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Media Meet to Agree Ground-Breaking Code for Reporting Elections

The challenge of objectivity, impartiality and balance in media is faced daily by Pakistan journalists, but there is no test of professionalism greater than that posed by a political election, states the Pakistan Coalition for Ethical Journalism, which today launched a historic code of ethics for the media in reporting the forthcoming elections.

The code was discussed at a meeting of senior media leaders in Karachi today and further meetings will be held in Lahore (November 21) and Islamabad (November 22).

The Pakistan Coalition plans to ask the Election Commission of Pakistan and the country's major political parties to note the code and to respect the rights of journalists and media to report fairly and without any interference during the upcoming period.

"It is very important that the media realizes both its rights and its responsibilities," said Kamal Siddiqi, Editor of Express-Tribune and a member of the Pakistan Coalition for Ethical Journalism "In Pakistan being a journalist during election time makes you very vulnerable. You are pressurized from different sides. This code of conduct or a checklist of do's and don'ts keep things in perspective and helps us report the truth and report on issues that matter."

This view was strongly supported by Aidan White, Director of the Global Ethical Journalism Network, which has been working closely with the Pakistan Coalition.

"Election coverage is the biggest test of ethical journalism," he said. "Pakistan media are aiming to set standards that will ensure upcoming elections are properly reported, free of corruption and that all voices from all sections of society are heard. It is a bold initiative which should be supported on all sides."

The Coalition urges media to observe guidelines, which includes issues such as banning rumour and unsubstantiated allegations, not inciting hatred or sectarianism, banning inflammatory language, promoting tolerance and ensuring all parties and candidates are given fair and equal coverage.

Azhar Abbas, CEO of GEO TV, and also a leading member of the Coalition added his support: “Ethics are important because the media, especially the electronic media, is still in its infancy,” he said.

“There are lots that the industry still needs to learn. We have taken great strides in many areas, such as fighting for our rights, freedom of speech and democracy. But now we need to look from the inside. It’s time to have a clear set of ethics and a code of conduct so that the media can be judged and held accountable. This is never more important than during an election.

“ For us, it is clear that public interest is the number one priority over ratings. Elections are after all, about the public. If we lose ratings during the election then so be it. Public interest must, and will, come first.”

Shafqat Abbasi, Press Council of Pakistan, also voiced his support for the initiative. “In regional media there is no concept of ethical journalism. Journalists often become the spokesman of political parties and candidates,” he said. “We must strike out the culture of paid news where local officials can use their power and influence to affect what is written. In some areas journalists face threats and harassment if they don’t write the stories that they are told to. A strong code of conduct will help to protect journalists. Proper training of journalists is also essential.”

More information can be obtained from:

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