



## ON THE MOVE

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A group of journalists has been named by an official of the Federal Investigating Agency (FIA) as recipients of doles and special facilities from the Agency. Predictably, the charge has led to reactions of indignation and protest. Were the allegations aimed at countering an increasingly critical and vociferous Press or there was substance to them?

It is easy to cast aspersions on the character of an individual or a group from any field of life. Journalists are natural and easy targets. When they are objective, they succeed in annoying all concerned. When they are partisan, they are automatically and rightly suspect. It is a tight-rope walk in which only a few succeed in maintaining balance from one end to the other.

Practically every government of Pakistan has vowed to uphold the freedom of the Press. The sincerity is, however, only skin deep in every case. The statements of President, Prime Minister, Information Minister and other government officials connected with information would run into hundreds of pages. However, the actions of these very luminaries against unfettered journalism would also cover volumes. They say one thing and mean something totally different. This is not an unsubstantiated charge like the one made by the non-descript FIA official. The other strong, irrefutable evidence, although circumstantial, backs it. Can one cite administrations other than those of Yahya Khan and Moeen Qureshi which did not try to restrict official media to its own

projection and eschew maligning others?' And even these two setups were questionable. Yahya Khan permitted a free-for-all in which the President's person was sacrosanct. Mr Qureshi's government was obsessed with presenting itself as the greatest, the most precious and non-partisan gift to Pakistan even when it jumped beyond its jurisdiction and enforced decisions far beyond its mandate simply because it felt political administrations were handicapped in taking unpopular and difficult measures. One way or the other, both governments kept state-owned media shackled and harnessed to their ends.

The claims of commitment to freedom of Press becomes see-through when governments do not apply the principle to themselves. Perhaps this is the reason why the vocabulary used is freedom of Press instead of freedom of media. But as long as this charity is not initiated at home, pious pronouncements would remain hollow.

It is a question if the Press has matured to the extent of realising its responsibilities. Actually it is, by and large, arrogant, aware of its clout, willing, indeed eager, to apply it collectively, its members often going over board to do so seeking favours of one kind or another. In recent months, I have been witness to two incidents depicting contempt for established rules and honoured norms. A senior official of a Federal ministry one day telephoned me to complain, with a great deal of anger about a 'totally baseless news' about his ministry appearing in a newspaper. He was seeking advice and help on a personal basis. I told him there was nothing I could do - no newspaper or newsman would contradict a report on its own even if the information was proved to them as incorrect. That is a great pity and showing lack of maturity and courage. There may be advantages in publishing factually incorrect information and refusing to correct it

without pressure. My advice was: issue an official denial. 'Would it be published'? He asked. One hundred per cent, I replied, I also told him there was no point in talking to anyone, the newspaper was duty-bound to print it. But the official position went unreported the next day. I checked if the fax had been received by the newspaper and reached the right person. It had. I talked to the editor. He said there was nothing to the Press release, so he threw it away. He did not say anything when told that the decision to evaluate it was not his. It was his professional duty to carry the clarification. He would have been within his rights to add that his

newspaper stood by its did not answer me back not publish the Press release. On another occasion, similar treatment was meted out about a semi-government with a fat publicity purse. The head of its public relations wing talked to the editor and threatened to suspend his organisation's advertising for that newspaper for a given period of time. Next day, the clarification was front paged. Many reports about corruption in the government estate are always circulating. Not of them are always false.

But it does not follow that Press has become the state of Denmark. There is a positive side to media as a medium no less. And this also does not follow that high or petty officials, politicians or bureaucrats can blacken the face of print media and character assassinate journalists. But this is exactly what was done by the FIA's blundering. Still, he alone is not to be castigated. Why did the newsmen at his Press talk put him on the mat for talking without evidence? The question: Why was his Press conference attended by any newsman? authentic level? He certainly not. The only official of whom notice may be off should be its head; other provide information which sifted and checked. It is that Press treats low-levelies as newsmakers in a setup. This just goes how underline an attitude of inculcated in the people during autocratic times.

That functionary should with the manner in which Federal Interior Minister handle affair. He has simply instructed FIA 'not to divulge names of other journalists who had allegedly been getting benefits from the Intelligence Bureau during the previous government.' He went on to add: 'When Brigadier Imtiaz will be present before the court and he would

**Reports about Pressmen on the pay and privileges list of intelligence agencies or being beneficiaries of secret funds are aired every other day. But so far, only insinuations were to be heard. If Brig. Imtiaz 'reveals' names, it would be a weightless charge unless supported by documentary evidence. That would be another case of missing the point which is the working of intelligence agencies and the use of secret funds.**

