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MEDIA AS OPERATIONAL LEVEL ON SUPPORTING POLICE REFORMS

Media is uniquely placed to play an important role in police reforms at the policy as well as operational level. Media persons are constantly in touch with policymakers and frontline police officers, and importantly with the community at large. Media can support police reforms through its several important roles such as

a) watchdog - exposing corrupt and unfair practices, b) agenda setter - raising awareness in public about their rights, policing issues and generating pressure on authorities to reform the police, and c) gatekeeper - acting as a public forum for diverse community groups and perspectives, and promote inclusive debate.

Media generally portrays police as a rotten basket - an institution which lacks the capacity to perform its core functions, lacking integrity, competence and sensitivity to people's needs. Such portrayal unfortunately resonates with the experiences of a large number of citizens. However, it does ignore contributions of a number of hardworking, honest police officers of all ranks with demonstrated ability to give up their lives to protect citizens from criminals and terrorists.

Media's role as 'agenda setter' on police reforms has been largely inconsequential. It needs to play a more meaningful role to raise awareness regarding issues and need for police reforms. Media's role as a 'public forum' for police reforms in the country lacks meaningful engagement with diverse groups, and informed and inclusive discussion on issues.

The portrayal of police as a rotten basket needs to be reviewed. It was the police, which successfully countered the monster of sectarian terrorism in Punjab in the 1990s. The role of the provincial police, in the last few years, especially in K-P, Punjab and Sindh, and the premier civilian intelligence agency headed by a senior police officer in countering terrorism is also praiseworthy. Media campaigns like the Police Awaam Saath Saath are playing an important role in making the viewers' reflect on their relationship with the police. We need more such efforts.

It is time to move the debate on police reforms from mere criticism of the police to understanding the complexities of policing, constraints and the specific needs. This requires an alliance of the media, civil society and the criminal justice experts followed by an organized effort. Media's roles as an agenda setter and public forum are critical; only deeper knowledge of the problem will help develop informed public opinion which will act as a stimulus for police reforms.

List of references:

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