

Opening address at Pakistan Media summit 2024

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The last seventy years experience of developing countries has demonstrated that the focus of Economic Development on the narrow concept of economic growth or increases in GDP is highly misplaced. . A much broader concept that aims at inclusive, sustained and sustainable growth is the current working hypothesis. Indicators of success or failure now cover wide range of Social, Environmental and Governance dimensions . The respective roles of state, market and society have also been redefined and the binary State vis Market or ideological labels such as neo liberalism vs Socialism are no longer valid and have become outdated concepts. What we need today is a strong , competent and effective State, well functioning competitive markets with ease of entry and exit and a vibrant and vigilant civil society. The consensus view is that it is the collaborative effort of all these three stakeholders working in tandem and unison that can bring about successful outcomes . It is in this context that I would offer some remarks as to how a responsible, ethical and honest media in Pakistan can play a major catalyst role in this endeavour.

First, a duly elected Government has to be monitored continuously to assess whether it is fulfilling the promises it had made when it sought the mandate of the people. Media can act as a watchdog and expose corrupt practices or other illegal benefits derived by those in power for personal gains by misusing public offices. Transparency in major contracts or in appointments to key positions that are the main source of political patronage can be achieved if the timely accurate information is disclosed to the public at large. Good Governance that is highly correlated with economic development can result from this combination of monitoring, disclosure and exposure of malpractices and infringement of human rights. Three out of six Governance indicators—Government effectiveness, Control of Corruption and Rule of Law – can be thus positively impacted. Extractive institutions hinder growth, while inclusive institutions foster

broad-based development. For this purpose, it is imperative that the Media does not have to be either partisan as it fully endorses whatever the Government is doing as is happening in India or act as perpetual opposition to the Government of the day as is and has been the case in Pakistan since early 2000s. During my stint in the Government I found that many civil servants were reluctant to take or implement decisions for the fear of unfounded character assassination campaigns in the media in addition to the fear of NAB. The media houses have to demonstrate a sense of responsibility, prudence, objectivity and impartiality despite the extraneous pressures of coercion or favours. This is easy said rather than done. Why? I would quote Edward Herman and Naom Choksy to illustrate this point.

“ If the powerful interests -whether the business groups that control media conglomerates or the state organs – are able to fix the premises of discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see, hear and think about and to manage public opinion by regular propaganda campaign, the standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with reality.”

Conflicts of interest of the owners between the goal of advancing their businesses and exercising neutrality in their media transmissions are a stumbling block that does not permit them to play the role which I have specified above. Biases, prejudices and personal or parochial considerations by the anchors to keep the clicks rising and converting into substantial pecuniary benefits for themselves and their owners reinforce the tendency which is so visible these days. Good Governance, unfortunately, is the victim.

I now turn to the markets or the private sector. Let me remind the audience that the private sector consisting of farmers, Laborers, firms, self employed, manufacturers, transporters, traders and distributors, service providers, etc contribute 80 percent to the national income. Government's share is only 20 percent. Economic development is therefore very much dependent on how the markets function. If they are competitive with level playing field for everyone then the resources would be allocated efficiently and the country would move on an upward growth trajectory. On the other hand, if the markets are rigged by a small segment of elite class for their own self aggrandizement based on rent seeking and grant of largesse by the state

then the growth would remain unsustainable, exclusive and short lived with booms and bursts. For efficient markets to function the multiple buyers and sellers must have access to the relevant information. TV channels and the print media can provide this service and minimize asymmetry of information which is inimical to competitive markets. But this service is no longer rendered as it used to be in the past and has become confined to the views and opinions of so called experts who are called on Talk shows. These opinions are no substitute for unvarnished, unfiltered and verifiable information. In addition to the existing market distortions which we all are familiar with, a new and powerful phenomenon of misinformation, disinformation, contrived and fake news, disseminated widely and swiftly by social media channels has exacerbated the situation. Forwards from anonymous and unattributable sources repeated multiple times are accepted on their face value and form the basis of individual opinions. Businesses are swayed by this phenomenon and the negative news spread all around deter them from making rational and desirable economic decisions. Among many factors that explain the relative economic success of India and Bangladesh are the consonance between the Rising India and Shining Bangladesh campaigns of the Governments and their wider dissemination by the print, electronic and social media channels. Investors feel confident and get reassured and therefore investment rates in both these countries have gone up to 30 percent –twice that of Pakistan. That is why their average annual rate of growth is 6 percent compared to our 3 percent. In Pakistan, all you hear between 8 pm and 11 pm every night is the episodes of doom and gloom, when the country is going to default, when the foreign exchange reserves are going to become zero, what level the Rupee Dollar exchange rate is going to touch, the factories are closing down, big business men are moving to Dubai, the majority of professionals are migrating, remittances have stopped coming in, and so on and on. There is of course some truth in all of these speculations but these are not presented in a balanced manner within the proper context. Markets work on sentiments, emotions such as fear, greed, biases, social influences and the negative information fed to them by the media pundits over and over again reinforces their sentiments towards prudence, caution, wait and see attitude and withdrawal. Markets get rattled under the influence of such sentiments as the herd instinct becomes dominant. The instantaneous dissemination of unverified and unauthentic news does immense harm as

economic fundamentals are set aside and drowned in cacophony causing huge confusion in the minds of market participants. . How can one expect any businessman listening to these expert opinions over and over again to invest in Pakistan. We are therefore caught in a dilemma. Until investment takes place and growth resumes our economic conditions would remain precarious but how can we expect investment to pour in when all we hear day after day is a bleak picture of the economy. The more negative your show is the higher are your ratings. Some of my friends who were good economic journalists had to switch from economic to political commentary as their ratings were falling. How do we resolve this dilemma? I do not have any answers but I am sure the experts on the panel would like to dwell upon this.

Finally, I come to the impact of media on the civil society . A large number of voluntary organizations are doing commendable job in providing basic services such as Education, Health, Family Planning, Technical and Vocational Training, economic uplift of marginalized communities. Our media, with a few notable exceptions, never takes the trouble of showcasing these efforts which can inspire other civil society groups to follow their lead creating a multiplier effect by scaling up these activities. Government alone cannot overcome the problem of 23 million children out of school, literacy poverty, stunting and malnutrition of young children . Joint and collaborative efforts between the Government, private sector and the civil society have helped Bangladesh achieve impressive social indicators. I haven't seen any debate or discussion of population control between Religious scholars and Population experts on any of the channels or in the print media except a few exhortative articles or lip service. Have we ever pondered as to how instead of fueling mistrust , polarization and cleavages the media can play a part in nurturing trust and promoting collaboration among the various segments of the society? Partnerships between Government, private sector and the civil society organizations in Sindh and Punjab in the areas of Education and Health have been successful . Have we ever heard or seen any stories focusing on these successful outcomes. The collateral benefits of highlighting these stories are once again building up of trust, mobilization of financial and human resources and scaling up of these activities . Such partnerships are badly

needed in Balochistan, Merged and backward districts of KP, Rural Sindh and Southern Punjab.

To sum up, my submission is that the media can play a constructive role in ensuring good governance , stifling anti competitive market forces and promoting trust and partnerships between the Government, private sector and the civil society. Other countries have shown that this is a feasible proposition and I am confident we can do it too.