



# MEDIA MANIPULATION: Terrorism, Corruption, and the Shifting Sands of Perception

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Between 2007 and 2013, over fifty thousand Pakistanis had been slaughtered by militant Islamist groups. The dead included politicians, soldiers, cops and common men, women and children. Most died in suicide attacks in mosques, shrines and in congested markets. Pakistan was under attack by ruthless forces who were killing people almost every day with utmost brutality.

The country was facing an actual existential crisis which the state and the government were struggling to address and resolve. Pakistan had become a state that was close to failing — just as the state in Somalia, Yemen and DR Congo had. Yet, the most serious crisis on the minds of most electronic media outlets and

certain major political figures in Pakistan at the time was ‘corruption’.

A major percentage of the discourses in TV talk shows revolved around the pitfalls of corruption. I remember seeing a questionnaire on the website of a popular news channel just before the 2013 elections. It asked people to state the most pressing problems faced by Pakistanis. One had to tick one or more boxes in front of the stated issues: corruption; unemployment; street crime; and drug addiction.

Terrorism, or the militant Islamism that was leading to terrorism, weren’t even mentioned in the ‘survey’, despite the fact that by the time the May 2013

elections were held, over 250 people had already been killed in terror attacks during the immediate months before the polls. What's more, even during the campaigning stage of the elections, terrorists were ruthlessly cutting down workers and leaders belonging to the outgoing coalition government that was headed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and also included the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) and the Awami National Party (ANP).

Yet, these attacks were just mentioned in passing in the media. The media's focus and energies remained to be invested in discourses revolving around corruption in general and the 'corruption' of the outgoing government in particular. What was going on?

Years later, or from late 2021 onwards, when the so-called 'Imran Khan Project' (IKP) shaped by the military establishment (ME) began to crumble, some prominent TV journalists decided to spill a few beans. They confirmed something which many folk already suspected. Between 2011 and 2021, a large section of the populist electronic media was integrated into IKP. Many journalists willingly bought into the narrative which the ME had moulded for IKP, but there were also journalists who just happened to go with the flow in which the hot topic and main talking point was 'corruption'.

Corruption became the mother of all evils in Pakistan. PMLN's Nawaz Sharif raged against the corruption of PPP's Asif Zardari and Imran Khan was permanently outraged by the corruption of Nawaz as well as Zardari. This went on even after Nawaz won the 2013 election. Nawaz and Khan competed against each other to prove that they were more anti-corruption than the other as suicide bombers continued with their daily carnage.

The media became a battleground packed with excitable anchors and talk-show hosts encouraging proverbial punching bouts between PMLN and PTI leaders denouncing each other as corrupt. Not much was said, however, about the elephant in the room: suicide attacks, assassinations, destruction of girls' schools and kidnappings for ransom. All done by militant outfits.

Then, the new military chief General Raheel Sharif began to slightly change the narrative when the intensity and frequency of terrorist attacks increased. One began to see 'experts' on TV discussing terrorism. General Raheel declared that the greatest threat that Pakistan was facing was internal instability caused by 'non-state actors'.

The media got the message. But since a large part of it was still tied to the line of thinking that it was important to build the IKP, terrorism too became an outcome of corruption, even though many leaders of political parties who were being demonised as being corrupt, had become targets of militant groups.

The media also played a major role in giving space to those whose job it was to actually justify the violence of the militants. Apparently, those, who by 2014 had killed thousands of Pakistanis, were 'noble but misguided brothers' who, due to them suffering from poverty and having a deep love for Shariah laws, were being pushed into a corner (because of corruption, of course) to pick up arms against corrupt rulers.

But at least this part of the farce suddenly collapsed when the militants attacked a public school in Peshawar, murdering over 140 people, including students and teachers. However, once the Panama Papers scandal materialised, things came back to square one. This time, though, since the state was finally looking to be winning the war against the militants, the narrative of corruption being the core crises in the country grew in intensity — especially as the 2018 elections approached.

The media plays a major role in developing narratives. But on various occasions, the narrative can include manufactured crises, shaped by certain forces to attain political or economic benefits. The manufactured crises are not necessarily entirely cosmetic, but sensationalised and exaggerated in such a manner that they start to look like existentialist threats. This was how the matter of corruption played out in the media in Pakistan, at the expense of ignoring an actual crisis (extremism/terrorism) which ultimately took the lives of thousands of people.

The corruption 'crisis' was largely manufactured by those who were formulating the IKP, but it also benefited populist media outlets who enhanced it to bag ratings by providing viewers punching bouts between politicians, and the spectacle of 'political analysts' and so-called 'clean' politicians such as Imran Khan lambasting the corruption of established parties.

Khan's regime was ousted in April 2022 by an act of Parliament. It was a thoroughly incompetent government which eventually had a falling out with those who had painstakingly constructed the IKP. Khan's ouster was quickly followed by allegations of corruption against him. His reputation was only saved by record-breaking inflation and certain missteps by the

coalition government which succeeded his fallen regime and by a caretaker set-up.

Consequently, the media, that had by then become increasingly populist, began to echo the narrative cleverly weaved by the precocious social media teams associated with Khan's party. The narrative claimed that Khan had become 'the most popular political leader in the country'.

Indeed, Khan is extremely popular, but mostly in certain large segments of the urban and peri-urban middle-classes. In surveys conducted by notable research organisations before this year's controversial elections, Khan's possible vote-bank never crossed the 40 percent mark. This means the rest 60 percent of the electorate were not willing to vote for him. His 'popularity', once manufactured by the media on the behest of the pilots of IKP, became the doing of the media alone once his backers in the ME started to dismantle IKP.

Largely, the media, too, is staffed and consumed by members of the social class in which resides Khan's core support. With rising inflation and the hands of the ME becoming a lot more visible in dismantling the IKP, any comment or commentary on this began to enjoy a surge in views, ratings, 'likes' and reposts on TV, YouTube channels and the social media.

A narrative about a new 'crisis' began to take shape and, of course, this one too is being presented as an existentialist threat: the country is on the verge of bankruptcy, there are dangerous divisions within the military, millions of Pakistanis are leaving the country, democracy is in danger, etc. These are alarming talking points that guarantee attention and keep the media rolling. But the actual crisis that Pakistan is facing is one that has been haunting even the most established democracies for almost a decade: severe polarisation and an unchecked rise of populism.

In Pakistan, this polarisation is being widened and exploited by folk who benefit from it. And unfortunately, this also includes the media. But the danger in this is that this may lead to an actual crisis within the media as well when a bothered state might begin to seriously initiate a clampdown on print, electronic and social medias. One can already see this coming.

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