

Comprehensive review of NAP

Media as mirror

*Azaz Syed**

*Syed Azaz Hussain Shah is an investigative reporter in Pakistan, who has worked as television and newspaper reporter with leading media groups of Pakistan including the *Dawn* and *Geo*.

Media have been a great tool of propaganda for the militants. Militants crave for it, to spread their ideologies, lure fresh recruits, attract more funds, and spread fear. Media connect militants with each other and with their audience – common people and policy elites.

At the time of Cold War, militants advanced their cause through print and radio. With time, other platforms were exploited, like television and internet. In the aftermath of the global war on terror, militants were forced to curtail their presence.

In Pakistan, many of those who went underground made their presence felt through printed or spoken words in the shape of magazines, journals, webpages, and audio cassettes or compact discs. Their public presence exposed state's resolve in fighting terror.

Thus, when National Action Plan was announced in December 2015, one of the points calls for “banning glorification of terrorism through print and electronic media”. Ever since, the government claims to be implementing the point in “letter and spirit”.

But six months later, it appears that the government's claim smack of a statement.

The old selective policy of ignoring, or supporting, some groups and haunting others still lurk in the background. Pro-Pakistan militant

outfits, which carry out activities in Afghanistan and Indian-held Kashmir, have well-grounded media houses which regularly produces documentaries and publishes content, glorifying violence in the name of religion.

The government's approach towards such outlets seems to be one of closed eyes. To be sure, anti-Pakistan group too release their work online. But they mostly release their work surreptitiously.

Legal homework

Although there are codes against hate speech, no specific legal work is done to curb glorification of militants on media.

By mid-2015, three of the four provinces have yet to introduce specific laws countering the spread of militant ideology. Ironically, these three provinces are the hardest hit by militancy: Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Sindh.

Punjab is the only province to have shown some headway – in terms of statute. On January 21st, Punjab legislature promulgated the amended Punjab Maintenance of Public Order, 2015, which bans glorification of terrorists and their outfits at any forum and in the media. Violators will be imprisoned for six months and slapped a fine ranging from 25000 to 100,000 rupees.

This act clearly reads that a “person shall not, by words spoken or written, use any formal forum to support terrorism or terrorists, or attempt to create sympathy for any terrorist or terrorist organization, or to oppose action of” different law-enforcement agencies.

After the ordinance was promulgated, Punjab government launched a crackdown against the hate material. According to an interior ministry document, the government, as of July 13th, 2015, has registered 1776 cases against hate speakers, arrested 1799 individuals, and convicted 236. Meanwhile, only 71 shops have been sealed and 1512 hate material confiscated. It is unclear as to what constitute one hate material – a book or a pack of books?

Still publishing ...

Several outfits continue to release their work, despite NAP and the law in Punjab.

Take the case of Jamaat ud Dawa (JUD), a charity front of an anti-India outfit. The group continues to spew hatred against non-Muslims and glorify militancy in the name of jihad. JUD’s seven Urdu and English periodicals include *Jarrar*, *Tayyibaat*, and *Zarb-e-Taiba*. It is striking to note that the government could not take notice of such content produced

by an outfit that is under watch list of the interior ministry.

Or, the case of the defunct Jaish-e-Mohammed, which now works under the name of Al-Rehmat Trust. The Trust regularly publishes an eight-page weekly *Al-Qalam* from Bahawalpur and Rawalpindi. A recent edition of *Al-Qalam*, available online at a separate portal, projects the role of militants and their activities inside India.¹

Or even, Khudaam ul Furqan, another defunct organization, which operating under the new name of Tehreek-e-Ghalba-e-Islam publishes weekly *Ghalba*. Another defunct organization Khudaam ul Furqan working under the new name of Tehreek-e-Ghalba-e-Islam is also publishing weekly *Ghalba* on regular basis.

Incoherent regulation

When it comes to mainstream media, like TV network or newspaper, the NAP’s media-specific point is partially implemented. Partially, because some see “there is an overall positive change” in the attitude of media to the discredit of militants.²

As to why the ban couldn’t be implemented completely, it is

¹ Online version of the magazine can be accessed at: <http://www.alqalamonline.com>.

² Author’s interview with Matiullah Jan, senior journalist and anchorperson based in Islamabad.

important to unpack the dynamics of media.

A media outlet stands on two key pillars: news, which involve day-to-day reporting; and views, which offer opinion on those reports, in editorials or talk shows.

When it comes to the news side, print and electronic media overwhelmingly played a responsible role in not covering the narrative of the militants. The only coverage news bulleting and news pages gave to militants was their claim of attacks. This was done, only to inform audience about the militants. Beyond that, mainstream media avoided airing and publishing the militants' 'side' of the story.

In comparison, the pillar of views tilted towards the militant story too. The editorials in the print as well as the primetime talk shows kept offering a narrative supportive of militants. These platforms, for instance, openly provided space to those individuals who publicly supported the militants' version. Guest list of several prominent talk shows include individuals known for sharing a narrow worldview, which aligns with that of the militants. The same people also write, either openly or as ghost writers, in leading newspapers, mostly of Urdu language. Furthermore, the very same people write as pseudonyms to

jihadi publications like *Zaraar* and *Al Qalam*, discussed above. Such is the nexus between the two strands of publications.

To several TV anchors, inviting such guests is often a tact ensuring security. "The apologists of extremists are invited by anchors only to ensure that they are on the safer side and would not be harmed by the militants", a senior journalist and television anchor, Matiullah Jan said.

It is not that media has not been asked to stop propagating militant message. According to Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, the country's electronic media regulatory body,³ it has provided a "list of the defunct organizations to the media outlets." PEMRA argues that it has issued almost ten "advisories" to private networks, asking them to restrain from projecting sympathizers of militants.⁴ "They should avoid publicizing their [militants] stories," said Azam Khan, federal information secretary and PEMRA member.

As violations continue, even of PEMRA's own advisories, the media regulatory body watches by. To date, no fine has been imposed on any channel for inviting militant-sympathetic people.

³Author's interview with a representative of PEMRA.

⁴ Ibid.

A former chairman of PEMRA, Parvaiz Rathore, says that “PEMRA acts according to the law” but “practically paralyzed”. “The media houses are very powerful. They have links in every section of society including judiciary. They often take our decisions to the court, which grant them stay orders. Thus, we are practically paralyzed.”⁵

Ironically, PEMRA itself hasn’t moved against violators. “We will take notice and issue show cause to them, when we observe any violation of our directions,” says PEMRA spokesman.⁶

As a way forward, Ministry of Information or PEMRA should immediately start a survey for the identification of such media personnel, who side with militants and project their ideologies, and should arrange workshops and seminars for them in sensitizing them about the pitfalls of promoting militant ideologies. Likewise, PEMRA must start fining the media houses involved in violation of the directions on this account.

Of course, this is linked with other gaps – presence of law and thinking beyond the selective approach.

⁵Author’s interview with Parvaiz Rathore in Islamabad.

⁶Interview by the author.