

# US Double Face On Media Freedom, Democracy and Pakistan

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## Contents

- [Why Censorship](#)
- [May 4 And Karachi Massacre](#)
- [Unpopular Regime](#)

The US government backed planted an advertisement in Panama papers on June 4 claiming: 'Without freedom of expression, there is no liberty, not in Venezuela or any other part of the world'.

The ads were planted on the occasion of Codi Rice's visit to Panama on June 4. On Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's decision not to renew the licence of Radio Caracas Television, Rice described in Panama as his 'sharpest and most acute' move yet against democracy. She urged the Organisation of American States (OAS) to send its secretary general to Caracas to look into the closing of the station and deliver a full report on his findings. Rice declared: 'Freedom of speech, freedom of association and freedom of conscience are not a thorn in the side of the government. Disagreeing with your government is not unpatriotic and most certainly should not be a crime in any country, especially a democracy'.

Lets go to Pakistan where a US backed military dictator (for whom - 'mainstream' media always use the designation 'president' while Hugo is almost always referred to as 'controversial president' ) is ruthlessly clamping down on media.

The day Condi was sermonising on media freedom, exactly the same day General Pervez Musharraf introduced amendments to the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance, 2002, putting new restrictions on electronic media. The amendments, made through an ordinance, empower PEMRA authorities to seize the broadcast or distribution service equipment of channels, seal their offices, and suspend their licences if they operate illegally or violate PEMRA rules. Widely watched private tv channels Geo, ARY One, and Aaj have been off air since June 4 till the filing of this report. According to new legislation, the authorities have been authorised to make new regulations without informing parliament. Moreover, and most importantly, the ordinance raises possible fines for violations from Rs 1 million to Rs 10 million. It also brings Internet Protocol TV, radio and mobile TV under PEMRA regulations. The contrast between Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's resounding denunciation of the closure by Venezuela of a single TV station and the mildly-worded expression of support given to media freedom by the State Department is evident: 'Well, we're watching it closely ... of course. This is an issue that the Pakistani people and the Pakistani government need to resolve within the confines of their law. I understand that there is a judicial process that is under way, and the media should be free to cover that process. It's an important element of making sure that the Pakistani people are informed of what their government is doing, so it is a situation that we're watching closely'.

## Why Censorship

The censorship is a response to growing democracy movement. Pakistan is in the grip of a mass movement that was triggered by General Musharraf's decision to remove chief justice of Pakistan.

It all began on March 9 when Pakistan's military dictator General Pervez Musharraf 'suspended' Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry on concocted charges. In fact, Iftikhar was summoned to Army House and was asked to resign. Certain radical decisions by Iftikhar had indeed annoyed the military junta ruling the country since 1999. Pakistan's pliant judiciary has always served the all-powerful military rulers since 1958. All the four military rulers, on assuming power (in 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999) were legitimised by country's Supreme Court. Corrupt and docile, Pakistan's judiciary had no credibility left. All of a sudden, Iftikhar Chaudhry, appointed in 2005, surprises the whole country when he suspends privatisation of Pakistan Steel Mills on corruption charges on the plea of workers union. It did not embarrass the government merely but jeopardised the whole privatisation process too. He further surprised when he took *suo motto* actions on a government-sponsored real estate project. 'New Murre' housing project was an environmental catastrophe. Despite protests by the civil society and environmental groups, the government refused to budge. Iftikhar Chaudhry took a *suo motto* action and ordered to shelve this project. He started earning respect for his 'judicial activism'. He took *suo motto* actions on human rights, women rights cases besides offering relief to trade unions in some cases. However, he became intolerable for military rulers when he publicly stated that General Musharraf could not continue both as president and army chief beyond 2007. Musharraf had plans to get another five-year mandate through Supreme Court as his predecessors have done and he himself did on assuming power.

Another sensitive issue was disappeared activists from Balochistan province. A civil war has caught hold of Balochistan since 1999. Hundreds of nationalist activists, including journalists and poets, have disappeared. When Human Rights Commission of Pakistan moved the Supreme Court against these disappearances, Iftikhar Chaudhry accepted the plea. The regime has been trying to hush up grave human rights violations (shootings, torture, and kidnappings) in Balochistan committed by military to crush the Baloch insurgency. 'Enough is enough', thought Musharraf and summoned Iftikhar to Army House. Iftikhar's resignation was demanded. To Musharraf's shock, Iftikhar refused to resign despite threats. An angry Musharraf suspended him. Iftikhar Chaudhry had surprised Pakistan and embarrassed Musharraf yet again.

More surprises (and embarrassments for Musharraf) were to follow. The lawyers fraternity, demanding Iftikhar's reinstatement, stood up in protest across Pakistan. As they took to streets on March 16, the regime resorted to violence. Demonstrations were brutally baton-charged and tear-gassed while a widely-watched TV channel Geo was attacked by state police for covering live the police violence. Violence did not work. Political parties now joined demonstrations across the ideological divide: religious right to far left. As the demonstrations grew, the movement picked up a broader agenda. Now demand was not merely the reinstatement of Iftikhar but the restoration of democracy. The Bar Councils (advocates' associations), that have always been in the forefront of democratic movement, from across the country started inviting Iftikhar Chaudhry for an address. Activists in their thousands welcomed him as he travelled to NWFP capital Peshawar. On May 4, he would travel to Lahore. As ordinary folk turned up in their hundred thousands to catch a glimpse of 'Justice Chaudhry' (also name of a Bollywood hit in 1980s, depicting a judge fighting injustices), analysts called it a revolution-in-the-making.

## **May 4 And Karachi Massacre**

May 4: Pakistan witnessed a glimpse of revolution if not the revolution itself. The rallying point was suspended Chief Justice of Pakistan Iftikhar Chaudhry. As he headed towards Lahore from capital Islamabad, hundreds of thousands lined the GT Road all the way to catch a glimpse of Iftikhar Chaudhry. An otherwise four-hour journey took 24 hours. Such a spontaneous mass mobilisation was unprecedented since 1968-days. A judge as a resistance symbol scared US-sponsored military regime. Khakis resorted to age-old response: thug violence was employed as Iftikhar Chaudhry arrived Karachi on May 12. Thirty-seven fell to bullets, 300 were shot injured and scores were brutally beaten up by ethno-fascist MQM-activists patronised by military regime. MQM is a Karachi-based party and ally of General Musharraf.

The Karachi massacre did not scare the ordinary Pakistanis who again turned in their hundred thousands as Iftikhar Chaudhry travelled to Abbotabad on June 2. An otherwise three hour trip took 14 hours.

## **Unpopular Regime**

However, unlike US-sponsored Velvet/Purple/Cider revolutions, Pakistani revolution-in-the-making is indigenous, spontaneous and above all directed against a US-sponsored military dictator. As General Musharraf handed Pakistan's military bases over to US forces in the wake of 9/11, he was showered upon military and economic aid. A regime that received US aid worth \$9.1 million in three years (1999-2001), was granted \$ 4.2 billion in next three years (an increase by 45,000 %). To assist Bush in his 'war on terror', Musharraf deployed 80,000 troops on Afghan border. But his pro-US policies have been extremely unpopular domestically. As reward for his support, Washington not merely blessed him with financial grants but also overlooked his election fraud (meantime shedding tears for Zimbabwe), violations of human rights in Balochistan and curbs on media. US satraps followed the suit.

Social democratic Persson government of Sweden, for instance, also invited him to Stockholm and sold him six Saab jets worth one billion dollar in 2002.

However, it was not merely his pro-imperialist policies but the grind of daily life that drove ordinary Pakistanis to streets. In last seven years, privatisation has rendered half a million jobless while prices have shot 100-200 % up. Lavish US aid has benefited either military or pro-military politicians. Life for ordinary folks have only got more miserable. Hence, the chief justice is mere a pretext, causes for ongoing movement are much deeper. Though it remains to be seen if Justice Chaudhry brings Musharraf down yet the die has been cast. Masses have humbled a mighty general back in 1968. They are likely to do it again.