**Freedom of expression, security and patriotism**

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MAY 24, 2019

Freedom of expression is an ideal that aspires to have no boundary or limit in its pursuit for achieving its desired goals. It’s an ideal that demands freedom for airing conflicting views without invoking any physical or disciplinary reactions from opponents or state’s regulatory agencies. Now the reaction against the use of this right is always unlimited and unpredictable based on the nature of subject and its victims. Historically, physical reaction, in majority of cases, comes from unlawful elements when their illegitimate activities are exposed by the reporters while the disciplinary reaction emanates from the corridor of power when certain policies of theirs are targeted. Third reaction comes from other writers who, based on their knowledge and understanding, analyze the ideas expressed in any form of communication and point out the contradictions, biases, and untruthfulness of the contents they find in them. Such analyses are always supported by authentic facts and, in no way, they are meant to impose any disciplinary restrictions on writers with the exception that they can sometime provoke disciplinary authorities to get into action against certain ideas that, in the opinion of a writer, are in conflict with the national interests.

Three columns appeared recently, two in local English dailies and one in an international newspaper, can be a good example of how the right for freedom of expressions is now being viewed in the country and what controversies it has been generating. One of the columns was written by a senior journalist and writer, Owais Tohid, and it was appeared in Dawn. Beginning from a gloomy title of the column, the writer went through his journalistic career drawing a picture of journalism in the country where, in his opinion, the resistant journalism is dying now. His reasons for this pessimism are: Deadly attacks on some senior journalists, loss of comrades in the line of their duties, threats from militants, treason charges against well-reputed journalists, redlines drawn by the editors and self-imposed-censorship by the journalists themselves.

Another senior columnist and a security analyst, Ikram Saigal, had his views printed in the Express Tribune wherein he discussed a new trend in Pakistani journalism that was exactly opposite to what Owais Tohid had described in his writing. The very title of his column was quite fearsome as it called some newspaper reports as a kind of hybrid warfare technique. How many wars a poor country like Pakistan would be able to endure is beside the point here. The point to note is that while Owais Tohid was lamenting for the dying culture of resistant journalism, Ikram Saigal was repenting that some newspapers are crossing their limits and waging a hybrid war against the country. To support his arguments, he used the exaggerated coverage of terror attacks in Balochistan and fake marriages of Pakistani women with Chinese men by one of the leading English dailies and added his own inferences to expose the real intent behind such reporting. These reports and some other negative comments on CPEC projects by a journalist of the same newspaper at IBA seminar, were considered by him as concerted efforts to target CPEC and China with a hidden agenda in mind to create a feeling that the province of Balochistan is at the brink of war and projects there are in danger.

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The third column written by an Indian historian, Romila Thapar, was appeared in The New York Times on the rise of religious extremism in India. How the emergence of BJP as a victorious political party in 2014 had ensued a drive to redefine Indian history in line with Hindutva version to legitimize exclusive Hindu majoritarianism instead of inclusive secularism was the main focus of this column. The concept of Hindu majoritarianism, in her opinion, comes from an obsession of Hindu extremist’s mindset that since the Hindus were victimized by the Muslims and were slaves for the thousand years of Muslim rule, it is now their legitimate and historical right to establish Hindu state and avenge their victimization in the past. Those critical of this Hindutva history are being labeled anti-national or unpatriotic.

Although the opinions expressed by these writers vary in their contents and messages, the concern they have is common – the use or misuse of facts. Despite being a very seasoned and experienced journalist, Owais Tohid appears to be losing his hope instead of realizing that he still had the ability to make his worries known and let his community to be aware of what dangers are lurking for any misadventure in the field of journalism if they remain oblivious to the new ground realities. As opposed to him, Ikram Saigal, another experienced and well reputed writer and an acclaimed security analyst, warned media of how the security and national interests can be compromised if cautions are not maintained even in reporting factual incidents. Being an ex-serviceman and running his own private security agency whose security guards were injured in a terrorist attack at the Chinese Consulate in Karachi, the words of cautions from him can’t be taken lightly or ignored as normal reactions of security agencies whose perspective remains confined to their profession only. Yet, his warning raises a serious question as to what level of cautions need to be maintained and who and how that will be decided. I will come back to this question later.

Interestingly, three days after the publication of Ikram Saigal’s column, a very lengthy report appeared in Dawn covering another serious threat faced by the journalist community. Several journalists, as report claims, are now being intimidated by some Twitter group or groups who, on daily basis, continue sending threatening and abusive messages to them. Even female journalists are not spared though we claim to be most respectful in dealing with them. A local journalist, Shahzeb Jillani, was the latest victim of these trolls and instead of getting a legal remedy against his tormentors he was accused and arrested for committing cybercrime. Luckily, he has got his release order from the court now because no evidences of “defamatory remarks against the respected institutions of Pakistan” and “cyber-terrorism” were found against him.

Now I go back to my previous question as to what level of restrains the media fraternity is required to maintain and what the criteria will be. Are such restrictions applicable to media persons only and not to their tormentors? Along the two old and frequently tested sacred words like patriotism, national interests the word of CPEC has also become anonymous. Of course, patriotism is a sacred duty of all countrymen but it carries different values for different users. Like, in case of India, Hinduism of Hindutva is the only acceptable standard of patriotism for BJP while Romila Thapar has many reasons to find it harmful and unpatriotic for the country. The sanctity of CPEC also varies in the country from the time when the current PM Imran Khan was simply a chief of its political party and he was blamed for jeopardizing the upcoming visit of Chinese Prime Minister by staging a lengthiest sit-in in Islamabad.

The only take away from these controversies is that while we need to have freedom of expression, we cannot ignore repercussions of any exaggeration or irresponsible writing that may hamper our national interest. Respects should be guaranteed to all citizens of Pakistan and it should not be confined to any particular institution or institutions. To maintain political balance and harmony in the country, voices of dissention have their own role. Think of Indian society and its predicaments if Hindutva version of patriotism becomes the rule of thumb. Any restrictive or intolerant attitude towards press freedom may not be a healthy sign for our country whose image is already suffering from being on the lower ladder on many indicators.

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