

Code of Ethics for Press

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THE Prime Minister's call for a Press Code of Ethics, made in Lahore on July 12 while administering the oath of office to members of the governing body of the local Press Club, was not just timely; it was something the media urgently need. It is however a question if a Code of Ethics is effectively implementable too.

This is expressing neither despair nor distrust, only noting that a lot of dirty and partisan water has flown down media rivers which should not be taken to comprise only print journalism; electronic media are no less a party to the changed colours of information dished out to the people of Pakistan. Much of it is one sided, at times grossly ignoring views and rights of the other side, aimed primarily at influencing people.

This is not to defend print journalism. It often goes overboard in a stupefying manner and turns to sensationalism at the drop of a hat. Electronic media are not to be charged with any crime on this count because of a general cautious approach to dissemination of information. It prefers to keep silent on issues, what to say of possibilities. However, when it comes to maligning opponents of the Government in power they have no option — having been forced into an indefensible position, psychopants bring gusto to the job. This is certainly not the doing of the present government; ugly traditions established by previous governments persist. It is good news that the government wishes to discard them; this is something that cannot be done too quickly.

The list of reasons why this state of affairs has come to prevail is simultaneously lengthy and brief. Illegal and non-representative regimes took the sting out of the Press and prescribed for it a life on handouts; breaking away from the given pattern meant going out of the information business. Over years, pressures turned in to habits.

This habit came to be broken when democratic urges started finding expression and opening. The Press, which waged a valiant struggle all through the unhappy years of illegal governments at a high cost to both newspapers and workers, more the latter, responded to the change but much damage had been done by then. The pitch had been queried by governments which used the economic lever of advertisements and newsprint quota and inducted individuals in newspapers to ensure that their point of view was the only one to be put across. Corruption, which had permeated all areas of national life but had not succeeded in making any

reports of the scandalous envelope journalism, of disbursement of secret funds to favourite ones available for playing non-professional games and allotment of residential, and even commercial land, a benefit of which many otherwise impeccable journalists availed of. In a recent interview with The Nation, Lahore the Prime Minister herself referred to journalists on the pay list of the previous government but did not identify them, saying that she would do so only if they were thrown out of journalism; I can assure her this will not happen. But just as publishing the list of defaulters separated the racketeer from the genuine client releasing the names of beneficiaries in this case may do the same for journalism.

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A notable point with regard to the Press asserting itself is the strength of the private sector in business and industry. Mr. Shams-ud-Doha, Information Minister of Bangladesh, at one stage and later one of its envoys abroad, published a weekly magazine from Islamabad for a while in 1970. It closed down after a few issues, the heavy hand of Yahya Khan's martial law taking a dislike to views expressed by it. It was indirectly associated with weekly Interwing as working for television was not a round the clock undertaking in those days. As News Editor at Rawalpindi/Islamabad TV. I was free around

Years later, Doha visited Pakistan as a Minister from Bangladesh. I asked him how did he feel now that he was on the other side of the fence. Were his views on the freedom of Press as strong as before? His answer was simple and straightforward. The Press, he said, could not be independent unless it was financially independent and that could happen only when a country had a strong private sector. With the process of privatisation and relaxation of investment rules, this should come in a few years time. Till then, however, the public sector would remain the bigger source of income for the print media. The government thus has a responsibility. It is required to ensure that advertising is not doled out

as favour but on a properly worked out basis.

The Prime Minister's stress on investigative journalism as against the popular prevalent form, statemental reporting, is most welcome. But this is an area not solely to be handled by the Press. Leaders on both sides of the political divide have a greater role to play if reporting of statements is to be reduced to the minimum; given the present conditions, it is not to be totally eliminated because the moment a publication starts ignoring statements of political leaders, it comes to be accused of being biased even though it may be following an equitable policy. I have personally

a Herald Publication evening newspaper of Karachi. We made it a point not to carry statements comprising platitudes and publishing only those which had any news value. The roof of accusations started caving in with that. We did not change the policy and can say at least this much: the refusal to print statements did not cause a loss of circulation; in fact the newspaper gained a little. But filling the space became highly demanding. Now-a-days, no one wants to put in much labour, statements are easy to report and help create and consolidate connections. Ours has become the era of PR.

There is also a defence for the charged atmosphere in the Press. Pakistan's journalism belongs to a tradition of confrontation which was the need of the freedom struggle. There was justification for the attitude. People were challenging a colonial power and wanted to get their rights. The foundations of journalism were laid down in the period by people like Abdul Kalam Azad, Maulana Zafar Ali Khan, Hameed Nizami and Altaf Hussain, to name a few of the Muslim stalwarts in journalism of those years. They followed a highly emphasised rhetorical line. For obvious reasons: they were engaged in a life and death combat against a colonial rule. That came to be the style of journalism in Pakistan.

The explanation why this happened is not far to seek. It lies in the political environments of the country since Independence. Elections were delayed for years after the establishment of the country. An elected government was sacked in East Pakistan in 1954. In the provinces of West Pakistan, governments were made and unmade by court intrigues; it was the same for Federal governments. Then came military rule and even the faint whiff of democracy evaporated. This was followed by elections at the end of which power was not handed over to elected representatives. No recent election has been accepted as fully above board. Genuine democracy has not taken hold in Pakistan. It would not be wrong to say that the distrust of governments has come to be embedded in the psyche of the people and the Press represents and reflects that condition. Things are certain to improve when trust in democratic practices and values improves. The Government should work towards that end and so should the Opposition. Other things will fall into place in time once ground rules are settled. Genuine and genuinely practised democracy by all segments will create its own code of ethics. Stress on leaders, such as the PM, is certain to bring the