

Without mincing words

Freedom of the press

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PRESS IS acclaimed as the fourth pillar of state and for very good reasons too. It conveys the aspirations of the people to the rulers who remain besieged by sycophants, provides educational information to its readers, highlights the pitfalls of a defective policy and at times goes all the way to point out the corrupt and immoral practices of those in power. No wonder it remains chained during an unrepresentative and despotic regime.

In Pakistan, the press has gone through traumatic experiences of all types. To muzzle the press all sorts of tactics have been employed to reduce its stature to that of a chamber maid. In this regard press and publication ordinance played its part gloriously. Applying a stick and carrot policy the wielders of power have continuously tried to achieve the grand design and even created the national press trust for everyone's welfare. Journalists have been pushed behind the bars and even lashed mercilessly on trumped up charges. On many occasions, some also have been meted out harsh treatment covertly by intelligence agencies. At the same time the favourites and the loyalists got their reward on silver plate like plots, permits and what not. Remember in the recent past we

also talked about Lifafa" culture being prompted by a political class!

Since our inception, we have been hankering about press-freedom but sadly without preparing a strong foundation for it. Government policies notwithstanding, which keep on changing with the tide of time, let us also look inward and establish a "modus-operendi" which should not only protect but also promote this cherished goal. After all it is a known fact that nothing comes free in life and especially the freedom which remains a costly commodity.

To my mind even a semblance of freedom cannot be attained if one is dependent on the crumbs and favour of others. In this regard mad rush to collect advertisements from Government departments is a point worth serious consideration. Running from pillar to post to get special concessions for travelling, hotel accommodation etc is yet another sore aspect impeding our march on the inclined road of freedom. If the press contributes to the ultimate concept of a classless society then it doesn't behove us to ask for special privileges and try to become a pampered class by itself. Yes, there are classes which enjoy special concessions but let us not follow their footsteps otherwise we will have no ground to object to the existing wrong prac-

tices which abound in every nook and corner.

PRESENTLY almost all the papers are owned and operated by an individual or a family. To influence or manipulate one and coerce or entice a single person is comparatively easier than handling of a larger group. This in no way is intended to

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throw any aspersion on anyone but if public limited companies were managing our news-papers, they would be in stronger position to thwart any attempt, by the ruling junta, to exploit them. In addition up-dated methods and new innovations would be used, on scientific lines, to manage the administrative and financial affairs making the paper immune,

to a great extent, to the purposeful exploitive influences prevailing all around.

Though some of them are real brilliant yet the ongoing father to son syndrome also deserves to be re-evaluated, in the interest of the desired freedom. Financial interest of the owner must be protected but the genuine interest of the workers, contributors and

other connected staff must also be safeguarded which will be more easily possible under a public company set-up.

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the matter. This should consist of eminent editors duly elected through a secret ballot for a fixed tenure by all the members. The findings of this council should be obligatory for all the papers to publish these prominently. This hopefully, will put a damper on various issues like misreporting or black-mailing and the moral pressure from the community itself will go a long way to establish a process of transparent accountability to further enhance the credibility of our press.

On various issues there are always different perceptions and unless these are projected forcefully and honestly the best answer to any problem cannot be found. However to eliminate the lurking fear of group or individual interest it is necessary to establish a "locus standi," which proves beyond any doubt the press being the true voice of the people. If the present day feeling, in certain quarters, that press uses its nuisance value to grab petty personal gains gets eliminated then only a fool will try to curb the freedom of press.

This was some loud thinking and I hope it will not be taken as whistling in the dark. Hope eminent journalists and learned columnists will contribute further on the subject. Aim being not to bulldoze the existing tall structures but to make these earth quake proof.