

Freedom

of the

Press

The Nation
15.6.94

Mass media

THE failure of the government in substantiating charges of sedition, treachery and what have you, in a court of law, and a vigorous and persistent campaign launched by brothers and sisters in the profession of journalism resulted in the release from jail of Najam Sethi, Editor of the Friday Times

His unshackling pointed to the fact that the Press and the media persons in Pakistan are not as weak as was perceived by the government and its political supporters in the Parliament and outside. Whatever the reasons, the release of a prominent journalist from jail is a big triumph for the national Press in Pakistan, the echoes of which have reverberated and heard the world over.

Walter Lippmann, one of the widely-read American political philosophers of the 20th century, whose views on democracy, politicians, legislators and political institutions were greatly respected and valued, once wrote: "The Press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision". In a succinct manner, he presented the broad parameter, within which a free Press is supposed to perform its important role in a democratic society.

All attempts by the rulers at gagging its voice, restricting its functions, or creating obstacles in its daily output, therefore, are bound to founder at the rock of sustained resistance, as has been convincingly substantiated by the unconditional release of a senior Pakistani journalist. Steadfastness and persistence in defending the ideals which a free Press stands for is the key to success.

One of the four pillars of a democratic polity, Press in recent times has come to be regarded as an organ of direct democracy, charged with the responsibility of exposing erring rulers and the excesses often committed by them in the garbs of democracy and welfare of the people. It is the duty of media persons to bring home to the people the uncertain character of the "truth" on which their opinions are founded. It is also the responsibility of the journalists to criticize, agitate and prod politicians, especially those belonging to the ruling Party, cautioning them to behave and not to exceed the mandate given them

by the people.

By the same token, the government, according to provisions of the Constitution of Pakistan, is required not to put any hindrance in the working of the Press and also to ensure its freedom. Not only that. It is also the duty of the government to provide all possible assistance to the Press to ascertain truth in all matters related to the State and welfare of the people, and discharge its duties in conformity with the dictates of democratic principles.

The ability to present news objectively and to interpret it realistically, on the other hand, is not a native instinct in the human species. It is a product of culture, which comes only with knowledge of the past and acute awareness of how deceptive is our normal observation and how wishful is our thinking. Regrettably, we find a majority of young journalists not treading this path for a variety of reasons, which the limitation of space does not allow to be delineated in this brief piece of writing.

An objective and independent Press, needless to emphasize, serves as a watchdog of peoples' interests and at times, by disciplining the erring rulers, can bring about far reaching changes in the political, social and economic structures of a democratic society.

Press in Pakistan has suffered much during the totalitarian regimes of military dictators and pseudo socialists and yet it has maintained its resilience in braving the vicissitudes of politics in this country. The worthy examples set by the founding fathers of Press in Pakistan, and the sacrifices made by working journalists during different and difficult periods of our political history have provided life blood, strength and vigour to the Fourth Estate of the Islamic Republic

Drawing strength from the successful culmination of their campaign against the arrest of a senior journalist, the Press in Pakistan should carry on with its struggle against all kinds of exploitation. The media persons can achieve similar results in future by discharging their duties with diligence, seriousness of purpose and commitment to the ideals set forth by the Father of the Nation.