

## The Role of the Pakistani Mass Media in the Lawyers' Resistance against the Musharraf Dictatorship, 2007-2009<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Note: All the pictures used in this paper are from the author's camera and were captured during research on the lawyers' movement in Pakistan, during 2007 and 2008.

## **Background**

The Arab Spring is a recent prominent example of the strength of the civil resistance. However, the world has witnessed such movements from time to time, for example the Gandhi's movement against the British Raj, and the Orange Revolution of Ukraine in 2004 (Karatnycky & Ackerman 2005:4).

Pakistan has a long history of dictatorships due to which democratic institutions have not been able to develop. Under three different military rules – from 1958-1971, 1977-1988 and 1999-2008 – dictators have ruled the country for nearly 33 years in its existence of 65 years, since 1947. It is in this context that we have to see the value of the lawyers' movement.

In March 2007, Pakistani lawyers initiated a movement for an independent judiciary in Pakistan. The movement was created after President General Musharraf suspended the country's Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry (CJ Chaudhry). Following this, lawyers initiated a non-violent struggle that attracted thousands of political and civil society activists. Prior to this incident, CJ Chaudhry had several important judgments to his credit, the most significant being the case in which he overturned the privatization of the Pakistan Steel Mills – a profit making corporation in Pakistan – and another in which he forced the government to locate “missing” persons, allegedly held by the intelligence agencies of Pakistan. These anti-government judgments triggered this conflict between the Musharraf government and the judiciary. Therefore, the corruption charges against CJ Chaudhry were nothing but an attempt to direct the judiciary, which had gone out of the hands of the ruling elites or specifically the dictator. In addition, the Naeem Bukhari's<sup>2</sup> letter was an egoistic attempt from one of the famous lawyers in Pakistan to revenge his defeats in front of CJ Chaudhry in the Supreme Court. Bukhari's letter became a supporting annex to the government's reference against CJ Chaudhry (Hamid 2007).

During the period between March and May 2007, the lawyers were leading rallies and protesting to get CJ Chaudhry reinstated as the Chief Justice of Pakistan. In response to the growing pressure from the lawyers' community on the government, a full court bench at the Supreme Court was set-up in May 2007. Accordingly, the proceedings of the Supreme Judicial Council commenced to deal with the case of CJ Chaudhry. Then day-to-day hearings started at the Supreme

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<sup>2</sup> Soon after this letter was publicized, Bukhari's membership with the Supreme Court Bar Association was cancelled.

Court. Simultaneously, the lawyers continued supporting the firm stand of CJ Chaudhry and one of the country's famous lawyers, Aitzaz Ahsan, was working hard as CJ Chaudhry's lawyer and a key leader of the resistance (Covasjee 2008). After hearings in the Supreme Court went on for over two months, on July 20, 2007, the bench headed by Justice Ramday, reinstated CJ Chaudhry. Then, Musharraf had no better option but to accept the decision of the Supreme Court, but this is not where the conflict ended.

After returning to his office, CJ Chaudhry continued his practice in the similar manner by taking up cases against the establishment. Consequently, the Supreme Court became intolerable to the people sitting in the powerhouses of Pakistan. Finally, in November 2007, after finding no other alternative, President and General Pervez Musharraf, in his capacity as Chief of Army Staff, declared a state of emergency. General Musharraf imposed the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) that suspends the Constitution and the fundamental rights of citizens, gags the media, and forbids any form of dissent (Eteraz 2007). This drastically distressed the already fragile political setup prevalent in the country. It was a do or die situation for Musharraf because only a few days after the martial law, a bench of the Supreme Court of Pakistan was to decide on a petition challenging the constitutional eligibility of the controversial October 2007 elections that re-elected Musharraf as the president for another term.

The lawyers kept the momentum of the movement steady by transforming under shifting conditions. In March 2007, the lawyers united to reinstate the Chief Justice of Pakistan, but their objectives were transformed in the post-November 2007 era. The *Adliya Bachao Tehreek* or Save Judiciary Movement started after November 3, 2007. Its primary focus was of course the reinstatement of pre-November 3 Judiciary in Pakistan. As far as the movement and its objectives were concerned, it was the continuation of the movement, which started in March 2007 and it was still in response to consistent illegal moves of General Musharraf. The second stage, post-emergency, was certainly on a higher pedestal – nationwide demonstrations against the proclamation of Martial Law under the garb of emergency.

It was clear and understandable that ultimately the masses would determine not only the future of this movement but also that of their country. People made the right decision, as it was observed on the Election Day in 2008 that demonstrated the people's power in Pakistan. Due to fears of unfair elections, the lawyers and their political allies like Imran Khan of the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf, boycotted

the elections. However, the lawyers on this issue were divided because some were demanding people to express their anti-establishment view through the election. Thus, despite the boycott, people voted against the Musharraf regime. This changed the dynamics of the movement initiated by the lawyers, as people voted against the previous government of Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), Musharraf's ally. Therefore, this vote was also against Musharraf, who supported PML-Q in the election campaigns.

The lawyers' movement achieved what it set out for, the removal of a dictator, and this confirmed the worth of people's power in this country. The lawyers' movement managed to bring together thousands of people from the civil society, media, and politics, and it deserves to be highlighted in the golden annals of Pakistan's history. The following abstract from the statement of the Asian Human Rights Commission is worth mentioning: "The contributions of the lawyers must be treated as a positive direction for the future political and democratic set up. The movement can be termed as a strong foundation stone of future democracy in Pakistan and it should be recognized by the new parliament" (AHRC 2008). The role of the mass media was crucial in becoming a strong pillar of support for the civil resistance in Pakistan, and that shows that the country is home to worthwhile institutions. According to a renowned Pakistani scholar (Cheema 2009:133), the movement mainly relied on media, lawyers, NGOs, and international support of the West.

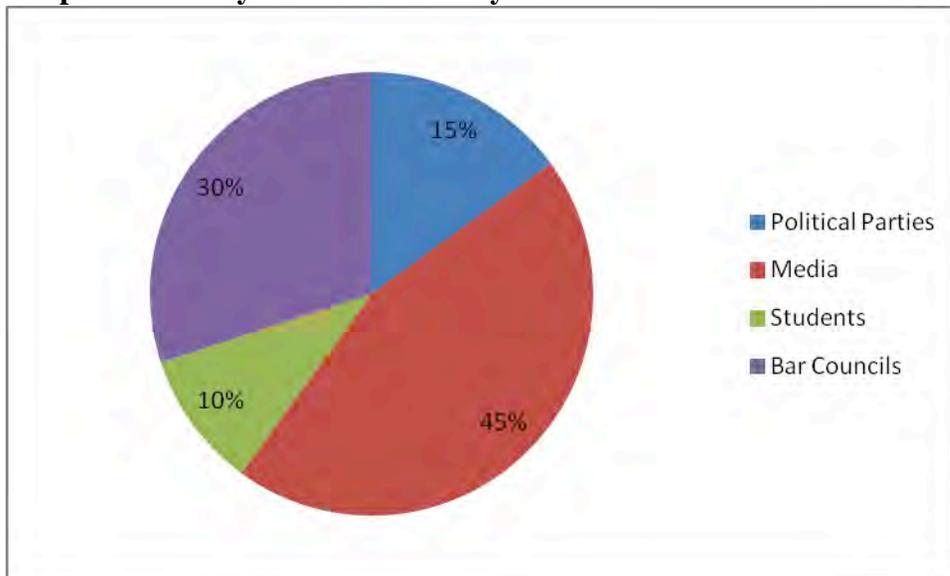
Many factors influenced the people's reactions against the dictatorship and among them, the role of the resistance leadership, particularly Aitzaz Ahsan, and the mass media were significant. The non-violent struggle led by the lawyers, backed by millions of Pakistanis from home and abroad, paved the way for the restoration of democracy in the country by ending the reign of a dictator (Ahmed & Stephen 2010:508). According to a report of a Denmark-based organization called International Media Support, "the Pakistani media, especially the electronic media, played a significant role in mobilizing public support for the demonstrations" during a struggle organized by the lawyers (IMS 2009). However, the role of mass media has not been studied with regard to its contribution towards the success of the lawyers' movement and that is what this paper attempts to explore.

### **Mass media and its role**

The analysis in this section is based on the data collection done by the author during 2007 and 2008 through interviews of 30 active members of the movement who came from all occupations, for example lawyers, NGO workers, journalists, and public servants. Not surprisingly, all of them declared the movement successful.

In South Asia, the Pakistani media has proved to be more vibrant. Irrespective of direct and indirect bans and restrictions from the governments, the media enjoys a great deal of freedom of information in the country. Consequently, the media was able to play its role in one of the successful civil struggles in the history of Pakistan. As shown in the graph below (Graph 1), the majority of the participants (members of the movement) identified saw in the Pakistani media a key partner.

**Graph 1: The Key Allies in the Lawyers' Movement**



The mass media has been expanding due to technological advancements and after the advent of internet, this field has moved beyond the confines of electronic and print media to internet – an important way of spreading information via e-mails, blogs, and social networking websites. This field is very broad, and considering the limited scope of this paper, the author will examine the role of TV channels,

newspapers and internet with reference to the case under investigation – the lawyers’ movement (2007-2009).

### *Electronic and print media*

The role of TV channels in the lawyers’ movement was more significant than newspapers due to the obvious limitations of the latter, such as the limited readership due to the low literacy rate. For 2010-11, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics reported 58 percent literate people in the country (PBS 2011). Consequently, the market for the print media has been decreasing in Pakistan. In 1997, the total number of regular print publications was 4,455, which reduced to merely 945 in 2003 (IMS 2009). It is because people, both literate and illiterate, have found better mediums for entertainment and news – robust TV channels. Therefore, the reduction in newspaper readership is not merely because of the level of literacy rate, because that has been overall increasing in percentage terms in Pakistan. There are other reasons, such as convenience and preferences. Due to the availability of cable operators, it is a lot easier for people to access all the TV channels and that too at a low price.

It is important to underscore that the revolution of electronic media with the help of private TV channels happened during the Musharraf era. This change has transformed the country in many ways, especially socially. Roughly, ten years ago, there was only a state owned TV channel, but now there are over 100. During the time of the movement, 15 out of nearly 49 TV channels were committed to nearly 24-hour news (IMS 2009). In 2002, Geo became Pakistan’s first private TV channel (Crabtree 2009). Accordingly, the TV viewership has increased in Pakistan – 86 million in 2009 (GI-P 2009). However, when it comes to the increasing strength of TV channels, it is not merely due to the role of electronic media. This is because the prominent TV channels are owned by well-established newspaper agencies, such as the Jang Group, Dawn, Nawa-i-Waqt, etc. Some of these channels have well-established media roots and alliances.

Pakistan’s geostrategic interests motivated media liberalization. In the post-Kargil war era, General Musharraf and his comrades wanted to decrease the influence of Indian media and its (India’s) propaganda in Pakistan. A dictator did what many of the democratic governments could not due to the fear of media. While reforming media policies, Musharraf would not have imagined that one day these privately owned TV channels would turn against him by avoiding the authority of

his army and intelligence agencies. Nonetheless, Musharraf rightfully claimed the credit for the media revolution, as was the case when interviewed in 2008:

... the freedom of media. I would like to take the credit for that. Whatever the media says, it is I who gave them the private television channels. Back in 2001, there used to be one – Pakistan Television. Today, there are over 50 channels operating. The media should exercise a check over the government (O'Hara 2008).

There is a strong connection between the tactics employed during the lawyers' movement and the media. A learning curve was witnessed in strategic and tactical knowledge, as far as the leadership and organization of the movement is concerned. With time, just like any other learning activity, the lawyers developed better strategies to bring down a dictator and learned from their experiences over the course of the two years under investigation. Most lawyers were able to consistently go on Thursday strikes and other boycotts irrespective of the financial blows. Thousands of lawyers made many sacrifices for the cause of the movement. The commitment of these strikes was similar to strikes led by Gandhi in the beginning of the twentieth century against the British Raj in the Indian sub-continent. In the case of the Pakistani lawyers, it was the value of their non-violent activism that attracted a wider audience, especially people who were fed up with widespread oppression in the country.

Among some key tactics, the lawyers and their supporters, particularly politicians and NGO workers, effectively used media outlets to spread their messages that helped this resistance a great deal. For example, CJ Chaudhry, when his case was being heard at the Supreme Court, during the period from May to July 2007, decided to embark on a historic series of visits to his comrades in bar councils across Pakistan. It is important to see this as one of the most significant approaches adopted by the lawyers' movement. CJ Chaudhry accompanied by his supporting lawyers started with his visit to Peshawar, followed by visit to Lahore<sup>3</sup>, Faisalabad, Abbotabad, Hyderabad, and Sukkur. All of these visits had huge backing of local bar councils, increasing the attention to these events. Thus, these visits of CJ Chaudhry and his debates on constitutional issues further strengthened the lawyers' movement and the civil society. Another strategic aspect of the planning was to arrive in the cities in the evening and continue until

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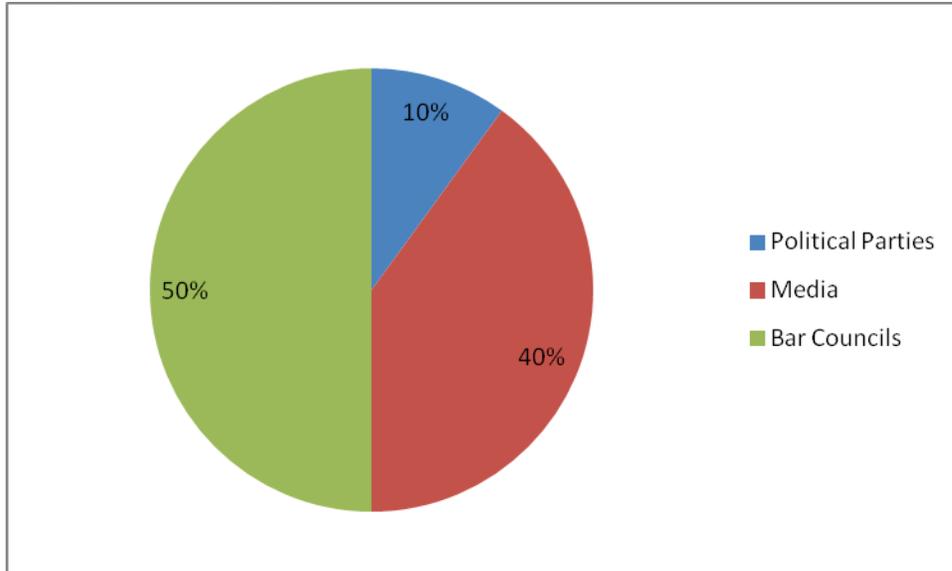
<sup>3</sup> The 24-hour car ride from Islamabad to Lahore of CJ Chaudhry was broadcasted live on several local TV channels, as were the violent attacks on lawyers and journalists in Karachi on the May 12, 2007.

late night to ensure the maximum participation of the working class. This also helped in obtaining full live coverage via TV channels during prime hours. Then, rightly, it was stated in an editorial of *Daily Times* (April 10, 2008) that “without TV coverage the deposed chief justice of Pakistan ... would not have become a national figure”.

The media, most importantly TV channels, were united to challenge the legitimacy of Musharraf’s actions. It is this activism of media that helped the lawyers’ resistance in obtaining support to challenge the illegitimate actions of the dictator. In any civic resistance, a key achievement is to gain people’s support against the legitimacy of authoritarian leadership; therefore, the media can help “civic opposition movements in making the case that they offer a viable alternative to illegitimate authoritarian rule” (Karatnycky & Ackerman 2005:14). In Pakistan’s case, the Musharraf government became the enemy of both lawyers and the media, especially after the regime limited the freedom of media through curbs on TV channels and newspapers. This united the media, especially the prominent TV channels to intentionally challenge and declare the authority of General Musharraf (*Daily Times*, 10 April. 2008).

The modes of communication were diverse and varied under different circumstances during the course of the struggle. However, mainly, messages reached out to masses through the electronic media, especially the famous talk shows of Geo, Aaj and ARY ONE TV channels. It was also through the live talk shows on TV that Aitzaz Ahsan and the Attorney General of that time, Malik Qayyum, challenged each other for a live constitutional debate in March 2008. TV channels broadcasted this constitutional debate. Ultimately, via media many people became aware of the pertinent constitutional clauses vis-à-vis the case of CJ Chaudhry. When asked, who mobilized the people for the resistance, a significant number of the participants said, the media (Graph 2). However, in mobilizing a major role was played by the lawyers themselves through local bar councils.

**Graph 2: Mobilizing Factors of the Movement**



Print media also played a vital role, especially in times when the overall integrity of media was threatened by the Musharraf administration. In June 2008, it was courageous of several English and Urdu dailies to publish paid advertisements calling on the public to join the lawyer's event – the Long March. These advertisements helped to spread the message



PML-N rally in Lahore, 2007.

across the country by decreasing the heavy dependence of the movement on TV channels facing constraints from the administration. For this big event lawyers, generally female lawyers were involved in distributing motivational invitations (posters) to tens of thousands of people in the major cities to increase the participation in the mega event. Importantly, the political alliance for the Long March also influenced the communication within the movement, as the political activists of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) were seen

active to inspire people for this cause. It was a timely event for many political actors, such as PML-N, Pakistan Peoples Party etc., in the country who were looking for a political change through their greater participation in the political process of Pakistan.

Let us examine the Long March episode more closely. The procession gained momentum slowly with an increasing number of public adding into an initial mob of 40,000-50,000. The thousands of lawyers were at the forefront of the Long March, so were people from a variety of other occupations. Predominantly, people who took part in the Long March were lawyers, human rights activists, leading scholars, professionals, retired army officers, religious figures, families of the missing people, and people from the neighboring areas of Islamabad (elderly people, men, women, children, and people with their families). In large numbers, there were political leaders and workers of the PML-N, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf, Jamaat-i-Islami, Khaksar Tehreek, National Workers Party, Awami League, and Sindh Taraqi Pasand Party. Irrespective of their diverse backgrounds, the participants of this movement demanded a free and fair socio-political and governing fabric in Pakistan. This event was not an absolute success. Many young lawyers, students and political activists were disappointed at the manner in which the whole event ended. Consequently, many angry protestors approached mainstream TV channels to share their resentment. TV Channels, such as Geo and Aaj allowed some young lawyers to share their disappointment against the leadership of the lawyers' movement. Consequently, a few TV talk shows hosted conspiracy theories against Aitzaz Ahsan – a leader of the lawyers' struggle. However, the media also helped the movement by informing the leaders of the resistance of the massive responsibility for and huge expectations from their followers.

Media was the backbone of the lawyers' movement in Pakistan. While doing its job, media, intentionally and unintentionally, supported the cause of the lawyers. In the beginning, for these TV channels, the CJ Chaudhry's movement was just like another story, but as the time passed, it gained interest of the masses and of TV channels. Some TV channels, namely Geo, Aaj and ARY-ONE had to pay a heavy price of showing programs that triggered anti-establishments sentiments in the country and abroad. For example, the government through the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which was established by the General Musharraf's government, harshly dealt with these TV channels. PEMRA executed stringent orders for live shows and forced some TV channels to drop their famous anchors, for example, Hamid Mir, Kashif Khan, Kamran Khan, Dr

Shahid Masood, Asma Sherazi and Talat Hussain. For roughly two months in most cases, people were deprived of the opportunity to watch their favorite talk shows.

During the emergency era, when some of the TV channels were shutdown, lawyers strongly supported their media allies by overtly backing the freedom of media and expression. An example is of a Geo TV anchor, Hamid Mir sustaining his program ‘Capital Talk’ while knowing that his recordings would not be broadcasted during the emergency era (from November 3 to December 15, 2007). Nonetheless, Mir continued to do his off-air shows from the stairs of the Geo TV office in Islamabad by managing to attract hundreds of people on daily basis. The guests of this program, such as ex-army officers, ex-judges, politicians, civil society activists, lawyers, etc., continued to talk about similar issues, mostly against the atrocious dictatorship.



Picture of Mir’s Capital Talk on November 22, 2007

Throughout the movement, TV channels faced constant challenges from the establishment, especially the regime of General Musharraf. Other incidents were in the form of brutal violent attacks on the Aaj TV’s office in Karachi and the Geo TV’s office in Islamabad. It was the Punjab Police who attacked the Geo TV office in Islamabad and this episode was recorded by the Geo TV cameras and later on proofs were presented to the then Minister for Information and other relevant authorities (Hamid 2007). No serious action was taken by the government to catch the culprits because it was done through directions from the President House via the Punjab government. The Punjab Police acted accordingly by passing off their jurisdiction in the federal capital. The dictator could not prevent media from its essential job of providing people with timely information. In this regard, the live talk shows were irritating to the powerhouses. Moreover, since March 2007 and even before there were famous comedy shows, such as “*Hum Sab Omeed Se Hain*” (We are all hopeful) of Dr Yunus But, and “Pillow Talk” based on animations; both programs focused on creative criticism of the government’s authoritarian policies.

Let us support of a web created by pillars of support for the resistance in Pakistan. Lawyers were supported by variety of actors, as discussed above. Its key pillar of support was media, which was also strongly supported by the civil society. NGOs maintained media's coverage of the movement, which was essential to maintain the momentum of this struggle. The country has a flourishing culture of NGOs doing important development work. There is not exact estimate available of the number of NGOs in the country, but roughly over 100,000 active NGOs. During the struggle, many of these NGOs, such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), and the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA), formed coalitions to support the movements. NGOs generated funds to cover the costs of their activities, for example, intra-city and inter-city rallies, and seminars. In November 2009, when certain TV talk show hosts like Asma Sherazi were banned, the Liberal Forum of Pakistan organized a seminar on "Freed media and social responsibility" in Islamabad to support journalists like Sherazi. In many ways, the changing circumstances generated more support for the movement. For example, the violation of human rights gained the support of human rights groups based in Pakistan and abroad. In addition, curbs on media led to immense backing of relevant groups, such as SAFMA. A strong association among supporting networks provided the movement with greater influence.



Socially, there has been another impact of the movement, which is critical empowerment of the masses, which happened mainly through the live debates during the lawyers' movement and through numerous TV talk shows. Now if something is right or wrong, people are not hesitant to speak out even in front of the TV camera. This change happened during the era of the lawyers' resistance. According to a survey, July 2008, of the International Republican Institute in Pakistan, the people in the country were explicit when it came to restoring the old Supreme Court: 83 percent said that they wanted the court reinstated. In addition, 86 percent described the judicial or judges issue as important to them (IRI 2008).

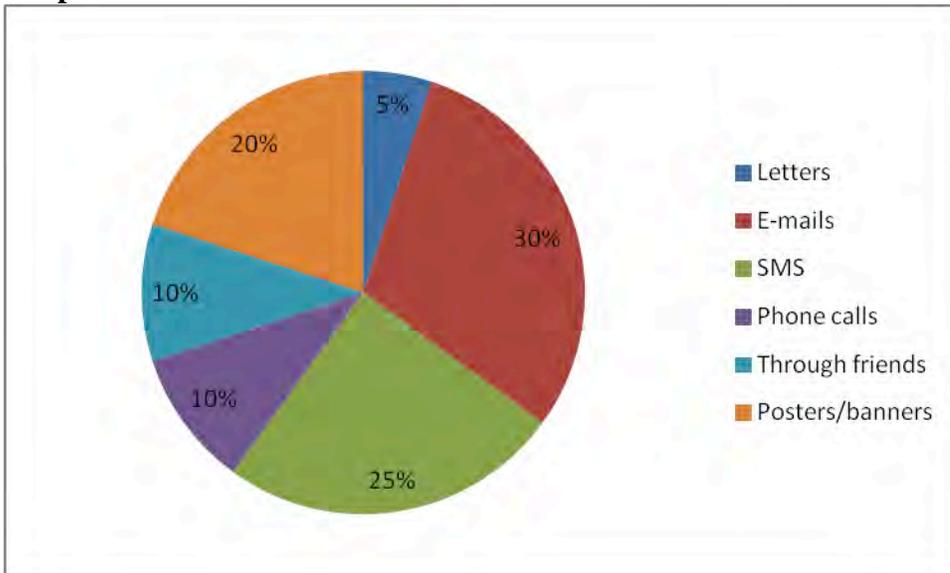
### ***Social media***

The media in general and social media in particular has changed the age-old dynamics of non-violent struggle. Nonviolence rejects violence as a mean of

achieving desired social change. Naturally, digital activism provides a perfect, though less influential, nonviolent way of promoting the cause. This way, many movements have gained greater participation of people, especially from the ones who do not or cannot participate in activism on the streets.

In recent times, the use of social media for activism has gained prominent and often it is called “digital activism”. Digital activism can be described as the use of internet communication, including e-mails, blogs, social networking sites, etc. to bring about a socio-economic and political change at domestic and international levels. In the past two decades, internet’s infrastructure has spread across Pakistan with internet access to numerous rural areas. As a result, the country is home to one of the world’s largest population using internet – 20 million – and 32.86 percent, roughly six million, of those use facebook (*Tribune*, 2 February 2012). As explored in the study, social media was used affectively for communication in the movement. During the course of the movement, the majority of the participants of this study received messages through social media (Graph 3).

**Graph 3: Modes of Communication**



The culture of blogging has been increasing in Pakistan and had a significant presence even prior to the lawyers’ movement. For example, since 2004, a site entitled “Pakistan Bloggers” has been a space for writers to share their views on a range of issues from corruption to feudalism, etc. However, the significance of

blogging has increased in the aftermath of the civil movement. In 2011, the first-ever International Social Media Summit was organized in Karachi. A US diplomat, William Martin (2011), then talked about blogging in Pakistan:

I did not know that Pakistan has such a lively and active blogging community, with over three million citizen-journalists freely reporting on virtually every topic under the sun.

The use of blogs and social networking mediums, such as facebook, was widespread during the lawyers' movements in Pakistan. Many people contributed to the civil resistance either by commenting on existing blogs or by setting up specific blogs and online forums. There was an initiative, a website project called "Pakistan Justice Coalition". Through this people shared reports of events relating to the lawyers' movement in Pakistan during the period between 2007 and 2009. Another example is "*Bolta Pakistan*", meaning Talking Pakistan. Bolta Pakistan was a sort of web portal urging people to sign-in for justice, democracy and freedom in Pakistan by showing their concerns, especially by not putting their lives in danger of street protests etc. Then this initiative had a blog too with the name of Bolta Pakistan Blog. Some students were involved in the movement through internet activism for rousing more people to maintain the momentum of this struggle. An example is of a student from Karachi who created a blog called "Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry's Blog"<sup>4</sup> and co-created a facebook group "Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry".<sup>5</sup> Her facebook group, as of July 16, 2008 had 392 members. This number is very small considering the number of facebook users in the country, but the people who interacted through these sorts of limited groups managed to share the message with thousands of others through e-mails and text messages.

Prior to November 2007, social media in Pakistan was not as effective as other forms of media for the lawyers' movement, but during the 2007 emergency era, this new medium was one of the important modes of communications for the civil society to organize protests. By then, the use of social media was evolving in Pakistan; therefore, the government did not know how to restrain online activism, even after being successful in putting restrictions on other forms of media, both electronic and print. As explored by this research, internet was used by people to get up-to-date information about the movement, especially about the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://cjiftikharmuhammadchaudhry.blogspot.com/>

<sup>5</sup> [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com) is a website devoted to virtual social networking.

demonstrations against the dictatorship in their neighborhood. It is after the success of the lawyers' movement in which media played a very important role that Stephen P. Cohen (2011) argued: "The press and the new media are ... wild card when it comes to mobilizing and potentially transforming Pakistan".

## **Conclusion**

There should not be any doubt that the lawyers' movement in Pakistan paved the way for the present democratic regime by opening doors for the two major political parties to return to politics in Pakistan. As Akhtar writes in one of his articles, "The two mainstream secular opposition parties, the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), have been frozen out of power for almost 8 years when Musharraf has been in power, and have accordingly been prominent supporters of the lawyers' movement" (Akhtar 2007). Later PML-N even became partners in the lawyers' movement. This movement became the only cause of trouble for the Musharraf's regime as explored through this study, as the only initiating force pressuring President General Musharraf to step down from presidency. The mass media, in particular, TV news channels and social media became pillars of support for the lawyers' movement, which without the backing of media would not have become a wide spread civil resistance. The media made CJ Chaudhry and other leaders of the movement saviors of Pakistan and national heroes with a vision of a free and democratic country. The message of the movement challenging the legitimacy of the dictator resonated with millions across the country to end General Musharraf's rule in 2009. As analysed in the study, the lawyers would not have achieved this success without the help of the media, particularly TV channels and social media.

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