

Downside of media control

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By M.B. Naqvi

PRIME MINISTER Benazir Bhutto has on several occasions expressed dissatisfaction with the conduct of both journalists and newspapers. Lately the subject of media's responsibility to society is also being discussed. Government-Press relations are a permanent topic of debate. The current round is a repetition of the old story regarding the government resorting to bribing journalists.

Although the entire subject is of utmost importance and needs to be discussed thoroughly, the question of journalists' integrity seems to be most pressing. Journalism is a noble profession and the media are a vital institution that serves as the Fourth Estate (of the state). If journalistic honesty is compromised, the whole purpose of free media, or in this case actually free Press, would be defeated.

Successive governments, to their eternal shame, have always earmarked secret funds, running into crores, that are distributed secretly and are not audited. When this practice started is not really known. Possibly it dates back to the Second World War or may be even earlier. This should, however, be called by its proper name. It is money for buying the loyalties of journalists and/or newspapers. This must be condemned and full exposure should now be demanded by all tax-paying citizens. It is a misuse of their money, indeed a species of grand larceny and certainly misappropriation of citizens' taxes.

Like all bribes, it must unmistakably be affirmed that both the giver and the taker are equally guilty — in morality as well as in law. One hopes some public-spirited citizens or NGOs would file a public-interest writ in High Courts, praying for full facts to be obtained from the government so that proper censure of all concerned is administered.

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media and individual journalists need to be established and some of it incorporated in the Code of Ethics for the Press that remains permanently on the anvil.

Secondly, the nation has now to decide, once and for all, whether it wants to be regaled with constant crude propaganda in favour of the ruling party from their electronic media. The latter are being run with public funds and are technically owned by the state — and not by the government. Why should the governments be permitted to misuse the electronic media the way they have been doing?

Fortunately, our equivalent of the 'Governor-General-in-Council' acts in this sphere quite stupidly; despite ample evidence from the recent past, they go on doing the same sort of propaganda in favour of the government without actually gaining one extra day in power through support purportedly mobilised by the TV, Radio, films and pamphlets. Nevertheless, there is a considerable amount of lost opportunities of both information and entertainment by the electronic media because of their misuse. That should end and soon.

The government — and by that one means all the governments that have so far held office since the end of 1950s — has owned a notable chunk of the print media, owning as many as 8 or 9 dailies and some weeklies. Why does it want to keep

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administered.

A separate word needs to be said about individual journalists who have received money under the counter from the government and/or some secret agencies. Their names, particulars of the amounts received and their subsequent writing trends or conduct need to be publicised. Society simply cannot afford a mirror that yields distorted images; such mirrors need to be broken. One hopes society and editors would chase the black sheep out of this profession. They are a fit case for a thorough-going social boycott and unending condemnation.

Some names were published during previous governments. A new internal scandal within the portals of the information ministry was discovered by Secretary Tanvir Ahmed Khan and was inquired into. Serious irregularities, including defalcations and misappropriations, were found and reported in the Press. Apart from formal crime by bureaucrats, a dismal picture emerges of governments intending to buy the support of journalists and newspapers with public money.

There is, apparently, a whole list of beneficiaries or partners in crimes, who are this profession's black sheep. Since many of these were or are likely to be pro-PPP, new or old, one should hasten to add that the PM should no longer hesitate to publish the earlier lists of beneficiaries of the secret funds of this ministry, especially of Mian Nawaz Sharif era — so that we can have an ampler, bipartisan picture of journalists hitched to both major parties, though one would wish for the names of those journalists also who go wider afield to service the various secret services. It is an alarming situation when so many agencies are out to buy the services of generally ill-paid journalists and not without success either.

For the rest, the government has long stood on the wrong foot on a number of counts vis-a-vis the media. To begin with, it needs to justify why it wants to retain the ministry of information and broadcasting. No really democratic country has an equivalent ministry or department. If we are a democracy, our government should not need such crutches, including the political use of undercover agencies performing the work of 'thought police'.

This is not the place for discussing secret services, though they are frequently used to keep tabs on journalists. Certain guidelines about their relations with the

possession of these newspapers? For some years there has been a pretence that it wants to sell them. But the conditions being attached to the sale being what they are, no one would buy. It only shows a lack of real intent to divest itself of the 'burden'. Why else would it put such conditions.

If there are no buyers for NPT papers, let those newspapers be shut down. Some workers would become unemployed, no doubt. That will be just too bad; this sort of thing goes on all the time throughout the economy. The displaced workers, of whatever specialities, might eventually find some alternative employment and the government can help by giving them a golden handshake before sending them home. The future of the workers is no excuse for not privatising or closing these papers down.

Similarly, there are needless accretions to the government's role in the media sphere and for organising propaganda. The list is, of course, headed by the ministry of information itself. It is closely followed by the jealous possession of the Radio and TV by the government. Whatever utility this possession may have had in the past is no longer valid in this age of satellites, dish antennas and a multiplicity of channels. It is about time, and it would save the citizen a pretty sum of money if the government were to sell off the various channels of the TV and the Radio's air waves.

Facing life without the expedient though misleading and actually unserviceable crutches might seem difficult to the government. But it has to do so now, willy-nilly. It is already beginning to face a discordant music from foreign TVs and other programme producers with new channels. And insofar as pure radio waves are concerned, a good chunk of Pakistani listeners is now tuning to BBC, German Radio and even the AIR. This is because our media have lost all credibility.

The ministry has elaborate departments for propaganda like National Centres, DFP and what used to be Reference and Research Outfit. All of these are basically a waste of tax-payers money and has no justification. The pity of it all is that it does not even achieve the stated purpose: the much-abused citizenry has actually grown mature and chastened enough to retaliate with disbelieving every word of the propaganda put out by no matter which government agency.