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**Between fear and fear**

Buridan’s donkey was quietly dying. Philosophers were ripping apart the paradox at the seams when it suddenly acquired a new lease of life. It assumes that a hungry donkey standing precisely midway between two identical piles of hay will be unable to choose between the two and starve to death because reason provides no grounds for choosing one rather than the other. Despite its inherent contradiction, this philosophical paradox is about ‘free will’, assuming absolute free will exists.

Either way, free will has never been as fictional as it is today. Before technology went exponential, before recent waves of populism and nationalism swept the world with their histrionics, and when the world was somehow easier to understand, free will was just that: free will. Sure, we knew it was a profound philosophic problem, but at least we believed it existed, even if it was relegated to the shadows. We also believed we had a right to it. But now, not so more because those shadows are fading and lines are being drawn in blood.

According to a voguish critique of free will: “The very concept of free will is incoherent; therefore, it obviously doesn’t exist.” In order to endure such an over-simplification of this basic yet complicated human right, self-proclaimers have built for themselves a carapace – an elaborate system of rationalization, if you will. Basically, this system justifies monocratic actions in the name of the greater good. As a logical outcome of this system, patriotism and nationalism become interchangeable. Who cares if these are as different as day and night. As long as they feel the same, they must be the same. Laws don’t understand feelings so populism gets to decide who’s a patriot and who’s not. The first casualty of this whimsical environment is the perception of free will – and hence the freedom to choose.

The concept of casualty is central to the idea of free will; that effects have causes. So what happens when equal enticements are replaced with equal threats, when two alternatives are judged to carry equally frightening consequences. Deriving from the conclusion of 14th century French philosopher Jean Buridan of the Donkey Paradox that in such a situation no rational choice can be made and action must be suspended until circumstances change, it would be logical to conclude that in case of equal threats one has no choice but to freeze from indecision.

Journalists in Pakistan today are being forced to do exactly that. Fear is freezing honest-to-God journalists every day. As if there weren’t enough menaces impeding sound judgement already, the last few of years have seen a dramatic rise in multidirectional yet equally menacing reasons for practicing indecision.

There was a time when pressures to censor were – for lack of a better word – distinctly unidirectional. We never came to terms with the pressures but at least we knew what they were about and how to play around them. It gave a semblance of liberty and allowed us the freedom to do our jobs, albeit creatively. Not so much anymore. Every pillar of journalism is struggling to cope with fear, and laws meant to protect journalists as professionals and as citizens no longer work as well as before. Yet they should, more than ever before, because laws are not there just to protect the weak but also to protect us from our individual and institutional autocratic impulses.

To give an example, journalists in Pakistan are being labelled traitors for doing their job. One third of the journalists facing legal cases in Pakistan risk being charged under the Anti-Terrorism Law, and most of these cases have been filed by government officials who are often ranking bureaucrats. The most common allegations against journalists include “acting against state institutions” or “defaming state institutions”.

Journalists in Pakistan are being systematically deprived of free will. They are being made to believe that theirs is an unholy job. Fear of retribution is forcing them to freeze with indecision. That is akin to not having the right to choose. The current extent of threats facing journalists in Pakistan today prove Jean Buridan’s paradox: that if the situation doesn’t change soon, journalists will start to wither away.

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