**Misuse of Freedom of Expression**

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Media/press is universally recognized as the fourth pillar of the state and rightly so. To play that role, it is imperative that it enjoys the freedom of expression. This freedom flows from the people’s right to know. But there is no concept of unbridled freedom of expression anywhere in the world. While the media is recognized as a watchdog against the government,the latter is also a watchdog against the media and all the entities, which operate within the state-whether commercial, political, economic, social or religious-to ensure a peaceful and orderly social environment conducive to the socio-economic advancement.

The emergence of social media (made possible by technological advancement in the communications domain) has revolutionized the media landscape at the global level as well as within individual states. With no time lag on the dissemination of information, it has become the quickest and the largest forum for the exchange of information which is indeed a very positive aspect of this new medium.

However, there is also a downside to this development. Anonymity on social media platforms has allowed most people to write hateful comments with immunity; spreading misinformation and misguiding people, relying on subtlety to influence people without being identified and effectively regulated by the regulating authorities. Hate speech has, unfortunately, become an integral part of social media. In the Pakistani context, most people are using this medium to spread religious, linguistic and sectarian hate propaganda besides bringing into disrepute the political opponents through false narratives and persistent lies as well as maligning the state institutions and undermining the state interests. No country can allow this situation to continue unchecked. But the dilemma is that regulating social media is a very tricky proposition. Voices against putting curbs on social media are much louder than the ones supporting the regulatory mechanisms. It is much more difficult to regulate the social media than the print and electronic media. That is the reason all those elements who wish to promote their political agenda and denigrate their political opponents choose social media as a first option.

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It is an undeniable reality that the social media warriors of PTI through their unrelenting propaganda premised on falsehood and crafty narratives did succeed in presenting political opponents of the party as thieves and looters in the eyes of the public and winning support for the line taken by the party even against the state institutions like ECP and the Army. This persistent propaganda led to the formation of a hostile mindset among its workers against state institutions, particularly the Army whom they considered a villain in orchestrating Imran’s exit from power.

Imran Khan upped the ante against Army after he fell from power and did not hesitate even to name the serving senior Army officers responsible for the woes of the party and the alleged conspiracies to kill and eliminate him from the political arena. These narratives were propagated all the time both by the social media stalwarts of the party within and without the country and the party supporters in foreign lands. This persistent anti-Army rhetoric and some pre-planned strategy manifested themselves in the attacks on military installations and memorials of the martyrs throughout the country after Imran’s arrest. Intelligence agency reports do confirm pre-planning in this regard.

The heinous crimes committed by PTI workers and its leaders on 9th May were bound to invoke public ire as well as the harshest response from the Army as well as the government. The incident has not only been condemned by all segments of society besides showing unqualified support for the Army but by most of the leaders of the party who have decided to part ways with it.

In the aftermath of 9th May, the party and its social media warriors changed their strategy and decided to stoke the issue into a human rights situation and hold the Army responsible for killing 30 people on that day. Shaheen Sehbai a former journalist and supporter of PTI now living in the USA tweeted “First I need ISPR to provide clarification on 30 plus PTI workers murdered by the establishment. As of today, we have yet to register FIR who is responsible? Where is the accountability? The British army question and response should come later.”

Sehbai in another tweet has said “UK Army’s Chief General Sir Patrick Sanders is in Pakistan since 29/5 for a “defence engagement visit”. No one has heard from the ISPR who they are meeting, what they are discussing, whether are civilians involved, are Pak nuclear assets under discussion, whether are they assessing the Pak Army leadership for a new Chief, plus a thousand other questions. Will any of the army or civilian spokespersons throw some light on what is going on”?

What Sehbai has said is very intriguing and is ostensibly designed to generate speculations and controversies on the subjects mentioned in his tweet. It is indeed a very insidious move to jeopardize the interests of Pakistan and create doubts about the leadership of the Army. These tweets have coincided with propaganda on social media that there is a rift between the COAS and CJCS regarding the trial of former ISI Chief General Faiz Hameed. This is a blatant misuse of freedom of expression.

It is pertinent to mention that the CM Punjab did ask Imran Khan to name any person who was killed by the Army but has received no response because it was a false claim. Imran triggered the campaign by tweeting that some of the PTI women arrested had been subjected to torture and rape in jail. This was followed by a deluge of such fake stories on social media showing doctored pictures of the torture of women. Based on these reports some voices were also heard from foreign countries showing concern about the human rights situation in the country. But all those who unleashed this campaign had to eat dust when the incarcerated women during their appearance in the court denied that they had been tortured or raped in the jail. Yet another proof of fake news being spread by the PTI social media is the travel warning to the US-Pakistanis not to travel to Pakistan on NICOP or Pakistani passport. The US State Department has denied having issued any such travel warning. The foregoing facts amply corroborate the misuse of freedom of expression on social media by the PTI.

In view of this unrelenting false anti-state propaganda on social media by the PTI team and some other elements involved in the spread of hate speech, the government has rightly decided to take appropriate action. Reportedly the authorities have identified at least 203 such accounts and asked the cyber crime wing of the FIA to block them. Accordingly, 106 accounts have been blocked so far.

*The writer is a former diplomat and freelance columnist.*