Media as a Tool of State Control: Propaganda and Censorship Techniques in the History of Pakistan (1958–2008)

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Abstract

This paper examines the systemic and calculated use of media as an instrument of direct state control in Pakistan across the profoundly tumultuous five decades between 1958 and 2008. During this foundational period, the nation's political and military elites purposefully and deliberately institutionalized sophisticated techniques of propaganda and censorship. The primary objectives of this institutionalization were to maintain and solidify political hegemony, suppress burgeoning dissent from all sectors of civil society, and meticulously shape public perception in direct alignment with their strategic interests. The establishment of landmark legislative measures, most notably the Press and Publication Ordinance of 1963 and the National Press Trust of 1964, provided the robust structural and legal foundations for this centralized control. These actions effectively co-opted and transformed media institutions, moving them from potential public watchdogs to reliable mechanisms for serving pre-determined state narratives. Applying the theoretical framework of the Propaganda Model alongside the concept of Extractive Elites, this analysis traces the evolution of this entrenched media capture across successive and ideologically diverse regimes. From the Ayub Khan regime's focus on state-led modernization to the Zia-ul-Haq era's pivot to religiously driven legitimation, the investigation reveals a consistent, systemic practice. This practice was not arbitrary but was deeply rooted in the country's broader authoritarian governance structures. The manipulation of public discourse through a controlled media apparatus has been central to the maintenance of power by these elites. This paper argues that this strategy has exerted a profound, long-term, and detrimental influence on Pakistan's socio-political development, primarily by hindering the development of an independent, critical, and robust public sphere necessary for any genuine democratic maturation.

Keywords: Media, State, Propaganda, Censorship, Extractive Elites.

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DOI: http://doi.org/10.65463/50

In the complex political landscape of Pakistan, the media's role has historically diverged sharply from the idealized function of a free and independent "Fourth Estate." Instead, for the critical fifty-year period spanning from 1958 to 2008, media institutions were consistently and effectively harnessed to serve as a powerful, direct tool for state control. This era, which encapsulates Pakistan's formative struggles with governance, democracy, and national identity, was characterized by significant political turbulence. This turbulence was marked by the repeated ascendancy of centralized military and political elites who, viewing an autonomous press as a threat, systematically employed the dual weapons of propaganda and censorship to secure, maintain, and legitimize their dominance.

We propose that this strategic manipulation of public discourse was not merely a series of isolated, reactive incidents or the policy of a single authoritarian leader. Rather, it was a calculated, systemic, and institutionalized practice, deeply rooted in the country's foundational, post-colonial struggle for national cohesion and political stability. The military regime of General Ayub Khan, which seized power in 1958, initiated this era of formalized control. It was this regime that painstakingly established the comprehensive institutional and legislative framework that would govern, constrain, and ultimately neutralize media freedom for decades to come. As noted by historian Ian Talbot, this foundational period set a definitive and lasting precedent, creating a centralized apparatus of control that subsequent civilian and military rulers would inherit, adapt, and aggressively utilize to ensure their own political survival (Talbot 2005).

The key to understanding this enduring phenomenon lies in applying the integrated theoretical lens of the Propaganda Model, originally developed by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, alongside the complementary concept of Extractive Elites (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The Propaganda Model provides a framework for understanding how media, even in ostensibly democratic societies, can serve elite interests through a series of "filters." This integrated theoretical lens, as explored by Niaz, illuminates how Pakistan's interconnected political, military, and economic elites—the primary beneficiaries and distributors of state resources—wielded structural control over media narratives (Niaz 2019). Their goal was to reinforce their own hierarchical position and systematically suppress any information, analysis, or political narrative that could potentially threaten the established status quo. This practice reflects a broader, global pattern of authoritarian governance, as demonstrated in historical analyses by scholars like Demm, where powerful state actors manipulate information flows to secure consent and demobilize opposition (Demm 2019). In the Pakistani context, media control was a direct, frontline mechanism for maintaining political hegemony and policing the boundaries of the public sphere, ensuring that critical voices and opposition narratives remained perpetually marginalized throughout this entire period. This continuous media manipulation represents a core institutional failure, one that has persistently compromised the foundations of democratic accountability and informed public consent.

The resulting history is one of continuous and evolving media capture. Successive regimes, regardless of their superficial civilian or overt military character, adopted

and skillfully adapted these established control mechanisms to fit their specific ideological and political needs. The core machinery of control, however, remained remarkably consistent. From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's populist government, which used state media to propagate its particular brand of socialist ideology and ruthlessly repress political opposition, to General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship, which executed a strategic alignment of all state media with his sweeping Islamization agenda, the central purpose remained unchanged (Jalal 2014). This purpose was, and always has been, to shape public perception, legitimize state policy (no matter how unpopular), and decisively silence dissent. As Ayesha Jalal has argued, this continuity demonstrates a structural feature of the Pakistani state (Jalal 2014). This research explores this continuity in detail, detailing not just the high-profile instances of censorship but, more importantly, how specific legal frameworks institutionalized this censorship, making it a mundane, bureaucratic function of the state. It also examines how evolving propaganda strategies—shifting from the promotion of secular modernization to the propagation of religious nationalism—always served the singular, overarching aim of reinforcing state authority and controlling the public's fundamental understanding of national reality.

The historiography of Pakistan extensively documents the media's complex and often subservient relationship with state power, forming a significant and recurring theme in political and historical analysis. Foundational works by historians, including Ian Talbot, have detailed how successive military and political elites consistently and skillfully manipulated media platforms (Talbot 2005). Their aim was to secure the "official" national narrative—one that emphasized unity, religious identity, and deference to state institutions—while simultaneously suppressing the multitude of opposing voices that challenged this monolithic story. Ayesha Jalal confirms this by highlighting the systematic co-option of media by these elites as a primary tool to enforce their political agenda and define the very boundaries of legitimate political discourse (Jalal 2014).

This paper builds upon these foundational works by providing a focused, longitudinal analysis specifically centered on the continuity and evolution of the legislative and institutional measures that formally codified this control. While much scholarship has focused on the distinct actions of individual regimes, this analysis suggests that these structural controls—the laws, ordinances, and state-funded trusts—rather than the individual political acts of censorship, represent the most enduring and insidious threat to a free press. It was the creation of this legal and bureaucratic infrastructure that made media suppression a sustainable, transferable, and permanent feature of the state apparatus. This institutionalization is the analytical focus used here to bridge the gap between individual regime analyses, arguing for a more holistic understanding of media control as a persistent state strategy.

This relationship between consolidated state power and media subservience is further clarified by scholars who analyze the systemic linkages to authoritarian governance. Francis Robinson, in examining the crucial Ayub Khan era, details how the state masterfully leveraged its burgeoning media infrastructure, particularly the state-run Pakistan Television (PTV), which was launched as a potent tool for modernization

(Robinson 2011). Robinson's work shows how PTV was used not just to inform, but to establish the political legitimacy of the regime and enforce its policy objectives, presenting the military-bureaucratic elite as the sole architects of national progress (Robinson 2011). Ilhan Niaz extends this understanding by analyzing how state control over media has been historically and inextricably linked to the broader authoritarian governance structures in Pakistan, which themselves are a legacy of the colonial "viceregal" system (Niaz 2019).

This study integrates these insights to demonstrate a crucial point: media capture in Pakistan was not a mere political tactic deployed during crises, nor was it a temporary deviation from an otherwise democratic norm. Instead, it was, and remains, a core institutionalized practice, deeply embedded within the persistent, unresolved conflicts between a centralized, security-conscious state and a fragmented, developing civil society. This approach allows this analysis to treat the media-state nexus as a persistent, structural feature of Pakistan's political economy, rather than as a series of isolated historical aberrations.

We anchor this investigation in the theoretical framework of the Propaganda Model, as articulated by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, and combine it with the potent concept of Extractive Elites (Herman and Chomsky 1988). The Propaganda Model, in its original formulation, asserts that media output, particularly in societies dominated by powerful and concentrated interests, inevitably serves those elite interests. It posits that information is systematically "filtered" before it ever reaches the public. This filtering process ensures that the media's portrayal of the world aligns with the interests of the powerful (Herman and Chomsky 1988).

This framework is applied to the specific context of Pakistan, where political, military, and economic elites have historically formed a tightly knit, interlocking directorate. These elites consistently controlled the crucial filters that determine media content. The ownership filter was most overtly applied through the state's direct acquisition of media outlets, exemplified by the National Press Trust. By controlling *who* owned the largest newspapers, the state controlled their editorial lines. The state, as the nation's largest advertiser, wielded immense financial power. It could reward compliant newspapers and television channels with lucrative government advertising contracts while punishing critical outlets by withholding this essential revenue, effectively starving them into submission. Media was, and often remains, reliant on official sources for information. Government ministries, press releases from the military's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), and official spokespersons became the primary, "authoritative" sources. This reliance ensured that the state's perspective was the default, framing every story. Any journalist or outlet that stepped out of line faced organized "flak" or negative feedback. This ranged from official government condemnations and accusations of being "anti-state" to legal harassment, arrests, and, in extreme cases, physical violence. This was often framed as "national interest" or, particularly under Zia, "Islam." This overarching ideology created a common ground between the state and media proprietors, where certain topics—such as criticism of the military, religious dogma, or foreign policy—were deemed "unpatriotic" and thus self-censored.

The concept of Extractive Elites is crucial here. This term describes a ruling class that designs political and economic institutions to extract resources from the rest of society for its own benefit. As Niaz has argued, these privileged groups manipulated information flows—just as they manipulated economic resources (Niaz 2019). This manipulation, as demonstrated by Eberhard Demm's analysis of wartime propaganda, served to consolidate their power at the direct expense of broader public welfare, accountability, and democratic development (Demm 2019).

To trace this history, the methodology utilizes primary sources, including the key legislative documents that institutionalized media control. The most important of these are the Press and Publication Ordinance of 1963 and the foundational documents detailing the National Press Trust Act of 1964 (Press and Publication Ordinance 1963; Creation of National Press Trust 1964). These documents form the legal backbone of censorship practices, revealing the bureaucratic language of repression. These laws are analyzed alongside a review of official speeches, government press releases, and ministerial policy directives issued between 1958 and 2008. This allows for an understanding of the state's public-facing *justification* for media control—the official narratives used to rationalize the suppression of press freedom and dissent, often citing "national security" or "public order." This analysis systematically cross-references these state-centric claims against the known political realities, human rights reports, and journalistic memoirs of the respective regimes, revealing the vast gap between official rhetoric and the reality of state repression.

The Foundations of Control: Institutionalizing the Apparatus

The effort to control media was not an invention of the 1958 military coup; it was baked into the very fabric of Pakistan's governance from its earliest, most vulnerable days. The nascent state, born out of the profound trauma and chaos of Partition in 1947, faced acute and existential issues of political stability, economic fragility, and the immense challenge of forging national cohesion from disparate ethnic and linguistic groups. In this high-stakes environment, the new state leadership viewed media control not as an ideological choice, but as a strategic imperative for national survival (Talbot 2005).

This perceived necessity, as observed by Talbot, quickly translated into concrete legal action (Talbot 2005). The Public Safety Ordinance of 1948 represented the first significant step toward formal, post-colonial regulation. This ordinance granted the state extensive, sweeping powers to curb press freedoms, shut down presses, and arrest journalists, all under the broad and ill-defined guise of maintaining "public order" and "national security" (Malik 2008). According to Malik, this ordinance established the critical and enduring principle that press freedom was not an inalienable right but a privilege that could be, and would be, readily subordinated to the perceived, immediate needs of the state (Malik 2008). This initial legislation set a dangerous and lasting precedent. It normalized the suppression of critical reportage and ensured that the state would, by default, continuously prioritize narrative control over the cultivation of democratic freedoms.

While these early measures were significant, this analysis identifies the military regime of General Ayub Khan (1958–1969) as the decisive moment when media control transitioned from ad hoc, reactive regulation to a fully institutionalized, systematic, and proactive system. The regime's "Decade of Development" was built on an ambition to enforce rapid, top-down modernization and industrialization, a project that, in the regime's view, required the total suppression of political opposition and regional autonomy movements (Ziring 1997). As described by Ziring, achieving this dual objective necessitated a compliant, supportive, and unquestioning media environment (Ziring 1997).

Two landmark legislative measures achieved this goal, forming the pincer movement of state control: the Press and Publication Ordinance (PPO) of 1963 and the subsequent establishment of the National Press Trust (NPT) in 1964 (Press and Publication Ordinance 1963; Creation of National Press Trust 1964). This dual approach was strategically brilliant. The PPO simultaneously centralized all state oversight and legal power over the press, while the NPT moved to acquire and manage leading print publications directly, ensuring their full compliance with official policy. This move was critical. It transformed the most influential segments of the media from potential adversaries into reliable instruments for reinforcing military rule, projecting an image of universal success, and managing the public perception of the elite's centralized authority.

The 1963 Press and Publication Ordinance was a regulatory masterstroke, a piece of legislation designed specifically to enforce obedience upon the entire print media landscape. The ordinance was draconian, granting the government sweeping and arbitrary authority (Press and Publication Ordinance 1963). This included the power to grant or deny the licenses required to operate any newspaper or periodical, and the power to demand hefty "security deposits" that could be forfeited if the publication printed anything the state deemed "objectionable." It also gave officials the power to seize publications deemed "seditious" or "subversive" (Press and Publication Ordinance 1963). This licensing authority, in particular, became a potent, invisible lever of influence. The mere *threat* of revoking or denying a license—which would shutter a business entirely—was often enough to silence critics. Furthermore, the threat of severe legal penalties, including crippling fines and imprisonment for publishing "forbidden materials" (a category that remained purposefully vague), fostered a pervasive environment of coerced self-censorship, a phenomenon detailed by Shafqat (Shafqat 2010). Editors and publishers, fearing for their livelihoods and their liberty, began to pre-emptively kill stories, soften critical headlines, and avoid sensitive topics, ensuring that their publications largely aligned with state diktats regarding public order, foreign policy, and the image of the military. This single legislative act was indispensable to the military regime's control matrix, as it codified censorship into the permanent legal infrastructure of the state (Shafqat 2010).

If the PPO was the stick, the creation of the National Press Trust (NPT) in 1964 was the critical move toward centralizing media *ownership*—a core filter of the Propaganda Model—directly under state control. The NPT's fundamental and explicitly stated purpose was to acquire the ownership and management of leading, established

newspapers and periodicals, thereby directly aligning their entire editorial output with the government's constitutional and political programs (Creation of National Press Trust 1964). The Trust, funded by the state, quickly took over major publications, effectively nationalizing the most powerful segment of the press. As Hussain has documented, the NPT became instrumental in shaping the entire media ecosystem (Hussain 2005). Its publications were guaranteed a sustained, high-profile platform for state narratives, complete with privileged access to government advertising. This move simultaneously sidelined, bankrupted, or outright suppressed competing critical editorial voices (Hussain 2005). This establishment of direct state ownership as a primary mechanism for managing public perception was designed to solidify the regime's political legitimacy. The NPT was the ultimate expression of the extractive elite's desire to control the nation's information resources, ensuring ideological conformity and a pro-government narrative at the highest level of print media.

Censorship in Pakistan: Evolution of a Core Tactic

Censorship in the Pakistani context can be considered the deliberate, systematic, and often brutal suppression of speech, ideas, images, and content that state elites deem objectionable, harmful, or, most frequently, politically inconvenient. Historically, censorship has been deployed as the favored and most direct weapon for state institutions to suppress dissent and manipulate the public discourse. Its targets have been wide-ranging, encompassing political opponents, human rights activists, labor organizers, journalists, academics, and artists alike (Shafqat 2010). As noted by Shafqat, this control is not limited to print media. It extends across all forms of electronic media, including state-run television and radio, and in the post-2008 period, has adapted to master the digital platforms of the modern era (Shafqat 2010).

This analysis argues that while censorship is frequently framed by the state in the defensive language of "national security," "public morality," or "religious sanctity," its primary, functional purpose has almost always been the maintenance of political authority and the quashing of critical perspectives that challenge the elite's grip on power. As Christophe Jaffrelot observes, censorship has been the single most consistent instrument of state control since 1958, demonstrating the Pakistani state's perpetual and deep-seated discomfort with pluralism, dissent, and genuine public debate (Jaffrelot 2015).

This system of control was not limited to military rulers. The civilian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–1977), despite rising to power on a wave of populist, democratic sentiment, quickly continued and, in some areas, expanded upon the institutionalized media control it inherited. Bhutto's regime skillfully leveraged the state-controlled media apparatus—including the NPT and PTV—to vigorously promote its socialist policies and the associated narrative of populist economic reform. This propaganda drive was often intensely personal, portraying the leader as a charismatic, heroic, and imposing figure, as detailed by Rashid (Rashid 2008). This positive messaging was, however, coupled with intense and ruthless censorship and legal repression of critics. The government actively silenced dissent, arresting and jailing critical journalists and editors under instruments like the colonial-era

Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance. This period solidified the use of state media not just as a passive mouthpiece, but as an active, coercive tool of political warfare against the opposition. As documented by Talbot, this set a high bar for civilian media control that, in its methods and severity, directly mirrored the tactics of the preceding military regime (Talbot 2005).

Censorship arguably reached its absolute zenith, however, during the long and suffocating military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988). Under Zia, the machinery of control underwent a fundamental ideological shift, moving away from modernization or socialism and toward the aggressive promotion of a rigid, state-sponsored religious nationalism. Zia's regime, facing a severe crisis of legitimacy after overthrowing an elected prime minister, strategically utilized media control to propagate its sweeping Islamization agenda. This agenda, as noted by Husain Haqqani, was calculated to justify his authoritarian rule, framing Zia himself as the necessary guardian of the nation's faith and ideological boundaries (Haqqani 2005). This involved deeply programmatic changes, such as the mandated introduction of explicitly religious programming on PTV and radio, the alteration of broadcast language, and the imposition of strict dress codes for presenters, effectively aligning the media's entire ideological stance with the military's political goals (Waheed 2017). According to analysis by Waheed, this transformed PTV from a tool of development to one of religious indoctrination (Waheed 2017). Journalists and media outlets that dared to criticize the government or its religious posturing faced extreme repression, including public floggings, lengthy imprisonments, and the outright closure of non-compliant publications (Shafqat 2010). As Shafqat documents, Zia's period represented the most extreme and brutal repression of media freedom in Pakistan's history, weaponizing religion to enforce a deathly political silence (Shafqat 2010).

The subsequent Pervez Musharraf era (1999–2008) presented a complex and telling paradox. This period was characterized by a previously unimaginable, market-driven liberalization of electronic media, alongside the continued, strategic, and often clumsy use of censorship. The introduction and rapid proliferation of private television news channels, a policy Musharraf touted as "enlightened moderation," offered a new and unprecedented measure of press freedom. This move diversified the media ecosystem, creating 24/7 news cycles and vibrant, critical talk shows, as observed by Nazish (Nazish 2008).

However, it can be contended that this liberalization was a calculated risk, not a genuine commitment to a free press. The government quickly and decisively demonstrated its capacity and willingness to resort to sweeping censorship during periods of political crisis. As Jaffrelot has detailed, the state imposed total media blackouts and shut down leading private channels in response to the 2007 Lawyers’ Movement, which threatened the regime's survival, and again during the chaos following the assassination of Benazir Bhutto (Jaffrelot 2015). The utilization of emergency laws and the creation of a new electronic media regulator, PEMRA, to detain journalists and pull channels off the air, further confirmed a critical reality: despite the surface-level liberalization, the systemic instruments of control first established in the 1960s remained fully operational, ready to be

deployed to maintain elite authority (Jaffrelot 2015). This era perfectly demonstrates the persistent, unresolved conflict between commercial media expansion and the entrenched interests of the state's security apparatus, with the latter always prevailing when political stability was perceived to be threatened.

Propaganda: Aims, Organization, and Evolution

The propaganda strategies employed by successive Pakistani regimes from 1958 to 2008 were not haphazard. They were meticulously designed, centrally organized, and psychologically sophisticated operations intended to achieve two primary goals: establish the regime's legitimacy and ensure public compliance with its agenda. A key and recurring strategy involved the *individualization* of propaganda. This tactic focused on creating a "cult of personality" around the ruling leader, a strategy that was particularly evident and effective during military rules, as noted by Hussain (Hussain 2005).

Under Ayub Khan, for example, propaganda was laser-focused on economic development and modernization projects. State-controlled media, including PTV newsreels and NPT newspapers, endlessly showcased the construction of dams, factories, and the new capital of Islamabad. These images projected an image of an efficient, dynamic, and progressive government. This messaging, as Ziring details, was calculated to instill public confidence in the military-bureaucratic state, reinforcing the idea that it was the *only* competent engine of national progress (Ziring 1997). This, by implication, justified the suspension of "messy" democratic processes and the suppression of "divisive" political parties.

Propaganda has also been repeatedly and powerfully utilized to construct and enforce a singular, monolithic national identity, often invoking powerful ideological and religious language. The state consistently used its media monopoly to foster a specific kind of unity, highlighting shared (or perceived) cultural and historical elements while systematically promoting a strong, state-defined Islamic identity, a point explored by McMahon (McMahon 2013). This top-down, state-driven nation-building effort served a crucial political function. By inextricably linking the regime's policies—whether domestic or foreign—to the sacred cows of national security and religious values, the state garnered public support. More importantly, this framing allowed it to rationalize and justify repression against any and all opposition figures, who could then be easily and effectively branded as "unpatriotic," "foreign agents," or "detrimental to the national interest," as Jaffrelot notes (Jaffrelot 2015). This ideological framing was a primary mechanism for consolidating state power, isolating critics, and suppressing political dissent, ensuring that the official national ideology always served the immediate political status quo.

Military regimes, in particular, consistently weaponized the state-controlled media apparatus to ensure their political survival and manufacture legitimacy. The NPT and PTV were not just assets; they were indispensable tools for military governments, allowing them to simultaneously extol their own virtues and enforce ideological conformity across the population. General Zia-ul-Haq's regime offers the clearest and most potent example.

As Husain Haqqani argues, propaganda meticulously framed his 1977 coup and subsequent decade-plus rule through an exclusively religious lens (Haqqani 2005). He was portrayed not as a military dictator who had subverted the constitution, but as the indispensable "guardian of Islam" and the protector of Pakistan's "ideological frontiers." This religious propaganda was broadcast relentlessly across all state media. It transformed PTV into an instrument of mass state indoctrination, one that completely marginalized critical political discourse and ensured a homogeneous public narrative that was vocally supportive of the authoritarian status quo (Rashid 2008). As documented by Rashid, this constant, pervasive use of religious rhetoric was highly effective in securing the political obedience, or at least the passive compliance, of conservative elements in society, thereby cementing his personal power (Rashid 2008).

Civilian governments, however, were equally complicit in using this same propaganda machinery to sustain their own hold on power, albeit sometimes using different thematic focuses than their military counterparts. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government (1971–1977), as mentioned, relied heavily on state-controlled media to aggressively promote its socialist and economic reform programs (Talbot 2005). This campaign, as noted by Talbot, was intensely personalized, crafting a charismatic, larger-than-life image of the leader himself as the champion of the poor (Talbot 2005). Subsequent civilian administrations, including the rival governments led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif during the 1990s, adopted nearly identical tactics. As Ayesha Jalal discusses, they utilized state media, especially PTV, to amplify their own economic and infrastructure initiatives—such as Nawaz Sharif's "Motorway" project—while systematically denigrating their political rivals, often portraying them as corrupt or incompetent (Jalal 2014). This continuity confirms that propaganda is a bipartisan, institutional instrument of control, used fluidly across the political spectrum to manage public perceptions and ensure favorable leadership narratives. We assert this demonstrates the enduring nature of Pakistan's extractive elites, regardless of their regime type (military or civilian), who consistently prioritize their own narrative control over democratic accountability, transparency, or the public's right to objective information.

Conclusion

The pervasive utilization of media as a primary tool of state control in Pakistan from 1958 to 2008 was not a byproduct of political instability; it was a deliberate, foundational, and systemic strategy. This strategy was pursued relentlessly by the nation's extractive elites—both military and political—to maintain their hegemony, manage public discourse, and neutralize all forms of dissent. The Ayub Khan regime laid the critical and enduring foundational structure for this control through the landmark legal instruments of the Press and Publication Ordinance of 1963 and the National Press Trust of 1964 (Creation of National Press Trust 1964; Press and Publication Ordinance 1963). These acts effectively institutionalized the mechanisms of censorship and propaganda, creating a robust, state-controlled apparatus that all subsequent regimes would inherit and adapt. The history of this period reveals a continuous, unbroken process of media

capture. From Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ideological purges and use of state media for personality cult-building, to General Zia-ul-Haq's profound religious indoctrination, and culminating in Pervez Musharraf's paradoxical allowance of media liberalization while retaining strategic "kill switches," the central goal remained consistent: suppress dissent and legitimize state authority. This enduring conflict between the centralized state and the quest for a free media is a core, defining characteristic of Pakistan's political history.

This systemic, decades-long repression of free expression, when analyzed through the lens of the Propaganda Model, has had profound, damaging, and long-term consequences for Pakistan's political evolution. The consistent stifling of political opposition, the marginalization of regional and ethnic voices, and the gross manipulation of national narratives have all served to fundamentally undermine democratic development (Niaz 2019). As Niaz has argued, this has fostered a deep and persistent public distrust in institutional legitimacy and stunted the growth of a civil society grounded in critical thinking and open debate (Niaz 2019). The findings presented here provide a vital historical perspective, illustrating the intricate, evolving, and deeply entrenched relationship between state power and media freedom. An understanding of this historical dynamic—of this institutionalized DNA of control—is essential for policymakers, journalists, and practitioners today. It serves as a powerful reminder of the absolute imperative for an independent, financially viable, free, and accountable media to ensure genuine democratic representation and sustained political stability in Pakistan.

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