[**The sinister knock**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1698647/the-sinister-knock)

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The writer is an author.

IT is an apocryphal story. A Russian and an American argued over who enjoyed greater freedom of speech. The Russian insisted that he enjoyed unfettered freedom of speech, to which the American replied: “Yes, but we have freedom after the speech.”

Retired Capt Ayaz Amir my fellow columnist (spellcheck automatically altered this to ‘communist’) should have read this anecdote before making his controversial speech the other day. He had hardly settled in his car afterwards when he was [manhandled](https://www.dawn.com/news/1697668) brutally, and had his mobile and wallet snatched.

Ayaz — a valued friend from ‘behind’ (as Pakistani politicians are wont to say when explaining the source of their wealth) — is many cuts above the average hack. Educated at Lawrence College, Murree, he joined the Pakistan Military Academy as a cadet officer. He retired as a captain and joined the Foreign Office, being posted to Moscow. He resigned on April 15, 1977. His reason: “Mr Bhutto has mocked both socialism and democracy and because of him I can hear the stomp of marching boots.”

Three weeks later, Bhutto was ousted by Gen Ziaul Haq. After Bhutto’s execution in 1979, Ayaz was imprisoned by a military court, and again in 1981 for five months.

He began his journalistic career with *Dawn*, then switched to *The News*. Disenchanted with them too, he turned to the more widely read Urdu press and latterly to ubiquitous television. His columns — trenchant, stimulating and scathing — developed a widening readership that another level converted into votes. He has been a member of both the PPP and the PML-N. On the latter’s ticket he became an MPA in 1997-98, and a MNA from 2008-13. To his targets — every incumbent government, almost every political party, the establishment, even his wet nurse the military — he is the irrepressible enfant terrible who has outgrown his novelty. He knows too much because he has seen it all, from the inside. Critics may disagree with his opinions, but he is entitled, as every thinking Pakistani is, to freedom after the speech.

What protection is available to voluble citizens?

What is the protection available to such voluble citizens in Pakistan?

Certainly not the law. The [Justice Qazi Isa case](https://www.dawn.com/news/1673402) has exposed that the law is insufficiently thick armour, even for a judge who by seniority is next in line to become chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Privacy is no protection. In October 2020, the door of the hotel room in Karachi where Maryam Nawaz-Safdar and her husband were staying was [broken](https://www.dawn.com/news/1586710) into during the night, even while they were in occupancy.

Principal-ship is no protection. In 2011, as principal of a prestigious college in Lahore, I was ordered by the then chief minister (now prime minister) to close the school immediately on account of floods, even though floods had ravaged mainly southern Punjab, not the north. lf I disobeyed, I would be handcuffed by the police and escorted off the campus.

Position is no protection. In 1976, the 70-year-old Mr J.A. Rahim — the senior ideologue of the PPP) and at the time our ambassador to France — was thrashed by Mr. Bhutto’s FSF thugs for daring to chide him for being unconscionably late to a public function. In the melee, Mr. Rahim’s teeth were smashed and his face severely lacerated. His son was jailed. He was brutalised by male prisoners.

Najam Sethi — now a seasoned victim — still recalls how on May 8, 1999, “an armed posse of the Punjab Police and the IB [Intelligence Bureau] smashed its way into my bedroom at 2:30 am, beat up my wife and me, gagged me, blindfolded me, handcuffed me and dragged me away”.

**Read:** [*Ayaz Amir incident raises questions about claim that security agencies will not be used for intimidation*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1698496/ayaz-amir-incident-raises-questions-about-claim-that-security-agencies-will-not-be-used-for-intimidation)

And more recently, the daughter-in-law of our national icon Allama Iqbal (and herself once a judge of the Lahore High Court, 1994-2002) had her house broken into by goons in search of her son Walid Iqbal, a PTI senator.

Our history is replete with such barbarous excesses, yet they remain submerged in our consciousness, like reeds which never reach the surface. The British writer Joyce Rachelle explained this self-induced amnesia as: “We hardly ever talk about trauma afterwards, because it helps to live in a world where we can pretend it never happened.” Will we always hobble along like this, with crippled memories?

We are at least six general elections away from our centenary in 2047. Will they too deliver the result we call democracy, or what Karl Marx warned: “The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them.”

Have I said too much already? Should I fear an attack on my car, theft of my mobile and wallet, and that sinister knock on the door in the dead of night?

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