

# Freedom of the press

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The national press has reacted sharply at the promulgation of the Registration of Printing Press & Publication Ordinance (RPPPO), 1997. The RPPPO gives the government arbitrary powers to confiscate a newspaper that publishes news or comments that are unpalatable to it. This ordinance is seen as an attempt to circumscribe the freedom of the press.

The government has attracted the ire of the press on three counts. First, the press has vehemently objected to the practice of making laws through presidential ordinances. Second, it has attacked the tendency of successive governments of dealing with it through special laws. Third, it has lamented that the newly elected government has reneged on its commitment to abolish the Ministry of Information. Following are gleanings from some major newspapers.

*The News:* The RPPPO is a black law that has caused concern to those who believe in the sanctity of press freedom. It empowers the Government to become the judge, the jury and the prosecutor. The practice of legislating through ordinances betrays arbitrary tendencies and it is insulting to the parliament. It is regrettable that the Ministry of Information is still in existence in spite of the government's promises to the contrary.

*The Nation:* Is it an attempt to muzzle the Press? In the presence of an elected National Assembly, there appears no urgent or valid reason for continuing the practice of issuing Presidential ordinances to the detriment of the legislative role of the National Assembly. Far from abolishing the Ministry of Information, a commitment made by the newly elected government, the practice of regulating Press through promulgation of an Ordinance is to continue. The free Press is always a thorn in the side of the government of the day.

*The Muslim:* The Press has been stabbed in the back by a party whose own ascension to power was felicitated by a vociferous media. It is a veiled attempt to muzzle truth in the name of national security and patriotism, both often abused euphemisms. It is a law full of absurdities. The promise to do away with the Ministry of Information is forgotten.

*Jang:* The National Assembly is the only legitimate forum to make laws. The RPPPO would not allow criticism of those who represent vested interests. Similarly, to discuss, question or criticize the government, its policies or actions could now be declared negative and make the newspaper suffer for airing its opinions freely.

*Khabrain:* All the evil anti-press laws made in the past 50 years have been rapped together in the new Ordinance. These are the laws which have been declared un-Islamic, negating Shariah and which are against fundamental human rights and civil liberties.

*Nawa-i-Waqt:* A civilized and democratic society would never accept such a law. The

last government was blamed for turning the President House into an ordinance factory. It is a deliberate attempt to denigrate the newly elected government. In principle, legislation by ordinances should be discouraged. The bureaucrat wizards have no right to draft a law and get it issued by the President. This is an insult to the Parliament and an affront to the popular mandate.

The government and press have a precarious relationship. If it is too close, democracy suffers. If it is too far apart, it would still suffer. They have to strike a delicate balance in their relationship to make the democracy flourish. It is the duty of the press to watch the leaders carefully whether they are growing or swelling. The politicians who value public opinion regard press freedom as an essential ingredient to good governance. The

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US President John Kennedy underscored the advantages of the free press in these words: "Even though we never like it, and even though we wish they didn't write it, and even though we disapprove, there isn't any doubt that we could not do the job at all in a free society without a very, very active press."

The press not only supplies information but it encourages debate, which is a bumpy and longer course to the destination, but safer. The governments suffer from the psychic diseases of hastiness and superficiality. Their object is not good governance but public acclaim. The press checks the government from acting extravagantly. It was not an act of good governance, but a gimmick for attracting public acclaim, to publicly handcuff three civil servants in Faisalabad. The *Nawa-i-Waqt* has asked the prime minister to refrain from acting as a judge.

Mark Twain (1835-1910), the famous American author, said early this century: "There are only two forces that can carry light to all the corners of the globe: the sun in the heavens and the press down here." The press keeps the world abreast with events that have occurred or are unfolding. It gathers information from far and wide and puts

it in black and white to make the world better informed. The government that does not take the printed word seriously is the big loser. None of its secret agencies could provide it the intelligence that can be found by browsing a morning newspaper. What people want, what ails them, what they think of the government and its policies? Answers to these and many other questions can only be found in the free press.

There are many who look with disdain and suspicion at the freedom of the press. Some are overawed by the competence of the press to reveal secrets. Some feel threatened by its propensity of probing the private lives of public leaders. They consider that journalists are evil and filthy adult delinquents skilled in turning enemies into money. They seldom concede what press publishes is true. The reporters especially are the butt of their ridicule who are often accused of bad reporting. Even Shakespeare (1564-1616) had reservations about a reporter's capability when he spoke through Hamlet: "Report me and my cause aright." The Bible says, "Write the things which thou hast seen, and the things which are, and the things which shall be hereafter." And that is what the journalists do.

Yeats (1865-1939), the Irish poet, hated journalists. He saw nothing in them but tittering jeering emptiness and regarded them the shallowest people on earth. Another poet detested reading newspapers because the newspaper is the natural enemy of the book, as the whore is of the decent woman. A British editor wrote in 1992: "If you can't get a job as a pianist in a brothel you become a royal reporter." Journalists are scum; granted, but they are the cream of the scum. If they were to behave gentlemanly, they would seldom succeed in unearthing corruption at the high places. Their disclosures are termed melodramatic and they are accused of belonging to the gutter press. Yes, journalists belong in the gutter because that is where the ruling classes throw their guilty secrets, so said a BBC journalist.

A despotic government would regulate the press. A democratic government would encourage it to talk freely. Lenin (1870-1924), the founder of Communist Russia, despised the free press for it hindered his march to despotic rule. He warned that the "freedom of the press" goes backward, and halts our headlong course towards socialism. Lenin's Communist empire now lies in ruins. The countries that allowed free press are prospering politically and economically.

It is a misfortune that at the dawn of the 21st century the press in Pakistan is struggling for freedom. This issue was tackled and gradually resolved long ago in the democratic West. In 1644, John Milton, the poet, appeared before the Parliament of England to argue for the liberty of unlicensed printing. He closed his speech with these words: "Give me the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience, above all liberties." Three hundred fifty years down the line we are still hankering after these liberties.