



## Exploring the issues relating to Freedom of Press in Pakistan: From journalists' perspective

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**Abstract-** Freedom of expression is the most crucial element for the media in twenty first century. Historically, it was noted that there were number of rules and regulations implemented to curtail the freedom of press in Pakistan. The present study aims to explore the challenges relating to press freedom in Pakistan. For this reason, interviews were conducted from ten Pakistani journalists. They had prolonged experience in the field of journalism. The study found that the media in Pakistan had to face many pressures from media ownership, administration, pressure groups, government, political parties and self-censorship.

**Key words:** Freedom of press, Pakistani media, censorship, journalists, qualitative inquiry, thematic analysis

### I. INTRODUCTION

Constitution of Pakistan (1973) guaranteed the right of freedom of expression to all the citizens of Pakistan. But at the same time, there were certain restrictions imposed on the issues related to Islam, security and national interest (Hamdani 2014). In many circumstances these restrictions were used to regulate media (CRSS, 2014). The history of Pakistan showed that there were number of incidents in which various governments, political parties and nonpolitical elements used censorship to control press. For instance, in 1948, the government banned three periodicals and their editors were arrested (Hassan, 2001). For a democratic country free media was pre-requisite (Jakobowich, 1985). Democracy and free media were both important for each other. Free media played watchdog role in a democratic society and point out wrong doings of the government. Further, it guides the policy makers regarding the real issues and problems of the common people. However, from Pakistani perspective, it was noted that the journalists had faced many challenges in their professional life. They were under paid and no job security. In such circumstance, how they could fight for the freedom of expression. Jabbar (2002) argued that different governments had been great threat to freedom of expression in Pakistan. When Pakistan came into being, there was Pakistan radio station and various newspapers. Pakistan television was formed during Ayub Khan's tenor in 1964. But this channel became the mouthpiece of the government. Ayub's tenor (1958-1969) was one of the dark era in Pakistan from the perspective of freedom of expression. Ayub Khan promulgated Press and publication ordinance in (1963) and many newspapers and periodicals were nationalized. PPO (1963) made difficult the process of getting declaration for the newspaper. A new tribunal was formed to investigate the cases against the journalists and newspaper owners. The journalists who violated the rules and regulations they faced severe consequences. In the formulation of laws relating to media in Pakistan, General Ayub had taken first step and introduced Press and Publication ordinance in 1963 (Mezzera and Sial, 2010). However, before, the implementation of PPO (1963), the laws by Pakistan Penal Code had already been issued and used to punish those journalists who were damaging the stability of Pakistan (Niazi, 1987). During Yahya Khan's regime (1969-1971), Sheikh Mujib was declared as traitor and media was not allowed to comment on this issue (Akhtar, 2000). Later on during Zia government (1977-1988), the press was under strict censorship (Jabbar, 2002). However, during General Musharruf's regime (1999-2008), the government adopted liberal policy towards media contrary to his predecessors. But at the same time, it used fierce policy to control oppositional arguments. It was noted that there were many challenges for liberal journalists in the country. Many incidents were noted relating to journalists' harassments and threatening (Adnan & Matiullah, 2005). The media was not allowed to give coverage to oppositional political parties. Moreover, anti-government stance was restricted in many instances. There were certain tools used to control media such as issuance of government advertisement to favorite media organizations, censorship and torture of journalists. However, in the case of democratic governments, it was observed that State power was used to control media. For instance, when Bhutto came into power, he promised cordial relations with press but later on his actions did not prove that. During his tenure, the journalists were

punished who opposed his actions (Niazi, 1987). With the advent of twenty first century, many things changed in Pakistan from the perspective of media. After 2000, there was enormous growth of print and electronic media. Number electronic media channels, radio stations, FM radio and newspapers started in the Pakistan (Waseem, 2006). It has ended state television monopoly. In present scenario, Pakistani population have opportunity to get information from newspapers, electronic media, social media and many other forums of new media. The present study aims to explore what challenges the Pakistani journalist in present scenario and what are the different factors which influence freedom of press.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There were number of studies conducted to explore the situation of freedom of press in Pakistan. There were many reports published which described the challenges faced by the media men in the previous history. Ashraf and Shabbir (2020) conducted a quantitative analysis of top ten Pakistani news channels and found that there many problems and pressures the channels had to face for freedom of expression in the country. For democratic society and sovereign country, free press and speech were important component (Ali & Khalid, 2012). As Siraj (2009) noted that Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah stressed on independent and fearless press. But press could not play its role independently (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2006). Nisar et.al, (2000) mentioned that since the inception of Pakistan, the press worked under enormous pressures. Powerful groups used media for their own interests. Index of press freedom showed that Pakistan was at 139<sup>th</sup> position out of 180 in 2017. According to IFJ report (2016) Pakistan was not a safe country for the journalists. There were many challenges for the media men in performing their professional duties due to lawlessness. The journalists faced miserable situations for free press. Pakistan press foundation reported 384 violent attacks against the journalists during 2001 to 2016. The media men had threats from militants, ethnic, religious and political groups (Pakistan Press Foundation Report, 2006).

Contrary to this, Waseem (2006) argued that due to enormous private radio and TV channels, Pakistani media provided pluralistic opinion to its viewers. Previously Indian channels were very popular in the country. Now private channels had given opportunity to its viewers to enjoy and consume multiple sources of communication. Private channels provided newsworthiness in its content and provided information from multiple sources. Although there were certain restrictions on Pakistani media, but at the same time the private electronic channels criticized the government for price hike, unemployment, law and order issues and corruption. By keeping in view the previous discussion, the present study would explore the perception of Pakistani journalists regarding the situation of freedom of press in Pakistan. This research was based on qualitative research design because previous studies were mainly quantitative. To fill this methodological gap, the researcher will explore the phenomena through depth intertwines from Pakistani journalists. The research question for the study was as follows:

RQ 1: What is the perception of journalists about the situation of freedom of press in Pakistan?

## III. METHODOLOGY

The present research employed qualitative research design. For data collection, the researcher utilized the technique of in-depth interviews. This was the most suitable technique when the researcher wanted to explore the phenomenon comprehensively. During interview, the informants explained the issue in detail. The participants could explain their personal opinion, understanding and feelings. For this study, ten interviews were conducted from Pakistani journalists who had experience minimum of ten years in the media industry. They were knowledgeable informants from the relevant field (Islam & Rehman, 2016). The basic objective of the study was to inquire about the situation of freedom of press in Pakistan. For that reason, it was pertinent that the informants must have experience in their relevant field. After conducting interviews, the researcher transcribed the data.

For the analysis of interviews, the researcher utilized grounded theory data analysis technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For this, the data was coded into three steps; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. In this techniques, the themes emerged inductively from the data and no deductive themes were required. Based on the following method, data from the interviews of Pakistani journalists was analyzed. For this purpose, the researcher used NVIVO 10. The different themes emerged from the data which answered the research question of the study.

## IV. FINDINGS

By analyzing the data the following themes emerged.

#### 4.1 Politicians Pressure

Political parties and politicians are one of the factors that are creating problems in free application of press in the country. Numerous Informants were thinking that sometimes political groups are deceitfully supported by media just because of the fact that these politicians will support them when they will part of government. Simultaneously few of the journalists added that these type of media groups and journalists are only few in number.

An Informant told that:

“Political parties are a threat to journalism in Pakistan. He added that MQM (Political Party) was a great threat to journalism once. Writing stories against MutahidaQomiMovement was not easy at all, however the situation is Better now”. (P7)

Another Journalist said:

“During General Zia ulHaq regime, JammataIslami (Political Party) Many times pressurized the journalists not to publish negative news related to them. Likewise, for the duration of the Pakistan People’s Party government, Peoples Student Federation was a big threat to journalists”.

The journalists were easily offended by the political parties in Pakistan. Many informants believed that this was because a journalist was a very soft target for anybody, so politicians in that way influenced their press freedom. At the same time, some of the informants were of the view that Political parties make relations with media just to get coverage of their own choice.

#### 4.2 Press Laws and Prosecution

Press laws in Pakistan are unfortunately not properly implemented and thus it becomes a major hurdle in free flow of freedom of press. Many Informants claimed that rules do exist but the issue is their implementation. A Journalist informed that:

“What you can do if I cover a story against you and even its fake?

Unfortunately Laws are there but the issue is their proper implementation”. (P1)

In order to improve the standards of press and its freedom in Pakistan, the enforcement of press laws and regulations are mandatory. Therefore, there is a dire need of a resourceful judicial system. A free and fair judicial system will result in a free and responsible press. One of the Informant added:

“the absence of press laws and regulations is not the question, what meant is their implementation”. (P9)

Another argued that:

“I have always been of the view that we don’t need to change the laws, what we need to do is there implementation. (P6)

Reporters have worries about prosecutions whenever there are news about elite. Some of the Informants claimed that there is no shortage of such financially strong persons in Pakistan who have excess of lawyers. These people can take you to the court. Libel laws are a great challenge for the journalists. Although this is the duty of every journalist to avoid writing against anybody without proofs, but this is also true that many media personals had been trialed by the courts even when they were not guilty. At the same time, few of the journalists claimed that the situation is not as bad as many a times described. An Informant said:

“I have been practicing journalism since 2 decades, we are always suggested to write only those facts which we can prove, in case if you don’t have undeniable proofs about your story, there is no proof, you could be sued in the court because of libel”. (P2)

Another Informant argued:

“I have seven times been called by the supreme court of Pakistan for covering few news stories, but Alhamdulillah every time I was declared clear by the honorable court because I kept proofs of what I publish”. (P9)

Some Informants argued that there is a lack of trust in judicial system, a lot of journalists in Pakistan are murdered every year but hardly few of them got justice. One of the Informant was of the view that:

“Until the prosecutions of criminals by the courts, the freedom of press will always be under question in Pakistan”. (P1)

#### 4.3 Religious and Ethnic Groups Pressure

Just like previously discussed factors, the religious and ethnic groups are also a threat to press freedom. Informants believe that journalists are very easy target for anybody whether its police force, politicians, religious groups or ethnic groups etc. A journalist said that:

“It is not easy to cover stories related to religion. Journalists need to be very cautious in selection of words for such news. An unwanted word if used for Religious Stories and matters can produce many problems for the journalists here”. (P4 )

Another Informant claimed that:

“Occasionally, there are many sensitive religious and ethnic matters where I have to think hundred times before publishing them”. (P5)

The press in Pakistan is influenced by various sects like Ahl a Sunnat, Ahl a Hadees, Deoband ,Ahl a Tasheeh and others. An Informant believed: “writing against a religious group can harm your life”. (P7)

Religious extremists from many sects also intimidates the media some times. An Informant contended that word selection for religious matters is very crucial, the informant further added that:

“One of our fellow reporter while reporting a religious conflictonce used the word “Jan Ba Haq” for a member of a particular sect, as a result he received life threats for not using the term “Shaheed”. Thus such matters are a big challenge”. (P8)

According to few other informants, another major threat is in the form of ethnic groups. As Informant told: “Ethnic groups are a threat to press freedom” (P9)

#### 4.4 Self-Censorship

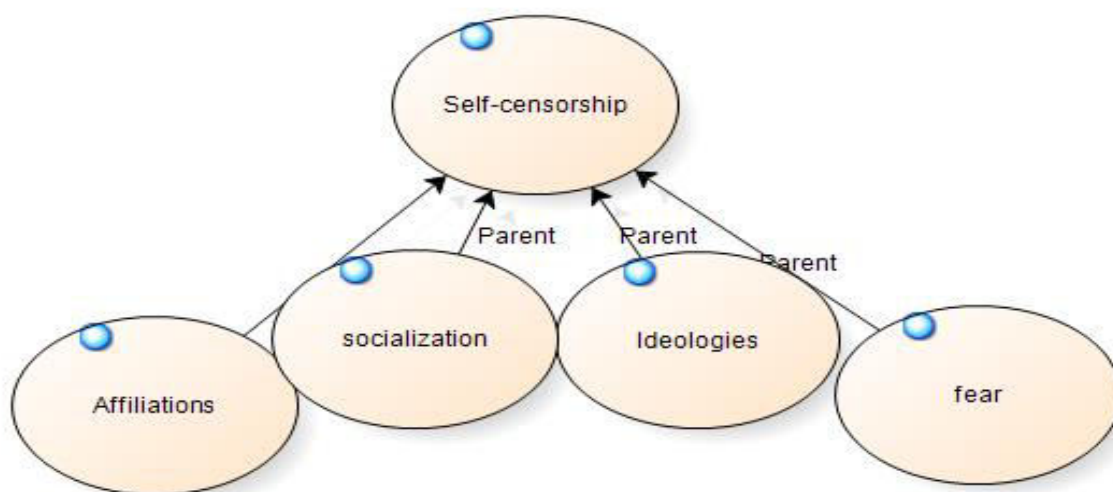


Figure 1.1: NVIVO Model relating to Self-censorship in Pakistan

The informants explained self-censorship as the manipulation of the communication on account of various reasons including fear, regard, sensibilities or priorities. Almost all the Informants were of the view that media freedom is being violated due to self-censorship. Reporters, owners and correspondents manipulates the news due to their affiliations and priorities. An Informant argued that:

“Many journalists in Pakistan are employed in private media organizations, thus they have no security of their job. Mostof the journalists belong to private media organizations and have no job security, the fear of losing the job is one of the reason which leads to self-censorship”.(P4)

Few Informants were of the view that the major problems for freedom of press are the associations of journalist with several groups, individuals and organizations. That is why they are most of the times intended to give them positive coverage. Another reason for self-censorship is that the majority of the journalists are being paid low from their media houses. Although economy is vital to survive, these low paid journalists attempts to look to unfair practices for producing further money. At times, due to personal rationing and sometimes because of money involvement, the news stories are played up or even paled down. An Informant argued:

“Most Pakistani journalists are not paid well as for as their salaries are concerned. Specially those who are performing their journalistic duties in surrounding areas of big cities are getting even more less salaries. And you will be shocked to know that some of them are not even being paid. So how couldyou presume an impartial press in this situation”. (P8)

The ideological beliefs and social learning of the journalists were also identified as important reasons of self-censorship by few Informants. As an Informant said:

“A fellow reporter of mine was against feminism and feministic activities in the city, so he use to play down the news stories related to them”. (P6)

#### 4.5 Societal Pressure

Pressure of society also influences the media content and thus manipulates press freedom. An Informants argued that:

“It is very hard to report fairly and truly in a type of society we are living in”. (P7)

An Informant said:

"It is tough to cover news stories related to issues like rape or even AIDS because society doesn't absorb such news and they believe that these issues should not be the part of open discussion". (P4)

Another Informant added:

"Our society becomes a hurdle many for press freedom. We are all aware about the fact that AIDS is a dangerous disease, but we cannot openly discuss the topic here in Pakistan. Situation is not different with other sensitive issues as well". (P5)

Few Journalists think that practicing journalism in Pakistan freely is not impossible but journalists need to be more cautious while attempting sensitive issues. Few of them were of the view that they avoid few sensitive issues because of the societal pressure. At the same time few informants think that responsibility is to take care of society's likings and disliking.

#### **4.6 War on Terror**

Among many pressures and dangers for freedom of press in Pakistan, a very serious threat is terrorism. A lot of journalists have been murdered in Pakistan since the war on terror. An Informant argued: "It is really tough to work in such a terror situation. If you communicate against Taliban, they may murder you and even threaten your family". (P9)

Another Informant said:

"Many journalists have been affected more due to Americans. When US started drone strikes, some journalists who were reporting on those drone attacks were also murdered". (P5)

Most of the Informants believe that this danger is of extreme severe nature. The terrorists can even target the families of journalists. In Pakistan, many journalists have been already assassinated, so it is not possible to work freely. Some Informants thought that this terror is limited to few areas in Pakistan. As one of them claimed that:

"In FATA (tribal area in Pakistan) and in Baluchistan, the condition of press is worst than other areas of Pakistan. Among the murdered journalists of Pakistan, most of them belong to these areas". (P8)

A major threat to journalism in Pakistan is the security situation of the country because of war on terror here. That's why Taliban and other militant groups in Baluchistan are a great danger to a free media. An Informant said: "The biggest hurdle for free press in Pakistan is Terrorism" (P10)

#### **4.7 Advertisers Pressure**

Journalism is now no more a mission and to serve the humanity is not the prime objective of media in this modern technological world. The main purpose of journalism today is to gain power and earn money. In this regard, advertisers are the major source of income for media organizations and hence they are very important for media outlets. The money that is generated from advertisement is utilized to bear major expenses of media organization. This dependency on advertisers is considered to be a great hindrance to achieve press freedom. As far as the condition of Pakistani media organizations is concerned, it is also dependent on the money of advertisers to bear the business expenses and to pay the salaries of employees.

According to an informant to researchers:

"Advertisements hurt freedom of press". (P9)

Advertisers mainly try to use media as a tool to serve their interest and for this purpose they try to exert pressure on media owners. Due to this pressure, the owners are bound to serve the interests of advertisers. As a result, any news that is against the interests of advertisers or against their business never gets published or broadcasted by media. The informants to researcher were mostly of the view that commercial interest is a great challenge and hinders a lot in the way to achieve press freedom. In the light of above discussion, it can be stated that advertisers use advertisements as a tool to threaten media owners and they can easily influence the content according to their need and desires.

One of the Informants also possesses the similar views such as:

"You will hardly find a media organization publishing news against the corporate sector. So I believe these corporate houses are affecting the media content to a greater extent". (P3)

How businessmen try to blackmail the press through advertising. One of the informants explains this as:

"If a Journalist bring a news story against a business group, his/her employers stop him/her to cover the story by saying that we take from them millions of rupees a year". (P2)

According to the above mentioned statement, it is clear that corporate sector stops to give advertisements to those media organizations who are reluctant to serve their interest, or who refuse to propagate their positive image in society. Furthermore, advertisements are completely banned for those media outlets that highlight any news which is against the interests and desires of business tycoons.

#### 4.8 Establishment Pressure

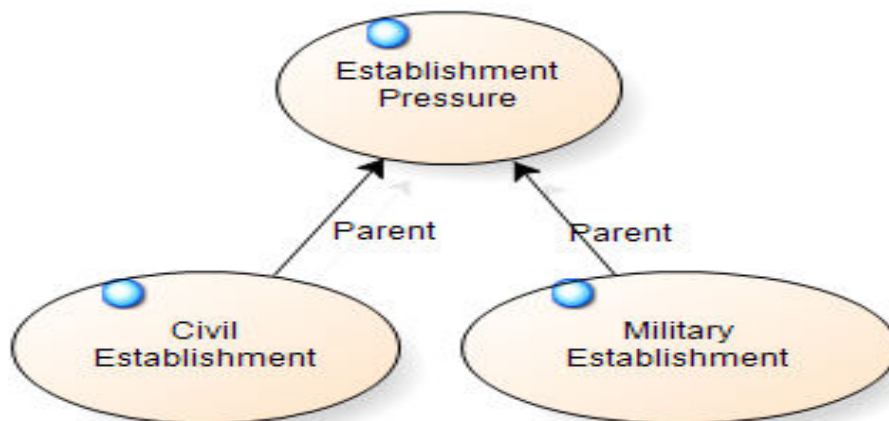


Figure 1.2: NVIVO Model relating to Establishment Pressure in Pakistan

The word establishment reflects strong, powerful and dominant group in a society. Every country has elite class, intelligence agencies and defense authorities that reflect establishment of a country. A look at the establishment system of various developed countries indicate that in most of the countries the role of establishment is limited but here in Pakistan establishment has always been so powerful as they have great role in major planning and decision making process for the country. They may not only have great influence on government but they can also exert great pressure on media as well.

As one of the Informants contends in a similar pattern:

“Army and agencies are a threat and hurdle for freedom of press. Criticizing army is not easy”. (P2)

Another informant claims the same while saying that:

“This is not the case with Pakistan only. Anywhere in the world you will hardly find the press to criticize its army”. (P5)

“Interference of Army in journalism is not as much as International organizations reported”. (P6)

The influence and pressure on media from establishment increases and multiplies during dictatorship regime. During the era of General Zia UlHaq many journalists were physically tortured, they lost jobs and were taken to secret torture cells. Many magazines and newspapers that were not in favor of military dictatorship, got banned.

But at the same time some of the journalists are of the view that in Pakistan the condition of Pakistan is comparatively better as compared to other countries of the world regarding influence of establishment on media content and ownership. They further argue that in Pakistan the pressure of establishment is not as harsh and severe as it is expected and highlighted by different circles of society. According to them, the intervention of establishment appears only when the matters are relevant to national security and national interest.

“We use to challenge everything in Pakistan, Journalists are discussing the Pakistan ideology, We can criticize the institutions, We criticize army as well”. (P6)

#### 4.9 Media Ownership Pressure

Media ownership is considered to be one of the biggest challenges in the way of press freedom. In different media organizations, owners mostly exert their influence on their employees. When a journalist starts his/her job in media organization, he is informed about the policy matters of media organization by his colleagues. Furthermore, he is also informed about the political affiliation of their owner so that the new employee must know about the limit in which he has to work. In order to achieve the support of power groups and business for their media, owners influence their employees to give special coverage to some issue and sometimes they don't allow their journalists to publish or broadcast news worthy story even. Media owners do not exert pressure on the reporters directly but most of the time this influence reaches to reporters through editors.

The same is asserted by one of the respondent as:

“Although the media is private and the journalist are on the payroll of that media group so how could they deviate from their policy guidelines”. (P5)

Another Informant said:

“I think the biggest pressure for freedom of journalism in Pakistan is the media owners”. (P10)

In addition to it, some journalists assert that the important and main pages of a newspaper are mainly prepared and designed in the head office according to the instructions and policy of owners and this is also one of the ways owners influence the content.

One Informant added:

“Although our media mostly is private, so the media owner will not allow you to violate the guidelines given by him”. (P2)

As long as the problems or obstacles in the way to achieve press freedom are concerned, most of the journalists consider media ownership as one of the biggest hindrance. Media owners just to flourish their business and to get support of the various existing pressure groups and stake holders influence content and their employees too. In order to serve their interest, they don't care for the main soul objective and mission of journalism.

Furthermore, political affiliation as is discussed earlier is also a great hurdle in the way of press freedom. Not only media owners but senior journalists also try to support their favourite party by giving positive coverage to their events, highlighting their activities and statements in positive manner. They leave objectivity and fairness far behind while supporting their political elites. The main purpose behind this support is to gain benefit, when they favourite party comes to power. The same argument is supported by one of the journalist as:

“Media is divided now. One media is supporting Peoples Party, one media is supporting PTI and then one has been affiliated with the Nawaz league”. (P6)

While considering this, it is argued that sometimes it becomes very difficult for honest journalists to highlight the malpractices of the political elites who are mainly supported by their organization. Such political elites also influence content and try to use their favorable media outlets to build their positive image in society. But some of the journalists were also of the view at the same time, that such sort of journalists and media houses are less in number.

As far as the hindrances in the way of press freedom are concerned, not only financial interests create hurdle in achieving press freedom but there are also some hidden agendas of owners due to which they try to influence their journalists and the content they produce. One of the journalists explains it as:

“Media owners may work on different agendas not just because of money, but may be because of promoting the ideology of a particular school of thought”. (P 8)

#### **4.10 Government Pressure**

The relationship between government and media has been a topic of heated debate since a long time among media scholars. Government poses a great challenge for media to achieve press freedom. Pakistan has experienced both kinds of governments since its independence i.e. democracy and Marshal Law. But freedom of press has never been allowed by both types of governments as government cannot allow media or journalists to criticize their policies and decisions. One of the journalists explains this as:

“No government in Pakistan, whether military dictatorship or democracy, have given the freedom to media”. (P3)

According to some journalists, freedom of press is not allowed by the government because government does not want that its malpractices are highlighted by media and people consider or call it corrupt. This is why government exert pressure on media and journalists not to publish any report that could damage the image and prestige of government in the minds of masses

Another Informant added while saying:

“I believe that if the government is clean and transparent then the press will be more free”. (P2)

Most of the journalists were of the view that government exerts influence on media through various means. In order to discipline or restrict the media, governments mainly tries to ban the press or news channel. Furthermore, government can also reduce paper quota of newspaper or can stop giving advertisements to media.

One of the informants while discussing the tactics used by government to restrict media tells that once revenue department of government started an inquiry against a media group just because of the reason that it gave coverage to antigovernment content. Journalists further added that in current era government is using national action plan to restrict and pressurize the journalists. Government sometimes restricts the journalists not to cover some issue or story just for the sake of national interest. Furthermore, some of the journalist also argued that government also tries to restrict and control media through PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority). Journalists and media channels are banned if they try to go against the policies of PEMRA. Some respondents also assert that the current situation of government pressure on media is not as worst as it was in the past. They maintain that:

“In the martial law era, reporting was not easy, but now I think it is not so easy to stop the news”.

One of the informants also explains the reason behind the better status of press freedom during current age while saying that:

“The mindset of governments in Pakistan has always been the same with regard to the freedom of press. So even if the press gets some freedom, it is not because of the governments but because of technology”. (P 10)

## V. DISCUSSION

Overall, it was noted that there were several factors which influenced the situation of freedom of press in Pakistan. The researcher discussed the role of government, media ownership, establishment, advertisement, war on terror, societal pressures, self-censorship, religious and ethnic groups, press laws and political parties to curb the freedom of expression in Pakistan. It was observed either democratic or non-democratic governments used different tactics to control press in the country. But at the same time, other political factors such financial interests of the organization, policies of the organization also affected on the publication of many issues. However, findings of the research revealed that Pakistani media was not as free as it should be. There were many challenges which hindered the free flow of information. It was not easy for the journalist to perform his duty freely; he had to bear many challenges. The journalists were not satisfied with the environment in which they were working. They argued that for free press, there should be fearless environment. However, few journalist commented that with the passage of time, there were many things improved in present scenario. There were many private channels which could easily criticize the government and provided impartial information to its viewers. In the nut shell, it could be concluded that there are many factors which influence freedom of press in Pakistan but technology and democracy is playing positive role to strengthen press freedom in the country.

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