S. ploy to buy the loyalties of the Pakistani public or as an American act of naïveté, with the money going right to President Zardari's pockets.

The United States suffers further blows to its image in Pakistani papers through their coverage of the drone attacks. The Peshawar-based *Mashriq's* reporting features drone attacks as well as terrorist attacks in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and FATA areas quite heavily on its front page, with an attack with minimal casualties gaining much more attention than in *Nawa-i-Waqt* or *Jang*. The reports draw special attention to civilian suffering caused in the process. Coverage uses highly emotive vocabulary, with the dead civilians described as “martyred” or even “flung into the pit of death.” The issue of Pakistani sovereignty vis-à-vis the drone attacks has not been as heavily discussed in the Urdu media as it has been in the English, but it may be examined more in the coming few weeks following the Wikileaks release of cables indicating the Pakistani government's covert approval of the drone attacks.

The United States has also been severely criticized for its handling of two Pakistani individuals, the accused Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad and Aafia Siddiqui, sentenced to 86 years in prison after spending three years on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists list for allegedly assisting Al-Qaeda in planning attacks. Both were described in Urdu columns as victims of a larger conspiracy to defame Pakistan and to give the United States an excuse to continue its drone attacks in the country's northwestern region. The issue of Aafia Siddiqui especially gained publicity in Pakistan, as Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gillani himself appeared in the news to protest her arrest and publicly engage the US authorities for her extradition. The “innocent and upstanding” Siddiqui has been idealized in the press as a “daughter of Pakistan,” who is a victim of “America's evil farce” and “Pakistan's neglect,” someone who will “live on as a martyr” after she most likely dies in prison while serving out her sentence.

Despite the billions of U.S. dollars in aid to Pakistan, then, the image of the United States within the press as well as among the public in Pakistan remains, perhaps, the worst of any party—including India. Such an image is reinforced within the pages of the Pakistani press despite the Americans' best public relations efforts.

Pakistan's culture wars: This detailed snapshot is based on only three months' press coverage, but the main characteristics of coverage in the Urdu press and the principal differences between the Urdu and English media are consistent with observations others have made in recent years. The dominant narrative in the Urdu press adds an ideological gap to the existing socioeconomic distance between the large middle-class audience that reads Urdu and the English papers' elite readers. The political ideas in Urdu papers are a lot more fiery than those in their tamer English counterparts. Anti-India and anti-American sentiment is unrestricted and oftentimes over the top.

There are religious undertones in Urdu newspapers, but religion is usually not the main feature that distinguishes Urdu papers from English ones. The most vitriolic columns in the Urdu papers, while referencing Islam or Islamic subjects, do not use religion as their main argument. With the exception of *Nawa-i-Waqt's* shocking aforementioned editorial, Urdu newspapers are not religiously extremist—rather, it is the extreme political views within them that are most striking.

Impact on the United States: Opinion polls and the observations of any number of visitors to Pakistan confirm that anti-American sentiment is at an all-time high. This look at the Urdu media suggests that this hostility is being reinforced daily with writing that creates and reinforces both high emotion and a kind of alternative reality. These are not easily countered, especially at a time when Pakistan has genuine problems for which it is comforting to find scapegoats.

This does suggest, however, that public diplomacy, and specifically an effort to humanize the United States and its people, need to be a high priority for U.S. policymakers. These efforts do not bear early fruit, but they can have an impact over time.

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