Press Freedom in South Asia; EFSAS interviews award-winning Pakistani Journalist

Global decline of Press Freedom

'Fake news', *'media propaganda'* and *'hacking'* are all but too familiar terms in today's news. By far, these terms have been mostly associated with the Donald Trump Presidency, as there have been high speculations that his 2016 campaign and Presidential elections were purposefully interfered with in order to secure his win. In addition, Trump has been using the term for his own custom and has spurred a battle against the mass media itself. Even the European continent, which has been widely regarded as the highest example of freedom of the press, has fallen victim to an Orwellian 1984-trap by witnessing a decline in its security of press freedoms; This past year, Europe saw increased cases of harassment and threats directed towards investigative reporters and even instances in which journalists were killed.

It is important to note that nowadays, media is not solely restricted to newspapers, journals and TV news stations. Today's media encompasses many mediums inclusive of social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.), blogs and online magazines. Several reports issued by Freedom House, UNESCO and Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters Sans Frontiers*) highlight how press freedoms have globally declined to its lowest levels in the last two decades. Such developments are largely the result of threats and harassments faced by journalists and the extensive crackdowns on independent media outlets, both in democratic and authoritarian regimes. Overall, there is a climate of unfriendliness and hatred that is increasingly visible, and which is no longer strictly reserved to undemocratic countries.

The Donald Trump Presidency has attracted more attention and focus on the issues within the West and thus, much has been overlooked in the realm of press restrictions in other areas around the world. A region that experiences serious hindrances with regard to promoting, protecting and advancing press freedoms, is South Asia. Since the majority of the countries in the region are still trying to rapidly expand and establish themselves in the various socio-economic and cultural sectors of public life, such milieu of speeded developmental creates the perfect canvass for dissecting and examining the intricacies and dependencies between the press, public and the state.

Challenges in South Asia

Sri Lanka ended its civil war in 2009, with the challenges of recovering being present even today, while Pakistan has dealt with terrorism – both as a victim and as an alleged perpetrator –, for the totality of this century. Maldives has been under tight-handed leadership up until this past year. India is navigating its way as the most populous democracy in the world, a challenge that has not been without hurdles. And although it lays just outside the realm of South Asia, the ongoing Rohingya crisis in Myanmar has reversed whatever progress had been made in the country since the military junta was officially dissolved in 2011 and a nominally civilian government installed; the effects of the ethnic unrest in Myanmar has had implications which expand throughout the whole of South Asia. The decades old conflict in Afghanistan is in no need of explanation. As all of these countries try to face their distinct challenges, recover from conflict, and progress towards fully democratic governance, the

media and freedom of expression in each country ride passenger, alongside the respective governments and the people in these countries. Press freedom and freedom of expression are one of the major building blocks of a functioning democratic state that ensure the liberal lives of the population, as well as transparency and higher literacy rates. The Indian subcontinent still struggles in the assurance of these pillars of democracy.

South Asia is home to around 2 billion people, or one fourth of the world's population. Many lack access to Internet, which has recently been declared as a necessity for human development by the United Nations. There is a vast disparity between those who have an Internet connection and those who do not, resulting in dissymmetry between those who are able to receive news and therefore, able to interpret and share it and those who cannot. In the specific instance of Myanmar, much of the country's population became introduced to mobile communication technologies and the Internet after 2015, at a time when sites like Facebook were widely popular around the world. When such drastic change in technology happens at such fast pace, the results that ensue are likely to have monumental impact.

And, just as leaders of the West, especially Trump, have slammed the media for anything that goes against them or their party, the same happens in South Asia. Falling into the global trend of repression of media freedoms, and increased violence against journalists, is also the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Widely criticized for its harsh violations of freedom within this category, especially when utterances are critical of the Pakistani military establishment or other aspects of State affairs, journalists often risk facing abduction, death threats, torture, and death itself, as has been argued by Mr. Taha Siddiqui, an award-winning Pakistani journalist, living in exile in France, and founder of *safenewsroom.org* – a digital platform documenting censorship – who also teaches journalism and is currently writing a book on Pakistan.

Threats to journalists
In an exclusive interview held by Ms. Danielle DePaulis, Research Analyst at EFSAS, Mr. Siddiqui explained how he often publishes articles calling into question certain practices of the Pakistani Government and the military establishment, and over the span of four years, has been continuously harassed and threatened by military personnel, which attempts to censor him. At one point, he was called into General Qamar Bajwa's (Chief of Army Staff) office and commanded that anything he wanted to write on Twitter must be approved by him first. At the beginning of 2018, Mr. Siddiqui was attacked while on his way to the airport in an attempt to be kidnapped. In other cases, the harassment and threats reach even more prominent faces. In 2014, Hamid Mir, an international award-winning Pakistani journalist and public figure, was shot six times in an assassination attempt on the streets of Karachi, for which he blamed the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.

Not only do journalists have concerns regarding the intimidation measures used by intelligence services, but they also bear apprehensions towards terrorist groups which inhabit the region. In 2002, following the 9/11 terrorist attack, Daniel Pearl, the South Asia Bureau Chief of *The Wall Street Journal*, was kidnapped and beheaded by Al Qaeda during his trip to Pakistan where he was investigating the case of Richard Reid, a British terrorist radicalized and trained in Al Qaeda's camps in Pakistan and Afghanistan. In another example, in April 2018, nine journalists were killed in Afghanistan in a coordinated double suicide bombing in Kabul, claimed by the Islamic State.

With the advent of the Internet and the evolution of modern technologies, terrorist organizations have become even deadlier as they have started manipulating the digital space to their benefit. Most of the terrorist attacks seen today are usually partly conceived with media coverage in mind; what images people will see afterwards, how news organizations will portray the violence, and what people will discuss, having the main goal of terrifying the population in order for the terrorist groups to achieve their ideological and political purposes. Terrorist groups in South Asia increasingly take advantage of social media outlets to lure marginalized young individuals, indoctrinate them with extremist ideologies and encourage them to carry out terrorist operations, such as *'lone wolf'* attacks. As David Patrikarakos, a British journalist, author, TV producer and contributing author for *Politico Europe*, has argued, *"nowadays social media networks have become a handmaiden of propaganda"*.

Privacy vs Security

Terrorist outfits exploit social media outlets to hold sway over how their image looks like, how their narrative will be delivered and spread and who will eventually receive it. Internet blogs, chat rooms and applications provide practical skills and know-how to users, for whom the only necessity is to make a quick browsing or ask for additional information, and most likely also receive an immediate answer, which has been widely manipulated by these extremist groups. This creates a snowball effect, where the attitudes and behaviors of populations worldwide can be influenced with only one social media status update or a message that transmits the information quickly and efficiently and connects a great number of users at a global scale.

A good example for this phenomenon is the emergence of so-called *'WhatsApp warriors'* in the region of Jammu & Kashmir, which has put the Indian Government in a dilemma regarding to what extent freedom of expression should come at the expense of national security. Particularly in the Kashmir Valley, whenever terrorists are barricaded in certain premises and security forces attempt to cordon off the area, these terrorists use WhatsApp groups to send messages to locals in the neighborhood, explaining how they have been encircled and that a battle is inevitable. They encourage youngsters to come out, disrupt the security operation by pelting stones and creating havoc, and eventually help them flee. Hence, terrorists exploit young disillusioned people, mainly by invoking religion, and use them as human shields in order to prevent their own apprehension by security forces. Many of these youngsters join these digital networks and engage in stone pelting under social duress.

Therefore, as a response to curtailing violence, in April 2017, the State government of Jammu & Kashmir declared a suspension of social media in restive parts of the Kashmir Valley, by cutting off Internet provision and shutting down more than 20 social media platforms used to incite violence. Hence, what becomes evident is how States, enterprises, and industries are actively engaged in the debate between privacy vs security, grappling with the potential infringement of civil liberties while trying to fight terrorist organizations in the digital world. In the fall of 2017, the Afghan Government suspended access to WhatsApp and Telegram and although the main motives are unknown, it is suspected that these apps were banned in order to halt Taliban operations. In March 2018, the Sri Lankan Government temporarily blocked access to Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp during a strong wave of violence against its Muslim population as it considered it the last resort to prevent the violence from spiraling further out of control. The Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) regularly blocks major websites like BlogSpot and YouTube, and sites with content it considers to be blasphemous, anti-Islamic or threatening to internal security. The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), an online database of information related to films and television programs was briefly banned in Pakistan in 2013 by the authorities.

Many governments all over the world have been faced with the task of handling privacy laws when using the Internet. Previous to this, the main challenge decision-makers faced was finding the balance to national security with allowing news companies to have freedom of the press or having restrictions on what sensitive information could be revealed to the public. Nowadays, there are many more variables and outlets for news to be shared as ordinary citizens themselves, have in essence become journalists by sharing information on the Internet.

Abuse by the State

The original concept of social media was for the platforms to provide snapshots of public conversations and enhance the overall sense of freedom of expression for individuals. For example, many journalists in Pakistan who had increasingly become censored in their writing for being critical of the military establishment, have found refuge on Twitter for the sake of expressing their views freely, as Mr. Siddiqui explained during his interview. He argued that social media platforms have helped Pakistanis find a legitimate outlet in an environment where free speech has been shrinking; thus, online milieus have become avenues where people can log in and discuss issues which could eventually get picked up by mainstream media channels. Tech-savvy journalists and reporters have been able to channel information through these platforms and persist on keeping the population informed whereas these Social media platforms have provided an instrument for citizens to upload videos and pictures, which might expose certain governmental abuses and ultimately call upon the accountability of those authorities. Although Mr. Taha Siddiqui has stated that social media is a platform one could find refuge in and feel immune, he has faced numerous setbacks using this medium, since the Government and military establishment in Pakistan have quickly figured out how to regulate such online environment.

In November 2018, Mr. Siddiqui received an email from the Twitter administration stating he had posted content that was in violation of Pakistani law (while living in Paris at the time) and that Twitter would have to remove the content if he did not do it himself. He reported that some of his Pakistani colleagues had gone through the same scenario. Therefore, what one observes is how the development of state governance has evolved owing to the expansion of the social media industry. Some governments have increasingly become more sophisticated in using social media for surveillance, censorship, and state propaganda as these states have fundamentally realized how social media is a ubiquitous tool in maintaining power. Autocratic and heavily centralized governments – and even those that would not be usually portrayed as such- subtly, employ censorship as a tool to silence public dissent.

In parallel with the rapid dissemination of politically charged *'fake news'* within the United States (US), Myanmar has faced similar occurrences on a greater scale. After the dissolution of Myanmar's military government in 2011, which kept the country in an informational eclipse, press freedoms and access to the Internet evolved considerably and expanded as a result of which social media platforms flourished in ways not possible before. The country today has around 18 million Facebook users, while in comparison, in 2011, as per the International Telecommunication Union, a United Nations special agency, less than 500,000 people had access to Internet at all. Yet, carrying the history of severe and intense oppression, the introduction of social media in the country has become a subject of abuse on behalf of State authorities for the purposes of inciting violence and persecutions against certain minorities. Lawmakers began posting regularly hateful, anti-Muslim content on Facebook and in some cases called for violence against the minority group. More than 1 in 10 posts made by politicians from

the Arakan National Party, between March 2017 and February 2018, contained hate speech. Some politicians even stated openly online that *"Muslims should get ready to be killed"*. The derogatory and hate-fueled posts were made both before and after the State-led violence against the Rohingya Muslims in 2017, signifying how contemptuous and hateful narratives were used in order to encourage and orchestrate violence. Hence, the case of Myanmar displays the urgent need of the global community stepping in, resulting in the fact that the United Nations, other international bodies and states have called upon social media sites to take responsibility for what users post and who reviews, and thus, reports the malicious content.

As stated earlier, while trying to answer this question, one should not disregard the fact that governments could also in return abuse such powers in order to control the population. For example, China's global influence can be felt through media outlets that depend on Beijing's goodwill for economic success; these range from a wide array of businesses and media outlets at home and overseas.

China is one of the heaviest controlled States and suppressed countries regarding freedom of the press and expression. It is documented that during President Xi Jinping's first term, censorship and surveillance reached unprecedented levels, mainly due to the massive use of new technologies. The country has a vast propaganda bureau within the government, meticulously constructing its image throughout the world and crafting what information is released when and where. *Reporters Without Borders* states that *"Internationally, the Chinese government is trying to establish a new world media order under its influence"*. The organization also reports that the Chinese model of State-controlled news and information is being copied in other Asian countries through an exportation of its oppressive methods, information censorship systems and intermated surveillance tools.

President Xi Jinping has previously suggested that he is willing to help implement his country's framework in developing countries and assist government leaders in *'gaining control'*. Moreover, some of the most serious cases of media censorship and restrictions of freedom of expression occur in countries which are part of China's *'Belt and Road Initiative'* (BRI), such as Pakistan. Both Pakistani and Chinese officials and media news outlets have constantly given employment figures for different projects under the framework of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), yet hardly any of those numbers are substantiated by formal governmental documents. Even ostensibly detailed reports on the CPEC provide no specific data on actual job figures, which is highly alarming considering the ongoing public resentment and suspicion in Pakistan regarding who is the *de facto* benefactor of the CPEC.

One of the lesser known ventures of the BRI, which does not garner too much attention, yet provides an overview of Beijing's cyber control strategy, is the so-called *'Digital Silk Road'*. The infrastructure alongside the BRI, which predominantly consists of roads, railways, ports and energy projects, will also be complemented with digital infrastructure projects that will be financed and built by China. China's *'Digital Silk Road'* intends to shape the future of the global Internet and it will comprise of two main components. First, Beijing will supply other countries with improved Internet connections in the type of new or upgraded undersea cables, in addition to providing broadband equipment to countries where such technology is underdeveloped or non-existent. And the second element is the international expansion of China's BeiDou Satellite Navigation Network, which would make it a direct rival to the US-owned Global Positioning System (GPS) and Europe's Galileo Global Navigation Satellite System.

Beijing's digital infrastructural endeavor is part of a larger contest between the West and China for dominance over the future of technology and global influence. In addition, China might seek to export its policy of authoritarian cyber control abroad, which would give countries the right to regulate and censor their own Internet. Some South Asian governments may find such opportunity attractive since it will harness them with greater powers over their information technologies.

In 2018, Pakistan already started replacing its use of the US GPS satellite navigation with China's BeiDou system. Sri Lanka has been preparing for the satellite system as well, and Nepal has operationalized a joint fiber-optic link with China in order to get access to new Internet routes. Chinese businesses offer a range of tech gear and cheap financing to developing nations looking to modernize their tech infrastructure, and thus find themselves more able to afford what China has to offer in comparison to other countries. The supply of this hardware, inclusive of facial recognition technology and data-analytics tool, is focused on governments with poor human rights records, which could benefit Chinese intelligence services as it is suspected that the technology sends information back to Beijing where it is stored and analyzed. An investigation report issued by the French newspaper *Le Monde* in 2018, revealed that the African Union's headquarters building in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, had been bugged by China and confidential data was transmitted for years to Shanghai. The building itself, costing $200 million, was financed and gifted by China as a symbolic gesture of solidifying Sino-Africa relations.

Conclusion

Freedom of opinion and expression and freedom of the press are indispensable elements of any democratic set up. Unfounded restrictions or censorship of mainstream and social media content, alongside with the harassment and intimidation of journalists and investigative reporters come as direct contravention of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. One of the strategies, which could appear beneficial in regard to combating rising trends of press and media freedom infringements in some countries, is the establishment of international safeguarding mechanisms which oppose and reject isolationist and fundamentalist sentiments. As long as countries and private industries agree to cooperate and combine forces in order to monitor online hate speech and extremist content, the issues examined earlier could potentially be tackled in a more comprehensive and systematic manner. Companies, governments, and third parties must maintain constant communication in regard to what is taking place online and continue keeping each other in check in order to secure the safety of the digital space.

In addition, the civil society should embrace the burden it carries in respect to information sharing online and acknowledge responsibility for the negative repercussions which their words could inflict. Free speech, when ignorant, unsubstantiated and biased, can be highly dangerous and bring considerable harm and damage to society, resulting in widespread public unrest and the decline of law and order. A leading example illustrating this scenario is the lynching and killing of Mashal Khan, a Pashtun student at the Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan in Pakistan. Mashal's hideous murder took place in the premises of the university in 2017, after he was erroneously condemned for publishing blasphemous content online. Mashal was actively waging a campaign against ongoing rampant corruption and bureaucracy in the educational establishment, when the university administration published an official online notice falsely accusing him of blasphemous activities. The notice virtually turned into his death warrant, when an angry mob of students stripped him naked and beat him to death.

Citizens should also make the conscious effort of considering the effects their words could have on others and be more pre-emptive when communicating their thoughts online. The role of education appears as one of the major tools in combating fake news and hate speech online, by the introduction of media literally classes in educational establishments and the encouragement of young people to think critically vis-à-vis extremist messages: to question and compare sources of information; to undertake independent and objective online research; to learn how to detect propaganda, censorship, and bias; and to examine texts, audio and visual information which could be radical and provoking, in order to establish a framework that reaffirms their positive values, strengthen their respect for human rights, social justice, mutual understanding and peace.

Freedom of speech is a very powerful tool, which needs to be used conscientiously, invoking foremost the rectitude and accountability of those who avail it to their advantage.

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