**Open Your Mouth?**

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“When it comes to racism, discrimination, corruption, public lies, dictatorships, and human rights, you have to take a stand as a reporter because I think our responsibility as journalist is to control those who are abusing power.”-Jorge Ramos

Article 19 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan pertaining to freedom of speech etc. says: “Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence.”

While this constitutional provision seems to endorse freedom of speech and expression for all citizens, regardless of whether they are in majority or minority, it also imposes certain “reasonable” limitations to the extent to which this right can be exercised and that essentially encompasses Islam, the country’s interest/security and matters pertaining to relationships with the international community. Fair enough, considering the sensitive nature of this subject. Since these are areas demanding extremely delicate treatment, it would have been prudent to lay out a scheme outlining the dos and don’ts for guiding the citizens and earmarking their expression perimeters.

In Tinker v Des Moines Independent Community School (1969), the Supreme Court of the United States (USA) held that students in public schools do not leave their First Amendment rights at the schoolhouse gate and laid down a rule: “You have a right to express your opinions as long as you do so in a way that doesn’t “materially and substantially” disrupt classes or other school activities. If you hold a protest on the school steps and block the entrance to the building, school officials can stop you. They can probably also stop you from using language that they think is “vulgar or indecent,” so watch out for the dirty words, OK?”

Despite freedom, governments continue to impose censorship as and when they find suitable.

Journalism is perhaps among the top-most daring professions in the world. Those who enter this field must be aware of the main purposes this occupation serves. Along with collecting, analyzing and disseminating information in the public interest there comes with it immense social responsibility as well as very high ethical standards. As Joshua Oppenheimer said: “The function of journalism is, primarily, to uncover vital new information in the public interest and to put that information in a context so that we can use it to improve the human condition.”

From the mere print medium of yesteryears to the variety of media that the modern world has to offer, journalism has gone through a rapid process of evolution in sync with gigantic strides in the arena of technology. The truth is that today, whoever has access to any social platform, has in one way or the other, become a journalist with or without the educational qualification.

Right from the superpowers down to Third World, so-called democratic countries, barring a few fascist states, there is much talk about freedom of expression with lots of written material freely available so this is not a unique attempt to elaborate the idea. Despite “freedom,” governments continue to impose censorship as and when they find suitable so much so, that even Quranic verses are expunged from articles that tend to question the validity of certain official acts. Speakers are banned from the media for telling “the truth,” journalists are forced into exile, and radio and television channels are either shut down or they are targeted with vengeance for spreading conflicting views. Still, these are mild measures compared to subjecting human beings to arrests, physical torture, humiliation and worse, murder. Not only are these in violation of Article 19 of our Constitution but are also in utter defiance of human rights.

Jorge Ramos has an interesting history in the sense that at 24 years of age he quit his job in New Mexico City after his story which was critical of the government, was censored. He moved to the more liberal USA in 1983 exclaiming: “To me, it was a palace….the US gave me opportunities that my country of origin could not-freedom of the press and complete freedom of expression”.

Ironically, today Julian Assange, WikiLeaks fame, may not agree with Ramos. He is in confinement in Belmarsh prison in London since April 2019. The USA has charged him with violating the Espionage Act of 1917 which editors of the leading newspapers are criticizing as an attack on the First Amendment. In November 2010, WikiLeaks released selections from a trove of some 250,000 classified diplomatic cables between the US State Department and its embassies and consulates around the world. Those documents dated mostly from 2007 to 2010 but included some dating back as far as 1966. Among the many topics covered in those secret documents were behind-the-scenes U.S. efforts to politically and economically isolate Iran, primarily in response to fears of Iran’s development of nuclear weapons.

As a coalition of various groups comprising experts, human rights watchdogs, etc. wrote to the Biden Administration in February 2021: “The indictment of Mr. Assange threatens press freedom because much of the conduct described in the indictment is conduct that journalists engage in routinely-and that they must engage in in order to do the work the public needs them to do. Journalists at major news publications regularly speak with sources, ask for clarification or more documentation, and receive and publish documents the government considers secret. In our view, such a precedent in this case could effectively criminalize these common journalistic practices”.

For an Islamic state, the concept of speaking out the truth should not be derived from merely an article of the constitution but from the Holy Book itself. Islamic history is full of glorious examples of people during and after the era of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who fearlessly spoke up before tyrants when the need arose to ensure accountability and transparency. However, we in Pakistan are trying to sail in two boats, civil law and Shariah law, while simultaneously vying to uphold democratic ideals about which we seem quite clueless in view of the prevailing political situation. During these hard days, it becomes all the more necessary to maintain high levels of tolerance for conflicting opinions to clearly mark our way forward rather than subduing truth with aggression. “In a time of universal deceit-telling the truth is a revolutionary act”-Unknown.

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