

CHALLENGES TO FREEDOM OF SPEECH IN PAKISTAN: RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND MEDIA CENSORSHIP

OUTLINE:

1) Introduction

Thesis statement: Freedom of speech in Pakistan is subjected to many challenges especially of religious extremism and media censorship. Nevertheless, some holistic approaches need to be taken to address this long festering issue.

2) Freedom of speech as basic human right and its perspective in Pakistan

- Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan.

3) Religious Extremism as a major challenge to freedom of speech in Pakistan

- Misuse and manipulation of blasphemy laws.
 - Asia Bibi Case of 2009.
- Violence and intimidation by extremist groups.
 - Shia Muslims of Hazara community
- Exploitation of religious and sectarian minorities.
 - Analysis by Naumana Suleman
- Restrictions on Artistic freedom by harassing scholars.
 - 2017 case of Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy

e. Pressure on media to conform to religious norms

- Geo TV case 2019:

4) Media censorship as another major challenge to freedom of speech in Pakistan

a. Banning of media content by government

- Dawn news shutdown (2018)

b. Threats and attacks on Journalists

- CPJ report (2020)

c. Self censorship of media due to economic pressures.

- Reporters Without Borders (RSP) report (2019)

d. Internet censorship and surveillance.

- Human Rights Watch (HRW) report (2020)

e. Use of defamation laws, cyber crime laws and press ordinance to control media.

- Journalist Cyril Almeida case (2017)

5) Effects imposed on Pakistan due to lack of access to freedom of speech.

a. Erosion of democracy and increased political stagnation.

- Example of Russia

b. Loss of public trust leading to anarchy

- Decline of freedom of expression (case study)

c. Communication gap between state and public.

- Amnesty International report (2020)

6. Way forward to deal with the issue

- a. Address religious extremism by promoting interfaith dialogue.
 - Common Word Initiative (2007)
- b. Encourage ethical journalism by supporting media outlets.
 - Press Freedom Index (Finland)
- c. Impose positive censorship on media to avoid chaos.
 - Example of United Kingdom
- d. Strengthen civil society by facilitating public discourse.
 - Solidarity Movement in Poland and other civil movements in Europe (1980s)

7. Case - Study

Egypt - how religious extremism and media oppression affected Egypt's government and public.

8. Conclusion

①

"I may not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."
(- Voltaire)

Man is born with few rights that are not confined to geographical and regional restrictions but are same and ever lasting for entire humanity and freedom of speech is one of them. It is the birth right of every human being that they have the complete liberty to express their thoughts, opinions and viewpoints without any external pressure. Unfortunately, access to this right has never been a bed of roses in human history. Despite living in the so called modern era of 21st century, this issue still persists to a quite large extent. Pakistan also faces hinderance in provision of this basic yet constitutional right of public. The manipulation of blasphemy laws followed by the violence of extremist religious groups, exerts pressure on the people to refrain from expressing themselves. There has been a notorious practice of harassing and attacking religious scholars and media journalists; forbidding them to share their opinions and ideas freely. These hurdles in freedom of speech have ^{implemented} drastic effects on the democracy and political stability of Pakistan. These problems must be addressed through the promotion of interfaith dialogue among

(2)

religious figures and encouraging ethical journalism in media outlets. There is no denying of the fact that the freedom of speech in Pakistan is subjected to many challenges especially of religious extremism and media censorship. Nevertheless, some holistic approaches need to be taken to address this long festering issue.

The freedom of speech is a universal and global right that allows each and every individual to openly and without any hesitation portray their perspective and ideology to public and state. Pakistan also follows this not only as a global right but also a state religion right i.e. Islam has given complete authority to man to have access to right of freedom of expression. It is the duty of the state and government to protect this right of civilians. The Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan clearly highlights the importance and significance of right to freedom of expression. It states

“Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression and there shall be freedom of press subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or integrity...”

In the light of this article, Pakistan provides its citizens including media to openly and fearlessly put forward their opinions. However, the situation

(3)

is not that simple at all. Despite being a part of constitution, freedom of speech has never been so easy in Pakistan primarily due to religious extremism and media censorship. There are thousands of events that clearly proved that freedom of speech is struggling to be a basic civil right. The main reasons for this struggle ~~are~~ ^{is} Pakistan's inability to tackle the religious riots and media propaganda through proper rule of law. Thus, it has become a parasite to the democratic norms and public liberty in Pakistan.

Religious extremism is the key challenge that provides obstacles in the freedom of speech right of general public. The manipulation and misuse of blasphemy laws terrifies common public; that they could be attacked or murdered if they put forth any of their idea or ideology related to Islam or Prophet (PBUH). The history of this misinterpretation forces them to stop questioning about religion. Even the people are scared to ask their queries or confusions from religious figures thinking that any of their statement could be molded into anything blasphemous or inappropriate for religion. Under section 295 and 298 of Pakistan's Penal code, individuals are prohibited from nonverbal and verbal actions deemed insulting to religious belief and practice. Pakistan is one of the only three countries in the world - the

(9)

others being Iran and Mauritania that enforce the death penalty against individuals for insulting the Prophet Muhammad and the Islamic faith. However, these blasphemy laws are manipulated to spread hatred and fear in people and prevent them from freedom of speech. For example the Asia Bibi case of 2009 portrays this manipulation where Asia Bibi, a Christian woman got into an argument with her co workers and was convicted for blasphemy. Though many sources say that it was mere manipulation of her words, yet she was held guilty in the case. Such scenarios make it difficult for people to express their viewpoints freely.

The violence and intimidation by sectarian groups also raises questions on the smooth functioning of freedom of speech in Pakistan. The extremist parties and contra rebels misuse Islamic aspect to undermine state religion. It enhances tensions among different sects of people particularly causing Shia-Sunni divide. This rift does not let the public to express their sentiments freely. The Hazara community in Pakistan, primarily Shia Muslims have faced severe attacks in Quetta. These incidents abstrain people to avoid freedom of expression. They are put in fear that their any conversation may prove controversial and ultimately fatal for them. Thus the threat to life and

5

even respect does not allow them to talk freely. These extremist groups do not even hesitate to sexually and physically harass people and particularly their women. The fear to lose honor and integrity causes hinderance in freedom to express one's viewpoints.

Also, the religious and sectarian minorities are targetted and exploited brutally to suppress their voice. These minor groups are treated like untouchables and are forced to compromise with every situation. Their demands and needs are not heard very well by the state and government. This gets more worse when they protest and the religious extremist give an extreme reaction to this. The minorities are bullied and mistreated by the majorities; so that they keep quiet and do not convey their demands without any fear of exploitation. These reactions and aggressive acts shatter the confidence of the minorities and they have no courage to speak even for themselves. Nauman Suleman, South Asia Coordinator at Minority Rights Group International writes

"In Pakistan minority-religion members face discrimination daily.... A country that is 96 percent Muslim, the targeting of its religious minorities (3 per cent) is widespread; especially for Shia, Ahmadi's,

(6)

Hindus and Christians."

These sort of events create an atmosphere of ~~terror~~ fear and pressure that becomes an unavoidable challenge to freedom of speech in Pakistan.

∴ Digging deeper into this issue, another challenge that imposes threat to freedom of speech in Pakistan is the restrictions on artistic freedom by harassing scholars. One ^{of the most} significant event in this regard is the **2017 case of Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy**, a prominent physicist known for his outspoken views on secularism and criticism of religious extremism. He faced severe backlash and threats forcing him to limit his public interactions. It underscores the broader issue of academic and artistic repression in Pakistan where scholars and artists often face intimidation and violence for expressing dissenting views, thereby severely impacting freedom of speech. Any such remark or statement by any scholar or artist that does not coincide with the extremist view points is regarded absurd by them. Such chaos and violence based attitudes ~~are~~ causes trouble in the freedom of speech in Pakistan especially for celebrity artists and scholars who are afraid for their life before giving any statement.

(7)

In Pakistan, the pressure on media to conform to religious norms also significantly hinders the freedom of speech. Media outlets often face direct and indirect coercion to align their content with conservative religious expectations, which restricts the diversity of viewpoints and critical discourse essential for a vibrant democracy. Journalists and media organizations are frequently subjected to censorship, threats and even violence if they publish material deemed blasphemous or offensive to religious sentiments. A notable event that illustrates this scenario in Pakistan is the 2019 crackdown on the television channel GEO TV. GEO TV aired content that was declared controversial and against Islamic values including satirical shows and dramas that touched upon sensitive issues. This led to severe backlash from conservative groups, resulting in the temporary suspension of channel's broadcast. It clearly indicates how media in Pakistan is pressurized to adhere to religious norms, significantly curbing freedom of speech and press freedom.

The other sector that imposes major challenges to freedom of speech in Pakistan is media censorship. There has been a track record of blocking and banning of media content by the state's government. If government feels that media does not show the picture of domestic

(8)

and national affairs to public in the way they actually want, banning the media is the foremost solution for it. One such event was observed back in 2018 when there was a temporary shutdown of the television news channel Dawn news. It published an interview with former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in which he made controversial remarks about the involvement of Pakistani militants in the 2008 Mumbai attacks. It led to severe backlash from the military establishment, resulting in the channel being taken off air in various parts of country. It exemplifies how government actions, often influenced by powerful institutions like the military can severely hinder freedom of speech by restricting media operations.

The journalists and anchors of the media industry are attacked and threatened in Pakistan that disturbs the freedom of speech here. The news anchors and television journalist who probably being neutral depict the true and clear picture of the recent happenings are harassed and forced to keep quiet; especially if the analysis they present is not in the favor of higher authorities and establishment. These journalists are given death threats, face harassment and are threatened for their family security. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) 2020 report noted that Pakistan is one of the deadliest

(9)

countries for journalists, with numerous reporters being killed, attacked or threatened each The journalists who cross the red lines set by the military or who cover sensitive topics such as religion and corruption face harassment, abduction and even murder. With no other option left, and having no feeling of security, the anchors and spokesperson of news and media keep quiet and do not present their viewpoints openly. This causes a huge challenge to freedom of expression in Pakistan and also contributes in hiding the truth from public.

Furthermore, self-censorship in the Pakistani media due to economic pressures is ^{also} one of the major challenges in freedom of speech. The economic pressures are used as tool by the state to influence media content. The fear of losing advertising revenue or facing financial audits leads many media houses to avoid publishing or broadcasting content critical of the government or powerful institutions. The media industry in Pakistan being heavily dependant on government advertising becomes extremely vulnerable, leading to widespread self censorship as media houses avoid antagonizing the government to ensure their financial viability. A 2019 report by Reporters without Borders (RSF) highlighted how media outlets in Pakistan face economic coercion by stating:

"Government agencies have been known to withhold advertising revenue from media outlets that do not toe the official line."

The outlets face severe financial constraints, that forces them to lay off numerous journalists and cut salaries, leading to increased self censorship among its staff to avoid further economic repercussions.

Amidst the self censorship of media, internet censorship and surveillance also hinders the freedom of speech in Pakistan. There are numerous cases where the authorities continued to block access to political, social and cultural websites and arrested and intimidated internet users; claiming that they expressed views deemed to be blasphemous, offensive and inappropriate. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has been given broad powers to censor online content and monitor internet users. This leads to suppression of online dissent, with bloggers, journalists and activists frequently targeted. The Human Rights Watch (HRW) 2020 report on Pakistan illustrates the impact of these measures by stating that the Pakistani government's increasing use of internet shutdown, online censorship and surveillance has created a climate of fear among internet users. Hence, these factors lead to self censorship and a stifling of free expression online.

(1)

Most importantly, the manipulation and misuse of defamation laws, cybercrime laws and press ordinances also causes issues in the freedom of expression in Pakistan. There has been an observation of misuse of the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) that it has been used to target journalists, bloggers and activists who criticize government. The law's vague definitions of offenses and harsh penalties have created a drastic effect on freedom of expression. A hallmark event highlighting the use of defamation laws, cybercrime laws and press ordinances to control media is the 2017 case against Journalist Cyril Almeida. He was charged with treason under Pakistan's defamation laws after he published an article in Dawn newspaper that reported on a high level security meeting discussing the military's alleged support for militant groups. Hence, the vagueness and misconception of these laws result in their manipulation and causes punishment for freedom to express one's opinions.

These factors of religious extremism and media censorship, causing huge obstacles, to freedom of speech path, leave far reaching effects on Pakistan. Lack of access to speak freely becomes the reason for erosion of democracy and political stagnation. Democracy is preferred over all other forms of government as it allows public to put forth their needs and express their emotions freely without any pressure or fear. But if despite being a democ-

atic state, people are afraid to speak openly, it results in nothing but failure and erosion of democracy. One such notable example is that of **Russia**. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia had severely curtailed freedom of speech and press freedom. The lack of free press contributed to the erosion of democratic institutions and leads to political stagnation. These both impacts hinder the political growth of the country. There is no stability and uniformity because the public does not get satisfied with the government. Though in democratic society, freedom of speech serve as a cornerstone for healthy public discourse, but Pakistan's pervasive censorship on media and religious extremism have stifled these critical processes.

Secondly, lack of opportunity to speak forces people to lose trust in government and state which leads to anarchy. The public feels frustrated and develops hatred for the country because they are not allowed to speak and are forced to be quiet and remain oppressed. According to a research titled, "**The Decline of Freedom of Expression and Social Vulnerability in Western Democracy**" by Aniceto Masferrer of University of Valencia, Spain, the decline of freedom of expression makes most people more vulnerable and jeopardizes the whole democratic system. The public sees no option and no way to express their sentiments that puts them into belief that the state and government

do not care for them. Instead, they are further suppressed and forced to stay away from raising voices. Such circumstances create environment of rebellion and insurgency where the public becomes against of the state. This delicate situation often paves way and creates opportunity for foreign attacks. Thus, absence of freedom to speak and express becomes the prime cause of public hopelessness and anarchy.

A wide communication gap between state and public is another major effect that is imposed due unavailability of freedom of speech in Pakistan. There is a vacuum in the path of public and government which increases chances of instability and restlessness in the country. According to Amnesty International's 2020 report;

“Governments that silence their critics, including journalists, activists and ordinary citizens deprive themselves of the information and perspective needed to create informed policies and address social problems effectively.”

It highlights how restricting freedom of speech not only limits individual rights but also undermines governance by preventing diverse viewpoints from reaching policy makers. When government will not be aware of public demands, it will not bring any reforms accordingly. To bring change it is important to be well informed of the civilian needs and demands and that is only possible when public states its opinions freely.

This gap leads to ignorance of the government that further leads to political and social restlessness giving birth to a vicious cycle of anarchy, lack of speech freedom and political instability.

The crisis of freedom of speech is an alarming issue and must be tackled with delicacy and attention to detail. The first and foremost step in this regard is to address religious extremism by particularly promoting interfaith dialogue. The government must bring scholars of each sect under one umbrella and ensure harmony through them.

For example, the "A Common Word Initiative" was launched in 2007 by Muslim scholars and leaders who reached out to Christian leaders worldwide emphasizing commonalities between Islam and Christianity for promoting interfaith dialogue. This environment of tolerance and respect is essential for protecting and enhancing freedom of speech, allowing individuals to express diverse religious and secular perspectives without fear of retribution. Encouraging interfaith dialogue can thus prove beneficial to enhance the freedom of speech in Pakistan.

The government of Pakistan should encourage ethical journalism by supporting media outlets free from extremist influence. Media channels, spokesperson and journalists should be

given ^{sufficient} ~~complete~~ freedom and liberty to express their
 view points. They should be made secure enough
 that no religious group can pressurize them and
 hinder their path to freedom to talk, express and
 write. The religious extremist groups should be controlled
 and not allowed to directly or indirectly influence
 media affairs. Finland ^{for example,} consistently ranks high in
 Press Freedom Indexes due to its strong support
 for independent journalism and media integrity. Such
 environment allows journalists to report freely without
 any fear of censorship or extremist influence,
 promoting robust public discourse and democratic
 values.

-Also, there is a need to impose a positive
 censorship on media to avoid any chaos and
 social unrest. There should be a moderate
 balance between completely banning and completely
 giving freedom of speech to media outlets. Media
 should be made well aware of its limitations
 and extent to which they can go while covering,
 publishing and broadcasting a certain news. It
 is important to control media's actions in order
 to avoid any extreme reactions. The media
 should be treated in an optimistic manner by
 implementing positive censorship so that no right
 of freedom of speech is violated ~~by~~ along with
 respecting the sentiments of other groups as well.
 for example in the United Kingdom, media

regulatory bodies like **Ofcom** has set broadcasting standards that prohibit content inciting hatred or violating privacy. These regulations aim to protect public interests without stifling freedom of expression.

Another strategy that can prove extremely helpful in promoting freedom of speech in Pakistan is to strengthen the civil society by facilitating public discourse. The **Solidarity movement** in **Poland** and similar civil society movements in Eastern Europe during 1980s played a crucial role in challenging authoritarian regimes and challenging freedom of speech. These movements engaged in public dialogue to gain freedom of expression. A vibrant civil society is essential for protecting ^{this} freedom. It provides space for diverse viewpoints to be heard, fosters dialogue among citizens and holds government accountable to their commitments to human rights and democratic principles. Hence, it should be the prime duty of government to ensure a strong civil society in order to face the issue of freedom of speech in Pakistan.

Egypt is regarded as one of the most notorious countries of the world that faces extreme challenges in the way of freedom of speech

mainly due to religious extremism and media censorship. Under President Abdel Fattah el Sisi, the government has tightened its grip on media and expression, often citing national security and the fight against extremism as justification. The climate of fear discourages open discourse on sensitive topics especially religion and politics. The assassinations of scholars, secular activists and journalists exemplifies the dangerous environment for free expression in Egypt. As a result, Egypt has been facing social, political and religious crises from a very long time. Pakistani government must look upon this example and take a lesson that how inability to provide freedom and liberty to express oneself openly can lead to a vulnerable and unstable state.

To sum up, it can be clearly said that lack of freedom to speak and express is one of root causes of Pakistan's instability and restlessness. The harsh and violent actions of religious parties combined with the media censorship serve as the main hurdles for public in disclosing their thoughts and ideas freely. These two factors immensely affect the free will of people and create an environment of fear among public. This terrifying atmosphere shatters their confidence and they choose to stay quiet rather than utilizing their right of freedom of speech. It is the need of the hour that the Pakistani government must take

(18)

necessary steps to avoid and ultimately remove these challenges, ensuring a strong and smooth path to the right of freedom of expression. This way it can strengthen the entire nation and bring them together as a binding force where everybody is open to hear, tolerate and respect each others opinions and ideas.

"Free expression is the base of human rights, the root of human nature and mother of the truth. To kill free speech is to insult human rights, to stifle human nature and to suppress truth."

(Liu Xiabo - Chinese critic and activist)