

Democracy, a free press and public cynicism

Mass Communication

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The role of the press is again the object of misgivings expressed by leaders both in government and opposition. Such 'bipartisan' unease is not new.

Governments and oppositions have consistently taken turns to accuse the press of being unfair to them. The undeclared desire of governments has usually been to have the media function as their supine handmaiden or PR instrument, while oppositions have expected it only to be a voice for their partisan view.

The press can be neither. Its job is to act as public watchdog and strive to be the conscience of the entire nation. Few political leaders — whether in government or in opposition — readily accept this notion, particularly the implications that flow from it. They act as cheer leaders when the press subjects their opponents to critical scrutiny, but accuse the press of negativism or bias when they become the focus of similar scrutiny.

This problem is compounded by the culture of intolerance that pervades our society. This intolerance — the product of a largely illiterate society — is exhibited in an inability to accept criticism and accept a point of view different from one's own. Instead, press criticism of a particular view or action is often regarded as a personal affront, even challenge to their authority.

Democratic substance

Pakistan today has all the paraphernalia of democracy — an elected government, parliament, and political parties. Still absent are the attitudes and values that are integral to democracy. Lack of such attitudes give rise to a political culture of intolerance which, in turn, erodes the substance of democracy.

Democracy is not only about voting in and winning elections. But many political leaders here act as if their concept of democracy is limited to seeking and securing votes. Once the votes have been counted, subjecting winners as well as losers to the rule of law and to public scrutiny is a notion that has not yet been widely accepted, much less operationalised by the country's political elite. This affects its view of and relationship with the media, creating the erroneous and unrealistic perception that the media's appropriate role is to publicise and support its point of view or activities.

Most political leaders have not yet understood how to communi-

cate their message to and through the press. The problem lies in their inability to distinguish between information and propaganda, between facts and polemics. To secure a better press, public officials have to formulate better policies and undertake measures that are seen to clearly be in the public interest. Once such policies have been formulated and measures implemented, they need to be articulated for the press and public.

Unfortunately, the official tendency is still to reveal 'facts' selectively to promote narrow political objectives or to interact with the media for public relationing purposes rather than to promote the principle of the public's right to know. Moreover politicians' chronic 'statementitis' — vacuous pontification — has yet to be cured.

Check on executive excesses

Because political institutions in Pakistan are still weak and in early stages of evolution, the press acquires greater importance as a forum for agenda - setting, debate and articulating issues. But its fundamental role here is the same as in other democratic societies. A free press is as vital for democracy as free elections. Democracy cannot function without constant checks and balances. This is what keeps it accountable between elections. If an elected government does not have the check of a free and vibrant press, it can easily slip into a form of tyranny of the majority.

Since members of parliament here have yet to learn how to hold governments accountable, and with the 14th Constitutional Amendment certain to inhibit this process, the independent media's role as a check on the exercise of executive power and misgovernance is likely to be even greater in coming days.

Only when the government and the opposition learn to present and argue their case with questioning journalists can their irritation with inadequate or unfair press coverage be reduced. The premise they both should learn to operate on is that any policy or measure that cannot stand the test of public criticism or scrutiny probably needs a re-think.

However, to effectively perform the critical role of a watchdog, the press has to be sensitive to public perceptions about itself and, therefore, also subject itself to rigorous scrutiny as well as maintain robust professional standards. Just as freedom of the press is essential to strengthen and safeguard democ-

cracy, the credibility and integrity of the media is vital to safeguard the freedom of the press. Any media that loses objectivity and credibility loses public esteem, confidence, and support.

One of the paradoxes of countries with censorship is that it gives words tremendous power. Conversely, in countries with a licentious press, words lose their import, since their reliability and veracity is open to public question. A writer once said that in countries with censorship one has to read between the lines, but where the press is known for excesses, one is forced to read between the lines.

Qur'aanic prescription

The credibility of the media follows from a judicious exercise of freedom. A press that is not free and responsible cannot be objective and credible. For Muslims the ultimate standards for objectivity are prescribed by the Qur'aan, which says: "Oh, you who believe, do not mix truth with falsehood nor conceal that which is right." The Qur'aan also explicitly warns believers against promoting deliberate falsehood or manipulating information: "If you distort facts (your testimony) or decline to state them, know that Allah is cognizant of all that you do".

To maintain and enhance its credibility, the press has to particularly guard against three kinds of lurking dangers. First, unwittingly promoting public cynicism, which exposes the press to the risk of being wounded by its own weapon. Second, relentlessly sensational reporting, with little or no basis in fact, that leads to inevitable public questioning about reliability and credibility. The third danger, which elsewhere too is a clear and present one, of becoming captive of vested interests.

Lurking dangers

The first danger arises from an increasing tendency in the press to focus excessively on political manoeuvres and intensely partisan attacks by participants on each other, while de-emphasizing the substance of issues that either figure in the political game or are on the public agenda. In sidestepping content, such coverage suggests that all actors are simply engaged in a power play, and this engenders public cynicism.

By focussing on strategic ploys rather than substance, the press could inadvertently be making people cynical about news organisations as well as public officials. Moreover, an 'elitist' focus, with relatively little attention devoted to

fundamental issues that affect everyday lives, can lead to lopsided coverage and articulation of a flawed public agenda.

Negative public responses follow when the press itself adopts too cynical a posture. If presumptions such as 'all public officials are venal' repeatedly colour coverage, the public cynicism that ensues is ultimately projected on to the press, which is seen as biased. The relationship between reinforcing stereotypes, growing public cynicism, and despair about the democratic system itself is then not hard to establish.

There is also the tabloid style affliction in some sections of the press to constantly engage in muck-racking and incendiary allegations without substantiation. The dubious assumption that sometimes guides such sensational reporting is that a scandal doesn't have to be a reality to become a question in the public mind. But for all the bangs produced by such shocking revelations, the bullets never find their mark. In an inversion of the censored world, where the official 'truth' has no takers, such disclosures in an open society produce almost no political effect. The danger this creates is that real exposés of official or corporate maleficence tend to be trivialised and ultimately discounted by the public.

Media credibility

Finally, media credibility is at risk here, as elsewhere, by the endeavours of vested interests to use the press as a tool to promote a particular political or commercial agenda. Selectively released information by such interests is designed to secure a specific narrow purpose which is not necessarily in the public interest. Not everyone can resist the temptation to refuse easy, though partial and 'motivated' information. But resist the press must in order to avoid becoming captive of vested interests. With that comes, sooner rather than later, erosion and loss of credibility.

All of us agree that a credible and objective media is a *sine qua non* for the evolution of a genuine and robust democracy. But the question is whether we are prepared to make the necessary and sustained effort to enhance the media's credibility and freedom, placing integrity above all other considerations. Unless the truth is valued in words and in deeds, and we are all prepared to take as much criticism as we make, it would be hard to develop the free and respected press that a democratic Pakistan deserves.

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