

# A code of ethics for the Press

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**W**hen we shackle the Press, we shackle ourselves. This immutable truth is self-evident in all democracies. Without liberty of the Press, there can be no free access to public information and public opinion to which all free men are entitled.

The liberty of the Press should forever remain inviolate. All persons may freely speak, write and publish their sentiments on all subjects. The freedom of the Press should be held sacred and is essential to the security of freedom in a state. It ought not, therefore, be restrained. The freedom of the Press is one of the great bulwarks of liberty and free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the invaluable rights of man.

The Press is considered to be the fourth estate of the realm and is perhaps the most effective channel of "getting through" the information and presenting ideas and viewpoints of different and diverse sections of the society in an effective and lucid manner. By the same token it is also regarded as a defender and protector of rights and liberties of the citizens. A free Press signifies an open society where decisions are made according to democratic traditions and according to the dictates of one person or body of persons. The Press can only perform its sacred duties of the fourth estate if it is free and independent in reporting its views and news.

The Press is under fire, yet again. This time around it is a democratically elected constitutional government which is trying to strangle whatever little freedom the Press enjoys in this country. Once more the honesty and integrity of the Press are being questioned. However, this is not something new. The Press has suffered (and is still suffering) since the early days of our history. Taking a brief

look at government-Press relations during the past 40 years or so, we are bound to draw an inevitable conclusion that democracy or no democracy, the freedom of the Press has always been bulldozed and journalists have been attacked, imprisoned, tortured and harassed time and again by various regimes.

Starting from those dreadful days of the Ayub regime when the Press and Publications Ordinance - also called the "Black Law" - was enforced, governments over the years in one way or the other have continued to put pressure so that the Press is unable to perform its functions and duties in a free and fair manner. History is witness to the fact that in the absence of democracy, oppression and harassment of the Press is an inevitable result. The Press has never been

columns it is subversive of a fundamental principle of the profession.

Good faith with the reader is the foundation of all journalism worthy of the name. By every consideration of good faith, a newspaper is constrained to be truthful. It is not to be excused for lack of thoroughness or accuracy within its control or failure to obtain command of these essential qualities. Headlines furthermore should be fully warranted by the contents of the articles which they surmount.

Fifthly, sound practice makes clear distinction between news reports and expressions of opinion. News reports should be free from opinion or bias of any kind. This rule however does not apply to so-called special articles unmistakably devoted to advocacy or characterised by a signature authorising the writer's own conclusions and interpretations.

Sixthly, a newspaper should not publish unofficial charges affecting reputation or moral character without opportunity given to the accused to be heard, right practice demands the giving of such opportunity in all cases of serious accusation outside judicial proceedings. Moreover, a newspaper should not invade private rights or feeling without sure warrant of public right as distinguished from public curiosity. It is the privilege, as it is the duty of a newspaper to make prompt and complete correction of its own serious mistakes of fact or opinion, whatever their origin.

Seventhly, a newspaper cannot escape conviction of insincerity if while professing high moral purposes, it supplies incentives to base conduct, such as are to be found in details of crime and vice, publication of which is not demonstrably for the general good.

**What is required is a bit of show of tolerance, moderation and patience on the part of the government. It need not be too apprehensive about the power of the pen. It must toe the middle line, leave the Press alone and let it carry on its work**

On the face of it, these basic rules narrate a reasonable number of self-imposed checks and restrictions which journalists all over the world are expected to comply with. The Press in Pakistan is undoubtedly responsible, responsible enough to see to it that these principles are not violated. The government's attitude towards the Press is based on orthodox

and obsolete ideals and beliefs. It fails to realise that people here are undergoing a process of socio-political evolution and when such a process sets in, people sooner or later have to decide whether they shall govern themselves or be governed by someone else. If they commit themselves to self-government, they must recognise the equal right of all men to think, speak, write and act freely. If they consign themselves to the rule