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Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239
Fax: (65) 6776 7505
www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan: Military versus the Media

Shahid Javed Burki¹

Introduction

Pakistan's government headed by Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif has had deal to with a variety of problems in the first year of his third term in office. These relate to the development of a political order which could define the role of Islam and that of the military in governance. A new battle front opened up for this administration as it was nearing the completion of its first year. This was the result of an assassination-attempt on a well-known TV anchor on 19 April 2014. Hamid Mir of Geo, a popular TV channel, was the target of some assassins-to-be. He was fired upon and injured as he was going by car to the Karachi studio of his employer. Geo is by far the most popular cable channel in Pakistan. It is watched by about one-half of those in the country who get their news and information from this particular medium. Soon after the attack, Amir Mir, the anchor's brother and also a journalist, went on the air and accused the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) and its Director General, Lt Gen Zaheer-ul-Islam, for planning and executing the assassination attempt. This accusation as well as General

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@yahoo.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

Islam's picture was featured repeatedly by Geo. Subsequently, the media conglomerate, which owns Geo and two dailies – The News (in English) and the Jang (in Urdu) – printed front-page apologies to the Pakistani military establishment for having resorted to “excessive, distressful and emotional” coverage of the assassination-attempt.

Here is an attempt to answer the following important question: Why would one incident in a city that sees scores of them every week acquire the dimensions of a major national crisis? The short answer is that the attempt on the life of a prominent TV anchor brought to the surface several conflicts that are at play at this time in the highly-troubled state of Pakistan.

A Targeted Media

The apprehension that the community of journalists in Pakistan was being targeted was based on well-known facts. Various international and national organisations that watch these developments have classified Pakistan as one of the most dangerous countries to work in for the members of the journalist profession. In an article written for *The Express Tribune*, the columnist and TV anchor Raza Rumi provided estimates for the number of journalists who were killed in the last couple of years. He had himself escaped an attack three weeks before Hamid Mir was targeted. “In 2013, eight journalists were killed and in 2014 four have been killed so far,” wrote Rumi.² But the question as to who was doing the targeting was not so easily answered.

A senior journalist told me in a conversation in Karachi, “All of us receive threats”. She thought that the Taliban were the source of about a third of these threats. Those who attacked Raza Rumi were reported to be from a Taliban-affiliated group that was offended by his writings on the societal damage attributable to the rise of extremism. For those operating out of Karachi, she thought, another one-third of the threats originated from the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, MQM. This political movement had held Karachi in its grip for a couple of decades using intimidation as a powerful weapon. The journalist suspected that threats also emanated from the intelligence agencies.

There is some consensus among journalists that Saleem Shahzad, a prominent journalist who had worked for a number of foreign publications, was murdered by the ISI after being warned not to investigate too deeply the working of the intelligence agency. He not only ignored the

² Raza Rumi, “Moving ahead of the attack,” *The Express Tribune*, 3 May 2014, p. 9.

warning but went on to publish a book which appeared after his death in 2011 in which he detailed the agency's involvement with the Taliban and some other extremist groups.³

In its coverage of the Hamid Mir incident, the newsmagazine, *The Economist*, also painted a grim situation in which men and women who were in journalism worked their trade. "More than a dozen other media personalities have been warned their names are on a kill list. Less well-known journalists die all the time: more than 50 have been killed since 2001". In providing some details about Mir's background, the magazine painted a picture of the complicated lives Pakistani journalists lead. "There was a time when Hamid Mir, Pakistan's most famous journalist, had little reason to fear his work might put his life in danger. In a country where his trade has long been a dangerous game, he kept on the right side of the media's two deadliest foes: Pakistan's militants and its security establishment. He had good contacts with both after making a name for himself as a chronicler of the state-backed jihad in Afghanistan and Kashmir in the 1980s and 1990s".⁴

Complicating the situation was the intense rivalry between the more important media groups. Some of them resented the domination of the Jang Group and got actively involved in the debate that followed the Mir incident. Several rival groups suggested that the government needed to curb the growing power of the Jang media empire. It was suggested that its domination was working against the democratic evolution of Pakistan because it virtually monopolised the presentation of whichever point of view the group's owners favoured. There were several interpretations of the reason why the Jang Group had launched a frontal attack on the military establishment. As is often the case with developments in Pakistan, a foreign hand was suspected in the way the Jang Group had handled the Mir affair.

The Jang Group

What is generally referred to as the Jang Group is a conglomerate that is important in both print and electronic media. It is owned by a well-known family that launched Pakistan's most-widely read Urdu-language newspaper, the *Jang*. The newspaper's name translates into English as "War". Probably encouraged by the British colonial administration in India, the daily supported

³ Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside Al Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond bin Laden and 9/11*, London, Pluto, 2011.

⁴ *The Economist*, "Journalism in Pakistan: The silencing of the liberals", 26 April, 2014, p. 32.

the war effort. This was important since about one-half of the recruits into the British Indian Army came from the Punjab and the Northwest Frontier Province (NWF). (The NWFP has been recently renamed as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.) Both had Muslim-majority populations. Their support for the war was important for the British colonialists, especially since the Congress, India's largest political party, was not in favour of the London-led conflict in Europe of that period.

The Jang also supported the creation of Pakistan as an independent state for a segment of the Indian Muslim population. The newspaper was initially published from Delhi but moved to Karachi when the latter city became the first capital of Pakistan. It became the most-widely read newspaper but was spared nationalisation as General Muhammad Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military President, launched an effort to bring newspapers under the control of the government. The military government targeted in particular the left-leaning newspapers. It nationalised *The Pakistan Times* and *Imroze*, two newspapers with strong sympathies for the socialist experiments in Eastern Europe and China.

Ayub Khan's departure from the political arena in March 1969 improved the media climate somewhat. It also resulted in the founding of new newspapers. Among those launched was *The News*, an English language sibling of the Jang. In 2002, Shakilur Rehman who by then had inherited the media empire from Khalilur Rehman, his father, went into the business of cable television. He named the Group's cable channel Geo News and went on to claim the largest share for it in the rapidly growing market. With the easing of government controls on television broadcasting, a number of other business houses also entered the field. They were, however, not able to shake the hold of Geo. Among the Jang Group's rivals is *The Express Tribune*, owned and published by a large business house operating in Karachi. The *Express* also went on to establish a cable TV channel of its own.

Having run into some problems with the governments of the day in the 1990s, Shakilur Rehman decided to leave Pakistan and move his business and media operations to Dubai. He left the day-to-day operations in the hands of the chief executives of three media outlets that were the components of his empire, devoting his attention to some new initiatives, the most notable of which was "*Aman ki Asha*." "*Aman*" is the Urdu word for peace; "*asha*" in Hindi means hope. This "hope for peace programme" was the joint enterprise of *The Times of India* and the Jang Group. It brought together in well-attended meetings scores of prominent business people, academics, writers and journalists from India and Pakistan.

After the Mir Assassination Attempt

The alleged involvement of the ISI in the attack on Mir (an allegation since retracted) and the reluctance of the Sharif government to condemn what appeared to be a media campaign against the army strained relations between the civilian and military leaderships. Two formal inquiries were launched. The first was ordered by the Prime Minister who requested the Supreme Court to establish a judicial panel to investigate the assassination attempt. The Supreme Court responded by appointing a panel of three judges. The military establishment ordered an investigation of its own, with members of the investigating team drawn from the civilian as well as military intelligence agencies.

The first formal contact between the civilian and military authorities took place on 28 April, nine days after the attack on Mir. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif invited General Raheel Sharif, Chief of Army Staff and Lt. Gen. Zaheer-ul-Islam, Director General of ISI, to a meeting in his office. Also attending was Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan. The Minister had given a series of statements preceding the meeting, lauding the roles of the military and its intelligence agency in defending the country. The meeting was said to have cleared the air a bit. "Sources privy to the meeting told *The Express Tribune* that the military conveyed its serious concern to the prime minister over the civilian authorities' reluctance to respond to the 'baseless allegations' against the security establishment. They added that there was a feeling within the army that the civilian government should have issued a clarification immediately after the accusation leveled by Mir's brother about the involvement of ISI in the attack".⁵ A statement should have been issued that the ISI had worked to "ensure the protection and defense of the country".⁶

The Prime Minister addressed the issue once again while on a visit to Britain. Questioned by a reporter from *The News*, Sharif said that the government was not in favour of banning any of the media outlets owned and operated by the Jang Group. Such a move, he said, would seriously set back the development of an independent media without which a truly democratic system would not function. In a statement made at a ceremony to observe the Martyrs' Day (observed every year on 30 April) General Sharif seemed to endorse the position taken by the Prime

⁵ Kamran Yousaf, "PM praises ISI for its sacrifices," *The Express Tribune*, 30 April, 2014, pp.1 and 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Minster. The Army chief lauded the efforts of the media and civil society in nation-building. “The media has played a key role in rallying public opinion on matters of national-security. We support the freedom of the press and responsible journalism and appreciate (journalists’) sacrifices,” said the General.⁷ In an editorial *Dawn*, Pakistan’s most influential English-language newspaper praised the General for the position he had taken in the Martyrs’ Day address. “...the army chief praised both the historical contributions of the media and underlined the need for a free and responsible one – in effect, instantly lowering the temperature in the ongoing media wars. While surely a single speech cannot erase the words and deeds to the contrary in the recent past, at least a marker has been laid down directly by the army chief himself about where he stands on democracy and a free media”.⁸

Conclusion

The attack on Hamid Mir bared a number of fault-lines on top of which Pakistan is attempting to build a political structure that the country hopes would prove to be durable. In play are several forces that are competing for influence and are not quite ready to function within an agreed legal framework. Several large business houses had established control over some of the media outlets in order to promote their commercial interests. The regulator – in the case of television, the Pakistan Electronic Media Authority, PEMRA – has not developed an enforceable framework and case-law defining the boundaries within which television channels must operate. The PEMRA works under the government’s executive branch and does not have the space within which it could operate without interference. The community of journalists do not feel obliged to check their facts before they write newspaper stories and appear on television screens. The PEMRA has interpreted its mandate not to include what is said on the scores of news programmes run by independent channels. The intelligence community – in particular the ISI – operates in the belief that only they have the right and the competence to what they think is “national security”. And finally, the civilian political establishment and the military are still feeling their way through in determining what their appropriate roles are in the evolving political order. These issues will need to be resolved before Pakistan is able to make progress towards the establishment of a durable political system.

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⁷ Iftikhar A. Khan, “Insurgents must accept state’s writ, says COAS”, *Dawn*, 1 May, 2014, p. 1.

⁸ *Dawn* (editorial), “Army’s chief’s speech”, 2 May 2014, p. 8.