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# A free press and national

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ONE of the greatest blessings in a democratic society is a free press which forms the fourth pillar of the state, the other three being the legislature, executive and the judiciary. A free press not only facilitates formulation of opinion by the common man but also asserts itself as a potent instrument of check-and-balance, within the working parameters defined by the three state organs. In Pakistan, no one can dispute the stupendous contribution of the press towards establishment of a democratic polity. With the press having valiantly defied the attempts by various regimes to clip its wings and blunt its edges, it is now confronted with inevitable threats of degeneration from within. A discernible tendency among a section of the press appears to be gradually gaining roots, wherein a sense of complacency and indulgence reigns supreme. Simultaneously, the hard-earned freedom of the press, in a few cases, is being exploited by the vested interests, who want to use the powerful media towards furtherance of their own ends. Yellow journalism, operating on the fringes of the journalistic ethics, is gathering strength and is becoming a threat of some magnitude to reckon with. No wonder, cliques do get formed and many jour-

nalists either stoop down to be on regular pay rolls of the vested interests or are content to be supplied with hot classified information that they can exploit to boost their professional image and clout. Freedom and responsibility go hand in hand. There can't be any two views about the fact that when the press is free, it has to be responsible and self-accountable with regards to national interests. If the nation and the country are there, the press has the audience, and the pleasure and clout of expressing their views. National interests, therefore, must be always at the back of the mind of every writer and editor, while sending the material to the press for final printing. The present epoch in Pakistan's history is convulsive because the world scenario, as well as the national scene, are taking a dramatic turn. Previously, whatever went on at the higher echelons, the ripple effect was not directly hard-pinching for the common man. However, with the artificial respiration duct of the national economy fast squeezing and the aid-gas cylinders virtually turning empty, the common man is hard-pinched now. To quote just one illustration, when the annual balance of payment deficit used to be approximately \$ 2 billion during the 80s, foreign aid package was roughly \$ 1.3 - 1.5 billion.

Now that the balance of payment deficit is \$ 3.1 billion, foreign aid package has shrunk to \$ 0.2 billion. On the political front, the government seems to be overawed with the heavy mandate entrusted to it, and appears determined to take initiatives that could retrieve the country out of the prevalent political, bureaucratic and economic mess. But working under such stress and duress, there are bound to be lapses on the part of the government which is the duty of the press to highlight, advise the government and enlighten the masses. A NEW phenomenon is recently noticeable in the press, in which, as a first step, a free-for-all kind of campaign was unleashed against the ex-chief of Naval Staff, Admiral (Retd) Mansurul-Haq. All kinds of stories were fed to the press and many writers went much beyond the limits that national interest imposes, whereby the institution's internal cohesion and faith was hit. While leveling allegations against the ex-CNS, they projected the case of some naval admirals --- a clear reflection of vested interests being behind the campaign. It is common knowledge that many stories were fed to these journalists by the insiders, with details that created a media-trial kind of an atmosphere against the retired

admiral. No doubt that the ex-CNS responded to it poorly and did not clarify his position in time. However, the government too acted in a high-handed manner predominantly under media pressure, and retired the admiral using the newly acquired power. The government took the decision without giving the accused a fair chance to justify his position, violating the basic principles of justice that no one is to be convicted un- heard. All this is in the backdrop that no politician of high standing has been convicted for their well known corruption. Simultaneously, another development regarding the Air Force took place, a Squadron Leader was arrested red-handed in the US on charges of smuggling 2 Kg of heroin. The follow-up chain reaction back home resulted in apprehension of a former

officers. The timings coincided with the campaign against ex-CNS, and sounds were heard demanding Chief of Air Staff's resignation. Another development was ex-Maj Gen (Retd) Zaheer Abbassi's interview to the press in which the ex-general, convicted on charges of treason, aired views against the Army's high command. The press also exploited and promptly published articles highlighting trends toward erosion of "Faith" and "Discipline" in the Army. The above scenario needs to be viewed from another angle. It's a well known secret that the IMF and World Bank are pressing Pakistan hard for reduction in its defence budget. It's being done in the backdrop of a glaring rise in India's 1997-98 budget proposals, presented before the Indian parliament on Feb 28, 97 in which India's defence outlay

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**In the final analysis, the message is that the media has done wonders during Pakistan's history of 50 years. Its heroic victory and the hard-earned freedom merits high appreciation of all and sundry. But let it not be hijacked by the few sensational money-minded media tycoons, vested interests and the naive pseudo-intellectuals. Let the media build the nation and its institutions, above all the Armed Forces.**

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