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Watching the Watchdog - II

**Media conduct in coverage of Local Government
Elections
December - 2013**

Disclaimer

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1. Media conduct in coverage of Local Government Elections

Findings of this report have been assessed in accordance with the guidelines for media, which Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) had formulated before the General Elections 2013. ECP's guidelines provide a code of conduct for print and electronic media in Pakistan; a benchmark to gauge its duties as a free, fair and impartial observer of electoral process in the country*.

These guidelines almost remained unobserved by PEMRA and other competent authorities during the general elections of 2013. None of these state institutions made practical arrangements to monitor the conduct of media on its part. Consequently in the absence of any state operated mechanism, we as a civil society initiative opted to contribute our share for this significant liability with regards to local government elections.

1.1. Mainstream Media

In this endeavor of monitoring the role of media in local government elections, we have strived to evaluate the text, context, space and occurrence of select samples from print and electronic media outlets. The assessment of findings signifies that there has been a very nominal coverage of electoral process on mainstream media. Most of the outlets neither covered the normal developments i.e. nomination, delimitation, campaign or other aspects, nor did they add special information for voter education in the editorials, columns, features and talk shows.

December 2013, witnessed the first ever party-based local government polls in Balochistan. Holding local body's election was a significant feat given the kind of conditions prevailing in the province. Unfortunately the mainstream media, once again, failed to pass the litmus test set by the ECP. Guidelines ranging from *balanced coverage* to *announcement of results* were repeatedly violated by different media outlets in addition to the complete absence of special programs and editorial and articles related to voter education and information about electoral processes.

1.2. Electronic Media

Electronic media instead of focusing on political parties, electoral campaigns and local issues considered it convenient to give coverage to the procedural developments taking place within the state institutions. Out of 940 news items aired during the month of December, 459 were related to the ECP and 305 to the provincial government while political parties and candidates lingered at 185 and 44 respectively.

Out of 930 news items, Sindh and Punjab accounted for 667 items while Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa and Balochistan related news items were limited to 322. The electronic media found it convenient to cover the electoral process from few main cities and towns of the province. Without properly covering the post election phase the election was termed as a success by media and accredited the provincial government and ECP for making it possible. However the confusion surrounding the legislation of local government laws and delimitations etc. in Sindh and Punjab remained the focus of attention. By the end of the month the frequency of news items related to LG elections had reduced in number.

Data analysis of TV programs and talk-shows affirms the general trend. Out of 34 such shows and programs 62% were related to Sindh and Punjab whereas 38% to Balochistan and KP. Hence, a major chunk of air time was allotted to the uncertainty prevailing in the former two provinces in regard to election which was a violation of the guideline pertaining to balanced and fair coverage of news.

1.3. Print Media

Print media was no different. Out of 878 news items, Sindh and Punjab once again took the lion's share with 82% of the news related to it while KP and Balochistan made a mere 13%. Balochistan remained on the print media's back burner as it failed to make news despite the fact that the province underwent an electoral exercise in December. The mere holding of elections was hailed as a triumph for the provincial government and ECP in particular and the democratic process in general.

Neither the pre-election scenario was given ample space in the print media, nor post election developments made any special news. Balochistan found a mention in nine editorials out of 40, whereas Sindh and Punjab were mentioned 18 times each.

The print media, specifically Urdu language national dailies such as Nawaiwat and Dunya can be accredited for giving coverage to candidates, campaigns and other local issues in context of local government polls.

Some 379 news items were related to candidate and 316 to political parties out of a total 878 in comparison to ECP which made news 208 times while 144 items were related to provincial government. It is also pertinent to note that 69% of news items were related to the PPP, PML-N and PTI, with the ruling party PML-N topping the list, as compared to the rest of political parties.

2. Regional Media

Vsh News and Khyber News have given substantial coverage to Baloch and Pashtun dominant areas respectively. Both the channels have been consistently airing news/analysis segments for local government elections in Balochistan, and the former extensively covered both the urban and/rural issues. Daily Intekhab adequately covered all the phases of LG elections in Balochistan. Punjab TV and Waseb TV-the Punjabi and Siraiki language channels almost seemed unconcerned with the local government elections in Balochistan and other provinces. However KTN News aired some headlines and reports a day before election and on Election Day in Balochistan.

3.1. Violations by Electronic Media

Data analysis has revealed that the mainstream media has not learnt any lessons from its past mistakes, mainly because the easy to dodge guidelines. In the absence of any state backed mechanism to monitor the media, the latter brazenly violated the code of conduct put forth by the ECP.

The guideline pertaining to *balanced coverage* was violated by almost all the electronic media outlets as is evident from the data provided. Similarly, *special programs on voter education* and the importance of local government election were brushed aside.

Dawn News overlooked the guideline relating to *the duty of balance that parties/candidates receive news coverage commensurate with their relative importance*; by giving inappropriate coverage to a protest held by the candidates at Quetta against alleged rigging on 10th December.

Moreover Waqt News ignored the guidelines referring to *balance and impartiality* and *to keep a clear distinction between editorial/opinion, news and paid content*; in a report covering the press conference of three political parties against the ruling party in Sindh, without including the version of accused party.

Whereas Channel 5 and Capital TV overlooked the guideline pertaining to *announcement of results*; by announcing unofficial results without any disclaimer, that too before the conclusion of polling in Balochistan, on 7th December.

3.2. Violations by Print Media

The substance and frequency of news samples from the province of Balochistan, where the election process had already been completed, offer an insightful view of media incompetence vis-à-vis the code of conduct set by the ECP. As mentioned earlier, Sindh and Punjab dominated news items instead of the only province where elections actually took place.

Daily Dunya repeatedly violated the guideline pertaining to *unbiased analyses*; as some of the editorials and features published by the outlet were clearly biased against the ruling party with regards to alleged misappropriation in delimitations and postponement of LG polls-in Punjab followed by Sindh. The print media as a whole also failed to adhere to the guidelines focusing on *voter education* and *access*.

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Society for Alternative Media and Research (SAMAR) produced this report after monitoring the contents/broadcast of the print and electronic media for any violations of Code of Conduct for Media by the ECP while covering the local government (LG) elections.

For the purpose, six dailies- Dawn, Dunya, Express Tribune, Kaawish, Nawa-e-Waqt and, TheNews, – and prime time transmission (6 to 10 pm, Monday through Friday) of 12 televisions channels – Apna News, Channel 5, Capital News, Dawn News, Dunya News, Express News, Geo News, KTN News, Khyber News, Pakistan Television News, Punjab TV, Waseb TV and Waqt News were monitored during the month of December, 2013. Moreover Vsh News and Daily Intekhab were also monitored (for a few days around the elections time in Balochistan). SAMAR remains solely responsible for any errors and/or omissions.

*The ECP itself did not issue a code of conduct for media for the LG elections separately. However in the absence of a separate code, it was assumed that media will follow the code given for the general elections 2013 which with a change of the title can serve equally well for any elections’ coverage. The ECP in the code has suggested forming an oversight committee but there is none in sight. SAMAR being a civil society initiative watching media within its limited resources has observed the on-goings in media on the subject and has produced this report. The aim of the report is to highlight violations so that it improves, conforms to the code and a viewer’s/reader’s time is put to a better use.

The code can be viewed at: <http://ecp.gov.pk/misc/MediaCode.pdf>.

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