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Mass Media and the Electoral Process: A Study of Pakistan's National Elections, 1990¹

Anura Goonasekera and Ijaz S. Gilani

In August 1990, President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dissolved Pakistan's National Assembly and dismissed the 20-month old elected government of Ms Benazir Bhutto. Elections were scheduled for 24 October. The 78 days, from dissolution of the National Assembly to the general elections was a period of hectic political activity, and elections campaigning. This study focuses on the role of the mass media during the later three weeks of this period. It is an exploratory study which aims to identify and describe media usage in the electoral process in Pakistan.

Social science researchers have devoted much attention to mass communications influence in election campaigns and related electoral processes. Such bench mark studies on voting behaviour as those of Lazarsfeld (1944), Berelson et al. (1954), Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Campbell (1954) and Lang and Lang (1971) among others have all advanced knowledge on how voters use the mass media in choosing their leaders, and how the various media impinge on voter turnout, voting decisions and levels of information.

These studies, however, are more reflective of the mass communication system and infrastructure in the more technologically advanced countries of the West, principally the United States. As such they cannot per se be used to generalize the role and impact of the mass media in other parts of the world, particularly the less developed countries. In the South Asian region there is little published research on mass communication and the electoral process. Much of what has been reported in the media relate to results of studies on voter preferences for candidates or opinion surveys. The Asian region, however, has

¹ Based on a study conducted for AMIC by Gallup-Pakistan. Additional information was provided by Prof. Nisar A. Zuberi of the Department of Mass Communication, University of Karachi. Financial assistance was provided by the Asia Foundation.

emerged, over the past two decades, as a very critical area in world politics and economic relations. Therefore, its political and electoral process would have implications far beyond the geographical boundaries of these countries. The present study, which is one among a series of studies² on media and the electoral process in Asia undertaken by AMIC, aims to address this lacunae.

■ Sample

The design of the study is exploratory. Table 1 gives the sample profile.

There is an urban bias in this sample. In interpreting these results, this bias should be considered. A conscious effort was made to ensure the coverage of various languages in the different provinces in Pakistan. In this light ten points were selected on the basis of geographic and linguistic distribution of the country. Rural locations were identified in the adjoining areas of selected points. Following this procedure, a total of 50 geographic locations comprising 42 urban and eight rural centres were identified. These were in the following cities and towns of Pakistan: Karachi, Peshawar, Sukkar, Quelta, Multan, Lahore, Faisalabad and Rawalpindi. All major linguistic groups were covered in the sample. In Sind, the choice of rural Sukkar in addition to Karachi was made specially to obtain Sindi-speaking respondents. The Urdu-speaking respondents were from Karachi. In Punjab, the largest province, the sample was distributed in Northern Punjab (Rawalpindi), Central Punjab (Lahore), Western Punjab (Faisalabad) and Southern Punjab (Multan) in order to include the various dialects of the Punjabi language. The Pashto speakers came mainly from Peshawar.

Within each identified location, a method of random selection of households was followed based on a list of all households in the location. Typically, ten households were selected from each of the 50 points. Through field instructions, it was ensured that in at least one-third of the locations, the respondents were females, who were interviewed by female interviewers.

■ Findings

Among the things that the survey tried to find out were the extent of exposure to the mass media, the role of mass media in providing election information to the people, the perceptions of the respondents

□ 2. Elections in the following countries have been studied: Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Pakistan and Singapore.

Table 1
Sample Profile

	<i>All Respondents</i>	
<i>Age</i>		
Up to 25	110	24%
26-30 years	91	20%
31-40 years	131	29%
41-50 years	73	16%
51 & above	46	10%
<i>Education</i>		
Illiterate	112	24%
Up to primary	69	15%
Up to matric	174	38%
Above matric	104	23%
<i>Income</i>		
Up to Rs. 1000	49	11%
Rs. 1001-2000	160	35%
Rs. 2001-3000	90	20%
Rs. 3001-4000	50	11%
More than Rs. 4000	52	11%
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	306	64%
Female	171	36%
<i>Rural/Urban-wise</i>		
Rural	120	25%
Urban	357	75%
Total	477	100%

Unweighted counts & column percentages Source: Gallup Election Media Study (E910), 18-20 October 1990.

as to the veracity of information given by the media and the extent to which the people believed that the media influenced their voting decisions. Table 2 gives the exposure of the sample to mass media by urban/rural dichotomy.

Table 2
Do you get a chance to read newspapers,
listen to radio or watch TV?

<i>Media</i>	<i>Location</i> <i>Response</i>	<i>Urban</i>		<i>Rural</i>	
		<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>	<i>Yes (%)</i>	<i>No (%)</i>
Newspapers (n=450)		229 (66)	116 (34)	63 (60)	42 (40)
Radio* (n=434)		100 (29)	229 (66)	45 (43)	60 (57)
Television (n=369)		182 (61)	115 (39)	41 (57)	31 (43)

* Sixteen (5%) urban radio listeners did not give a clear answer.

Table 3 gives the frequency of election-related information received from the mass media as recalled by our sample by gender. Table 4 gives the responses to the same question, by urban/rural dichotomy.

The survey also tried to ascertain whether the media was doing a good job of reporting the elections with fairness and without bias. Table 5 gives the responses of the sample to this question by gender and Table 6 gives the responses by urban/rural dichotomy.

The study revealed that a majority of the newspaper readers took a special interest in election reporting. Four-fifths of them had read reports about the elections and half (51 per cent) of all newspaper readers identified political news as a subject that attracted them the most in newspapers. Their interests focused more on national rather than provincial or constituency level news.

Newspaper readers were divided on whether the newspapers were doing their job of reporting without bias. Views were somewhat tilted against the performance of newspapers. Twenty-eight per cent rated their performance favourably while 35 per cent rated their performance negatively. The remaining 37 per cent were unable to make particular judgments.

Radio was not a major source of information on the election campaign. Only 23 per cent of the sample said that they had recently heard a broadcast related to elections. When asked to identify the election-related radio broadcast which they had heard, the respondents came up with a variety of programmes, comprising all the special broadcasts on elections, such as an interview programme with political

Table 3
Have you read, listened on radio or viewed on TV any recent reports about the elections?
(Responses by gender)

Media	Gender Response	Male			Female		
		Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)
Newspapers (n=292)		166 (89)	21 (11)	—	66 (63)	39 (37)	—
Radio (n=176)		28 (24)	76 (64)	14 (12)	12 (21)	42 (72)	4 (7)
Television (n=369)		135 (62)	84 (38)	—	88 (59)	62 (41)	—

Table 4
Have you read, listened on radio or viewed on TV any recent reports about the elections?
(Responses by location)

Media Response	Urban		Rural	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Newspapers (n = 292)	174 (76)	55 (24)	58 (92)	5 (8)
Radio (n = 176)	29 (22)	89 (69)	11 (23)	29 (62)
Television (n = 369)	182 (61)	115 (39)	41 (57)	31 (43)

Table 5
Do you think the media reports are fair in their reporting of political news?
(Responses by gender)

Media Response	Male			Female		
	Fair (%)	Partial (%)	No Opinion (%)	Fair (%)	Partial (%)	No Opinion (%)
Newspapers (n=292)	56 (30)	67 (36)	64 (34)	26 (25)	36 (34)	43 (41)
Radio (n=176)	26 (22)	10 (8)	82 (69)	13 (22)	—	45 (78)
Television (n=369)	81 (37)	37 (17)	101 (46)	59 (39)	18 (12)	73 (49)

Table 6
Do you think the media reports are fair in their reporting of political news?
(Responses by location)

Media Response	Location	Urban			Rural		
		Fair (%)	Partial (%)	No Opinion (%)	Fair (%)	Partial (%)	No Opinion (%)
Newspapers (n=292)		54 (24)	87 (38)	88 (38)	28 (44)	16 (25)	19 (30)
Radio (n=176)		26 (20)	6 (5)	97 (75)	13 (28)	4 (8)	30 (64)
Television (n=369)		114 (38)	47 (16)	136 (46)	26 (36)	8 (11)	38 (53)

party leaders titled *Qaumi Siyasat* (1 per cent), polling procedures (5 per cent), a special election programme titled *Election '90* (6 per cent) and political talk (4 per cent). Interestingly, radio news broadcasts were not perceived as an important source of information on elections.

Regarding the question of fairness in radio reporting of political news, a large proportion of the sample (72 per cent), declined to give an opinion. Among those who did, the majority believed that radio reporting was fair (80 per cent). Among those who believed the radio reporting to be biased, more than 70 per cent believed the bias to be in favour of Islam Jamhoori Itehad (IJI), which was the ruling party at that time. Interestingly, 20 per cent believed that radio reporting favoured Ms Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

In contrast to radio, a large proportion of the respondents (60 per cent) had watched an election-related telecast on television. But the election-related viewing was mostly restricted to a series of interviews with political party heads. This programme titled *Qaumi Siyasat* (National Politics) was mentioned by nearly 70 per cent of those who claimed to have watched an election-related programme on TV. The second most often quoted programme was related to the explanation of polling procedures on TV. It is worth noting that television news did not figure prominently as an election-related programme.

Regarding the question of bias on television election reporting, a large proportion of the respondents (47 per cent) did not venture an opinion. Those who did generally viewed it as fair and without partisan bias. However, among those who believed television reporting to be biased, 62 per cent considered it to favour IJI, but a sizeable group (27 per cent) believed the bias was in favour of Ms Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party.

The levels of knowledge on elections were measured on the basis of several indices such as the ability to recall the dates on which national and provincial council elections were to be held, names of political parties and names of candidates contesting the elections.

Around 90 per cent of all respondents were able to correctly recall the dates on which the elections were to be held. This information was derived mainly from television (41 per cent), followed by newspapers (27 per cent), word of mouth (14 per cent) and radio (5 per cent). Eighty-nine per cent of the respondents were able to name at least one political party contesting the elections. The major sources of information about political parties were newspapers (38 per cent), followed by television (18 per cent), word of mouth (17 per cent), posters (6 per cent) and radio (5 per cent). Three in four respondents (73 per cent) knew the names of candidates contesting their constituency. The major sources

of information about candidates were newspapers (27 per cent), word of mouth (23 per cent), posters (20 per cent), television (5 per cent) and radio (2 per cent). It is seen that posters and handbills emerged as a significant source of information on individual candidates contesting the elections.

How did these various forms of publicity impinge on the voting decisions of our respondents? Interestingly enough, only half of the sample said they made up their mind regarding whom to vote for during the election campaign. The other half had made up their mind even prior to the announcement of the elections. Among the 50 per cent of the sample who made their decision during the campaign, 29 per cent said they made their decision soon after the nominations were announced, 11 per cent decided midway through the campaign, 5 per cent did so just before the dates of the poll.

One half of the sample refused to acknowledge that their voting decision was influenced by the election campaign at all. Among the

Table 7
Sources of information/influence on
knowledge of elections and voting behaviour
(By percentage)

<i>Influence</i> <i>Sources of Information</i>	<i>Knowledge of</i>			<i>Voting Decision</i>	<i>Change of Voting Decision</i>
	<i>Election Date</i>	<i>Political Party</i>	<i>Election Candidate</i>		
Newspapers	27	38	27	16	9
Radio	5	5	2	2	1
Television	41	18	5	10	6
Posters/handbills	1	6	20	1	—
Friends	8	11	16	7	2
Relatives	3	5	4	7	2
Neighbours	3	1	3	1	1
Party workers	—	—	—	5	4
Others	4	4	4	10	7
No influence	—	—	—	29	25
No opinion	9	12	21	11	44
Valid responses as a percentage of total sample	91	89	73	50	8

Table 8
Of all the forms of publicity you have seen so far, which would you say
influenced you most in making your decision to vote for a certain candidate?

	Newspapers	Radio	TV	Friends	Relatives	Neighbours	Party Workers	Posters/ Handbills	None	Others	No Opinion
<i>All respondents</i>	74 16%	8 2%	48 10%	33 7%	30 7%	6 1%	25 5%	3 1%	135 29%	49 11%	48 10%
<i>Age</i>											
Up to 25	19 17%	3 3%	15 14%	8 7%	9 8%	3 3%	7 6%	1 1%	23 21%	10 9%	12 11%
26-30 years	14 15%	—	13 14%	8 9%	9 10%	—	6 7%	2 2%	24 26%	10 11%	5 5%
31-40 years	20 15%	2 2%	11 8%	10 8%	7 5%	1 1%	8 6%	—	43 33%	12 9%	17 13%
41-50 years	8 11%	2 3%	5 7%	6 8%	3 4%	2 3%	2 3%	—	28 38%	8 11%	9 12%
51 & above	11 24%	1 2%	4 9%	1 2%	2 4%	—	1 2%	—	14 30%	9 20%	3 7%
<i>Education</i>											
Illiterate	4 4%	2 2%	4 4%	14 13%	12 11%	2 2%	2 2%	1 1%	35 31%	12 11%	24 21%
Up to primary	9 13%	—	7 10%	5 7%	3 4%	1 1%	6 9%	1 1%	22 32%	13 19%	2 3%
Up to matric	34 20%	3 2%	21 12%	8 5%	11 6%	2 1%	9 5%	1 1%	59 34%	14 8%	12 7%
Above matric	27 26%	3 3%	16 15%	6 6%	4 4%	1 1%	8 8%	—	19 18%	10 10%	10 10%

<i>Income</i>											
Up to Rs. 1000	6 12%	—	—	3 6%	6 12%	3 6%	2 4%	1 2%	12 24%	5 10%	9 18%
Rs. 1001-2000	26 16%	3 2%	12 8%	19 12%	16 10%	7 4%	1 1%	44 28%	18 11%	10 6%	6 9%
Rs. 2001-3000	11 12%	3 3%	11 12%	6 7%	2 2%	—	—	1 1%	32 36%	10 11%	8 9%
Rs. 3001-4000	12 24%	—	8 16%	—	—	—	—	—	15 30%	7 14%	4 8%
More than Rs. 4000	7 13%	1 2%	10 19%	—	6 12%	5 10%	—	—	13 25%	4 8%	6 12%
<i>Gender</i>											
Male	55 18%	7 2%	24 8%	30 10%	17 6%	2 1%	19 6%	—	87 29%	35 12%	23 8%
Female	19 12%	1 1%	24 15%	3 2%	13 8%	4 3%	6 4%	3 2%	48 30%	14 9%	25 16%
<i>Rural/Urban-wise</i>											
Rural	21 18%	3 3%	4 3%	18 16%	8 7%	2 2%	3 3%	—	23 20%	27 23%	6 5%
Urban	53 15%	5 1%	44 13%	15 4%	22 6%	4 1%	22 6%	3 1%	112 33%	22 6%	42 12%

Unweighted counts & row percentages Source: Gallup Election Media Study [E910], 18-20 October 1990.

remaining half, the most acknowledged sources were personal relationships (relatives, friends, neighbours) (15 per cent), party workers (5 per cent), newspapers (16 per cent), television (10 per cent), radio (2 per cent), posters and handbills (11 per cent) (Table 7).

Only 8 per cent of the sample believed that their views about whom to vote for were changed during the election campaign. The major sources of influence on this group were newspapers (9 per cent), television (6 per cent), radio (1 per cent), personal contact (5 per cent) and party activists (4 per cent).

Table 8 is a summary of the perceived influence of communication media on the voting decisions of our sample by demographic and socio-economic variables.

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