Journal of Peace, Development and Communication

Article:	**An Analysis of Taliban Conflict in daily Dawn during Three Regimes in Pakistan**
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Published:	19th March 2023
Publisher Information:	Journal of Peace, Development and Communication (JPDC)
To Cite this Article:	Haq, I., & Hussain, S. (2023). An Analysis of Taliban Conflict in daily Dawn during Three Regimes in Pakistan. *Journal of Peace, Development and Communication, 07*(01), 159–171. https://doi.org/10.36968/JPDC-V07-I01-14
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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes news reports on the Taliban conflict published in the daily Dawn newspaper to identify the factors responsible for shifts in press narratives in an environment of diverse and conflicting voices over the period 2001-2015. The study shows different reporting patterns during the governments of the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-i-Azam, PML (Q) led by President Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N). Using quantitative content analysis and using the conceptual framework of political contest theory, this study examines how the competing positions of political actors were mediated by the journalistic agency. The results show that the selected newspaper treated the official and dissenting sources differently during different regimes, meaning that press support for official or dissenting sources constantly changed according to the changing political environment. In addition, the results related to the press's treatment of tones in headlines indicate that the positive, negative, and neutral trend toward government policies during the Taliban conflict in different regimes did not remain static and was constantly changing.

Keywords: State-Press Relations, War, Taliban Conflict, Newspapers, Content Analysis, Political Contest Theory

Introduction:

In 2001, following the Pakistani authorities' decision to engage in the US-led war in Afghanistan, the country witnessed a large number of protests and rallies across the country. Many religious scholars termed the actions of the United States of America as anti-Muslim and aimed at global dominance. At the same time, authorities in Pakistan were accused of pursuing the US agenda instead of national interests, which allowed the killing of Muslim brothers, particularly mujahideen. A large number of people were of the view that Pakistan should not support the US against the Afghan Taliban.

Taliban fighters had to leave their positions in Afghanistan following a full-fledged areal and ground offensive from the United States. Taliban reached the tribal areas adjacent to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border (Iqbal & Silva, 2013). This tactical move enabled them to regroup and initiate militant activities against the Pakistan Army. The formation of TTP in 2007 is closely associated with the fall of the Taliban regime in Kabul (Jadoon, 2021). As a result, a changed policy toward the Afghan Taliban drew Pakistan squarely into a confrontation with local factions of the Taliban, including TTP and many other militant factions, and the ongoing war on terror secretly crept into Pakistani territory in the form of terrorist attacks in the country.

Differing opinions kept emerging over the years, and this conflict remained controversial both in the beginning and in the middle. Opinion polls (2007-2008) showed that Pakistanis preferred peace deals with militants and believed peace deals could end the confrontation (Fair, 2009). Public opinion witnessed a change in late 2009 when the Taliban invaded Buner after withdrawing from the Swat Sharia for Peace Pact. Polling results conducted in May and July 2009 showed that the public was no longer in favor of deals and demanded military operations.

According to a report by the International Center for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (2015), a moderate segment of society opposed violence, but still many supported violent ideologies based on religious motivations. A considerable number of Pakistanis followed religious scholars which had a huge impact on public opinion.

During this difficult period, Pakistani newspapers served as a forum for broader debate during the Taliban conflict, while three subsequent governments had to address the issue of militancy in the country after deciding to become a non-NATO coalition partner in Afghanistan and later in fighting the TTP. In this context, press coverage has seen gradual shifts in discourse. These gradual shifts in print media discourse took shape by competing storylines of various actors including government officials, oppositional actors, religious actors, civil society, and others. Given the unique nature of gradual changes in news discourse, the issue merited systematic study, as the well-known Pakistani newspaper Dawn reported on the Taliban conflict during three successive regimes.

Review of Literature:

Within the scholarly literature on political communication, the most important theory regarding press/foreign policy is Bennett's indexation hypothesis (Aday, 2017). The indexing hypothesis argues that news media report on foreign policy issues, particularly wars, conflicts, and crises, according to elite viewpoints and priorities; this indexes the reporting to the opinion spectrum of the elite (Bennett, 1990, 1994; Bennett et al. 2007).

Similar to indexing, Entman's (2003) Cascading Activation Model narrates how elite dissatisfaction can shape the framing process and how disagreements trigger or suppress messages that deviate from the frames supported by officials (Entman, 2003). By emphasizing interactions between cultural congruence, motivations, power, and strategy, the cascade model provides new insights into this scholarly domain.

Wolfsfeld (2004) adds new dimensions to this ongoing theoretical development by offering the theory of political contest, which posits that antagonists struggle to gain media attention for political control. This relationship between antagonists and media is seen as a competitive symbiosis based on the exchange of messages for the public. High status and organizational resources allow an antagonist (state agency) to produce robust and newsworthy events compared to the weaker antagonists. Consequently, the weaker antagonists (challengers) resort to rebellious and unacceptable social behavior to gain news media attention. Wolfsfeld explains that while the media remain loyal to the authorities, they also become advocates of weak opponents and challengers. This means that the media portrays the conflict as portrayed by the authorities, but also communicates the challenger's stance.

Prominent scholars have empirically examined press coverage of conflicts related to political support to determine the role of the press in supporting or opposing states' stated positions (Hallin, 1984, 1989; Bennett, 1990; Mermin, 19--, Entman et al Page, 1994; Thrall, 2000) and have concluded that the news media largely index elite viewpoints in news reports and select authoritative sources, thus remaining obedient to government and elites. However, other scholars such as Zaller and Chiu (2000) argue that the press has become independent of Congress and the President, although not entirely independent of government officials.

A recent study by Goddard et al. (2008) provides valuable insight into how the British press arranged its coverage of the government's decision to go to war in Iraq in an environment of a diversity of opinions. In another study, Robinson et al. (2009) analyzed television coverage of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The results show that the coverage reflected characteristics of elite-driven, independent, and oppositional models in news media performance.

The scholarly literature on press-state relations in the context of Pakistan is sparse, but scholars have examined the Pakistani media's coverage of conflicts through the lens of agenda-setting theory and framing. Some of the notable studies in this area are Siraj (2010), Hussain and Siraj (2018), Hussain (2016), Safdar et al. (2018), Qadir and Alasuutari (2013).

The Political Contest Theory

In his political contest theory, Wolfsfeld (1997, 2004) argues that government leaders keep struggling to gain control of the political environment and that their level of success in turn influences the role of the news media. The level of control, according to Wolfsfeld, can be determined by considering three factors: the ability to initiate and control events, the ability to regulate the flow of information, and the ability to mobilize elite support. The approach is actor-centric as it seeks to gain a more accurate understanding of how different political actors struggle for time, space, and legitimacy in the news media and what impact this struggle might have on the political processes.

Wolfsfeld (2004) suggests studying press performance on a scale of independence. At one corner of the scale, the press functions as a governmental tool to get governmental messages across, disregarding challengers, especially in times of crisis and war; at the middle point of the scale, the press serves as a semi-honest mediator, giving challengers ample time

and space; At the other extreme, the press acts as the underdog's advocate by amplifying the challengers' statements. Coupled with an apparent lack of literature in the Pakistani context, this comprehensive review identifies the following gaps in the existing literature:

The performance of news media was examined when advanced countries were involved in conflicts in foreign countries where internal security was not threatened. The press performance was not examined in a multi-party or coalition sort of political environment. Finally, scenarios wherein the enemy was earlier a friend and later becomes a foe were not examined.

While staying within the framework of political contest theory, this paper attempts to fill the above gaps by examining press-state relations in a multiparty environment. To trace the changing portrayals of the Taliban conflict in the Pakistani press, this paper analyzes press coverage during three regimes, including one led by President Musharraf and two subsequent governments of the Pakistan Peoples Party and the PML(N).

Research Questions:

Overall, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Which sources/actors dominated the coverage during the selected regimes?

RQ2: Are there any changes regarding the policy positions of dissenting groups during the governments of President Pervez Musharraf (PML-Q), PPP, and PMLN?

RQ3: To what extent do the tones in the headlines of the newspapers differ during the three governments?

Methodology

Content Analysis:

Content analysis enables the systematic analysis of a large number of units (Krippendorff, 2004: 3). In addition, the systematic analysis of texts remains replicable by other scientists. According to Ole R. Holsti, content analysis is much more effective as a multipurpose research method to study problems where the content of the communication serves as a basis for inferences. This study primarily examines media-state relations in the theoretical area of political contest theory, and thus also utilizes methodological insights from the work of Robinson et al. (2006; and 2009), Goddard et al. (2008), and Murray et al. (2008), who also used the established frameworks by Hallin (1986), Semetko et al. (1991) and Wolfsfeld (1997) to examine cases of press autonomy in their research.

To fulfill the purpose of the present study, the sample was drawn from the daily Dawn. According to International Media Support (2009), the daily newspaper Dawn is a liberal, newspaper with moderate views. The newspaper is considered to be the English elite daily as it is well-received by the country's politicians and educated population (Hussain and Siraj, 2018).

Sampling Technique:

Given the unique characteristics of the Taliban conflict spanning 15 years and three governments, the present study used the constructed week technique for an in-depth analysis of news texts. This sampling method has attracted the attention of scientists in recent years as an effective and trusted tool. The constructed week technique used in media content studies ensures that the selected sample represents a full 7 days of a week (Jones & Carter, 1959; Stempel III, 1952) to account for cyclical variations in news content (Riffe, Aust, & Lacy, 1993). Through this technique, coverage of selected newspapers is retrieved each week of each

month throughout the sample period. This is a tested method and studies by Riffe et al. (1993) demonstrate that the constructed week sampling method is far better and more reliable in analyzing newspaper content compared to other techniques like random sampling and sampling of consecutive days.

For the present study, almost all the news related to the Taliban conflict from the front page and the national page were selected from the archives (paper folders) of the National Library of Pakistan and analyzed. The complete individual news report served as the analysis unit.

The main focus of this paper continued to be to capture gradual changes in press discourse during three governments, including the President Musharraf-led PML-Q (2001-2008), PPP (2009-2013), and PML-N (2013-2015).

Coding Scheme:

The coding scheme was formulated in line with the work of prominent scholars using, for example, Gadi Wolsfeld's (1997, 2003, 2004) Gulf War and Intifada in The Media and Political Conflict. Similarly, the coding scheme for the present study also benefitted from coded classifications developed by Robinson et al. (2010) in their study of the UK's media performance during the Iraq War, which was the modified forms of those applied by Hallin (1986) and Wolfsfeld (1997).

The following significant variables were coded:

Main Source/ Actors:

This variable was included to methodically enumerate who the press turned to for information during the above-mentioned regimes. Did the press rely on prominent government/official sources, or did they also contact and gather information for their stories from the opposition, religious figures, civil society, and foreign sources? These sources can be political, religious, or military figures, spokespersons of various government institutions, militant groups, non-governmental organizations, associations, experts, foreign leaders, former government officials, etc. To fulfill the purpose of this analysis, the presence of a source has been encoded when citing a source or discussing its position in the message. However, if a message only mentioned the action of a specific group or individual, this was not counted as having a source in the unit or the message.

Position of Source on Policy & Actions:

This variable captures the position/attitude expressed by the cited sources towards the prevailing policies and actions of the respective governments. The possible coding values were as follows: 1- Critical of government policy, 2) Supportive of government policy, 3) and Mixed position.

The Tone in Headline:

This variable records the expression in the headings of news reports, i.e. on government policies and actions, whether the headline expresses a positive bias towards the respective government's policies and actions, reflects a negative bias, or represents a neutral stance in the context of the Taliban conflict. Thus, if the text in a particular heading praised or supported a particular movement or announcement made by official sources, that heading was coded as positive. On the other hand, if the headline reflected criticism or a possible flaw in the announced policy or action by officials, the headline was coded as negative toward government

policy. However, if a headline neither praised nor criticized an announcement or action by officials, it was coded as neutral.

The intercoder reliability was ensured by discussing at length the research purpose and details of the variables with five MS social science students who had the previous familiarity with content analysis of news text. The intercoder reliability test was carried out after coding 65 news items during the pilot phase, and its result in Krippendorff's alpha was not less than 0.84. Having reached this appropriate level of agreement, the authors then coded the remaining news stories.

Research Findings:

The main objective of this study was to examine the reporting patterns of the Dawn newspaper during the Taliban conflict while staying within the theoretical realm of press-state relations. For this purpose, the data were collected in such a way as to capture the different patterns of press coverage during three regimes, i.e. the Musharraf-led PML (Q), the PPP, and the PML (N) government. A total of 318 news reports from the daily newspaper Dawn were analyzed from 2001 to 2015. The empirical findings are explained below:

Table 1

Regime-wise Press Share of Sources.

Regime	Source					
	Govt. / Military	Opposition Parties	Militant Groups Reps	Civil society	Foreign Sources	Total
Musharraf Regime	64 (43.8%)	41(28.1%)	3(2.1%)	27(18.5%)	11(7.5%)	146(100.0%)
PPP Regime	71 (52.6%)	13 (9.6%)	6 (4.4%)	32 (23.7%)	13 (9.6%)	135 (100.0%)
PML-N Regime	25 (67.6%)	5 (13.5%)	2 (5.4%)	1 (2.7%)	4 (10.8%)	37 (100.0%)
Total	160 (50.3%)	59 (18.6%)	11 (3.5%)	60 (18.9%)	28 (8.8%)	318 (100.0%)

RQ1: Which sources/actors dominated the coverage during the selected regimes?

Regarding governments' control over the political environment that supports fostering consensus and minimizing dissent, the study attempted to analyze the share of different actors, particularly the share of government and opposition sources during three regimes. The results in Table 1 show that during Musharraf's government, sources from opposition parties received (28.1%) coverage, while government sources received (43.8%) coverage. On the other hand, during the PPP regime, the coverage of the opposition parties decreased and reached (9.6%). Interestingly, government sources received (52.6%) share during the PPP regime. During the PML(N) government, the share of opposition party sources was only (18.6%), while government sources (50.3%) received the highest share among the three regimes.

Table 2

Positions of Sources toward Govt Policy in Three Regimes.

Regime	Position			
	Supportive	**Critical**	**Mixed**	Total
Musharraf Regime	61 (41.8%)	64 (43.8%)	21 (14.4%)	146 (100.0%)
PPP Regime	36 (26.7%)	27 (20.0%)	72 (53.3%)	135 (100.0%)
PML-N Regime	17 (45.9%)	2 (5.4%)	18 (48.6%)	37 (100.0%)
Total	114 (35.8%)	93 (29.2%)	111 (34.9%)	318 (100.0%)

RQ2: Are there any changes regarding the policy positions of dissenting groups during the governments of President Pervez Musharraf led (PML-Q), PPP and PMLN?

To account for the political environment and dissent, the study systematically coded the sources' reported dissent in terms of supportive, critical, and mixed attitudes toward government policies and actions. The results in Table 2 show that during the Musharraf government, the critical stance of the opposition groups was (43.8%). This proportion was reduced in the PPP regime, where the critical attitude of opposition sources reached (20%). This proportion further decreased in the PML-N regime, narrowing to (5.4%) for the opposition. From the perspective of political contest theory, one evident reason for the expression of extreme dissent during the Musharraf regime could be Pakistan's political scene from 1999 to 2008, as this was a time when only some small political parties held stakes in the government. On the other hand, prominent political parties were out of business and eager to exploit any possible event or situation against the incumbent government. Later, during the governments of PPP and PML-N, the main political parties were in power which ultimately reduced the critical viewpoints to a great extent as can be seen in the analysis of Dawn's news reports.

Table 3: Regime-wise Distribution of 'Headline Tone'

Regime	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
Musharraf Regime	49 (33.6%)	56 (38.4%)	41 (28.1%)	146 (100.0%)
PPP Regime	32 (23.7%)	23 (17.0%)	80 (59.3%)	135 (100.0%)
PML-N Regime	12 (32.4%)	2 (5.4%)	23 (62.2%)	37 (100.0%)
Total	93 (29.2%)	81 (25.5%)	144 (45.3%)	318 (100.0%)

RQ3: To what extent do the tones in the headlines of the newspapers differ during the three governments?

The results in Table 3 show that during the Musharraf regime, the negative headline ratio was 38.4% while the positive headline ratio was 33.6%. On the other hand, the negative headline tone decreased to 17% during the PPP regime, while the positive headline tone was 23%. The negative trend in headlines continued to decrease in the PML(N) regime as the negative headlines in Dawn were only (5.4%) while the positive headlines were 32.4%.

Discussion & Conclusion

This study has examined media-state relations during the tenure of three governments in Pakistan, namely the PML (Q) government under President Pervez Musharraf, the PPP regime, and the PML-N government in the above context. The analysis has focused on how the conflicting narratives of political actors were conveyed through the journalistic agency.

The analysis shows that while government sources received more coverage during the regime of President Pervez Musharraf, opposition sources were successful in becoming more inclusive compared to the latter two governments. During the PPP regime, coverage of opposition political parties declined dramatically. Similarly, in the PML (N) regime, the proportion of opposition parties shrank to its minimum, while government sources received the highest coverage of the three regimes.

Similarly, the critical stance of opposition parties remained at its peak, which began to decline during the PPP regime. Interestingly, this ratio decreased dramatically during the PML (N) regime, leading to a gradual increase in the mixed political position of opposition parties and civil society during the PML (N) regime.

Regarding the headlines, i.e. positive, negative and neutral, during President Musharraf's administration there was an almost equal ratio of positive and headlines and even fewer neutral headlines. Also in the PPP government, there was an almost equal ratio of negative and positive headline tones, but the ratio of neutral headline tones was high. The only government that received the highest proportion of neutral headline tones was the PML-N, along with the minimum proportion of negative headline tones and a significant proportion of positive headline tones.

The empirical findings of this study indicate that during an unexpected perilous dangerous conflict, the daily newspaper Dawn not only played the role of regime accomplice but took its position in the middle of the independence continuum. Although empirical evidence suggests that the selected press gave proportionately more space to the views of official sources during the conflict period, the evidence also indicates that dissenting voices were at times given significant space. These are interesting findings, showing that in the face of changing local and international political scenarios that ultimately threaten the country's national security, the press has selected from a wide range of sources and placed challenger's viewpoints alongside official sources to convey all views to readers.

Aside from source selection, the study also provides evidence, using the variable of press tone, that the press treated official and dissenting sources differently at different times, suggesting that press support for official or dissenting sources was constantly changing accordingly with changing political environment. Furthermore, the results related to the press treatment of tones in headlines suggest that the positive, negative, and neutral trends toward government policies did not remain static and constantly changed in different regimes.

In the domain of press-state relations, the available literature revolves around studies that primarily examine press performance in western countries during wars and conflicts. Resultantly, theories in this area have been developed in the United States and the bipartisan political environment. This paper embarks upon filling this gap by examining press performance in a multiparty political environment where the internal security of a country in the Global South was at stake due to involvement in a conflict. Moreover, the cultural image of the enemy was also not well-defined among the masses. Secondly, studies of press performance during wars other than the Indo-Pak conflict are scant in the context of Pakistan. The present study has thus pioneered this neglected yet significant area of inquiry.

Policy Implications:

Scholars believe unexpected events at home and abroad allow the press to incorporate oppositional readings into news, ultimately weakening government control over news content. Culturally incongruent messages can be cited as a key reason for weak state control over the press, as President Pervez Musharraf's government found it difficult to turn the Taliban's friendly status into an enemy. Given the above facts and summarizing the empirical evidence, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

During and after sudden events that could impact national security and public perception, such as the event of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2022 followed by

speculation of rising extremism and militancy in Pakistan, the National Security Council may communicate measures other than strategic to press. The severity of the threat, the security measures taken and the ability to counter the threat, etc. can be communicated through the mainstream press (printed and electronic) so that they can be relayed to the masses and they can gain a sense of satisfaction that the state has full control of the developing affairs and will face the threat with an iron fist. Furthermore, the fog of such speculation can also be cleared by reaching out to global news networks (Al Jazeera, CNN, DW, etc.) and providing factual and substantive information so that the international community can be informed of what Pakistan is doing to avert the threat.

An Analysis of Taliban Conflict in daily Dawn

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