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**Whirlwind legislation**

The nation is witnessing one of the worst acts of violence and harassment against journalists.In the same week that a journalist is beaten up by unknown assailants in Islamabad, parliament sees introduction of a bill on protection of journalists tabled in the National Assembly by the minister for human rights. In the following week, news of a proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority Ordinance 2021 which media and rights groups have termed a ‘media martial law’, starts to circulate.

The timing is ironic and bizarre to say the least. While on the one hand, the government is taking legislative measures to give journalists their constitutional right of complete security to life and protection from censorship, threats and intimidation, on the other hand it is restricting their freedom of expression by institutionalising censorship through an ordinance.

One wonders why, in the recent past, issues pertaining to constriction of fundamental rights and curbing freedom of expression have seen speedy and rushed legislation through parliament or the use of ordinances, while bills on the protection of rights or on issues of public importance are subject to cumbersome and tedious processes that can take years for passage or can even completely lapse due to the various hurdles, both systemic and created, in the legislative process.

The minister for human rights conceded in a tweet that it took two years to give the bill on protection of journalists final shape. Not only should this bill be expedited in parliament, it should also see strong and popular support in its implementation. Why am I not too hopeful of that happening? One, because of the contradictory behaviour of this government visible through the counterproductive PMDA Ordinance, and two, I have witnessed how multiple draft bills on issues of public importance have lapsed in parliament for want of attention or are endlessly delayed due to the government’s lukewarm response. Too frequently have members been cajoled into withdrawing a bill on the pretext of a similar bill being drafted or soon to be introduced by the government.

According to Pildat, out of 48 Acts passed by parliament since October 8, 2018 – after the current National Assembly was sworn in – the average time taken from introduction to passage of a Bill is five months and six days. In the same period, the longest time it has taken for a Bill (Islamabad Real Estate (Regulation & Development) Act, 2020) to pass through various stages of legislation was 18 months and 10 days. The shortest time was two days, in the case of the Anti-Terrorism Act, 2020. If anything, these statistics reveal our legislative priorities.

The Senate’s Parliamentary Year Report 2020-2021 shows that out of 62 private member bills introduced in the year, only 16 were passed – a glimpse of the sorry state of affairs we are in. These figures reflect systemic issues that increasingly undermine the ability of people’s representatives in undertaking public interest legislation.

Private member bills, especially, travel a very rocky road and a lucky few ever reach their intended destination. The investment in terms of time and effort in conceiving, drafting, introducing, lobbying for and defending a bill only to see it lapse or withdrawn for want of serious debate or attention or prioritisation leaves most members demotivated.

Not too long ago, the Islamabad Compulsory Vaccination and Protection of Health Workers Bill, 2019 had to be reintroduced in the Senate after it had lapsed despite an earlier introduction and unanimous passage in 2015.

A bill that seeks to protect the children of the country through vaccination from diseases that can cause death and disability was first introduced in the Senate in April 2015, when it was referred to the Standing Committee on Health for detailed deliberations and public hearing that led to various improvements and unanimous passage by the Senate in December 2015. It was then referred to the National Assembly where despite unanimous passage in the Committee on Health, it was not introduced in the National Assembly in time for voting and thus lapsed as per Rule 126 of Senate Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business. On its reintroduction, and despite unanimous passage by the Senate in January 2020, this bill was placed more than twice on Orders of the Day for private members day but was never taken up for introduction in the National Assembly.

Does this not reflect a systemic issue in our legislative process or is it a manifestation of the government’s misplaced priorities where issues of public importance, especially health, figure very low? One hopes that a joint sitting of parliament according to Rule 127 will soon be convened to take up all ill-fated bills like the one above which pertain to saving the lives of our children – and that issues of public importance enjoy the same urgency and attention as do ordinances on curbing freedoms?

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