**[Friends, not hybrid warriors](https://www.dawn.com/news/1430259/friends-not-hybrid-warriors)**

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THE new information minister’s statement about his government’s desire to create a supra regulator to oversee all media and social media platforms will create misgivings at a number of levels.

Fawad Chaudhry has said he wants to club together the role of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regu­latory Authority and the Press Council of Pakis­tan which respectively regulate electronic and print media.

In addition, the role of ‘regulating’ social media would also devolve to this regulatory body. This announcement came without holding any consultation with stakeholders in the media in particular. Why does the government feel the need to regulate the media with an extraordinary body when there are existing regulators and laws that adequately provide for the job?

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For, if there are shortcomings in their general functioning, including how appointments to these bodies are made and whether these are politically motivated, they need to be addressed rather than the existing regulations and the regulators being demolished.

As has been well [argued in this newspaper](https://www.dawn.com/news/1430057/media-regulation) in a leader yesterday, the electronic media, ie radio and TV, on the one hand, and print, most notably newspapers, on the other, function in vastly different ways — a one-size-fits-all regulator cannot be the answer.

In the UK, for example, electronic media and the newspapers are regulated by entirely different bodies. Ofcom is the regulator that covers phones and internet, TV, radio and on demand. Ofcom’s mandate is to ensure the orderly growth of the communications industry across the spectrum of its responsibilities.

Equally, it enforces anti-monopoly regulations and then addresses user/ viewer/ consumer complaints which cover a broad sweep such as billing, quality of the service provision, and last but not least, content. It also provides the code that broadcasters have to follow.

Then there is the Press Complaints Commission which is the body that rules on reader/ affected party complaints against newspapers. As for social media, there is no regulator per se. Laws exist to safeguard the public against defamation, slander etc which are routinely enforced by the courts.

Against this backdrop, either one takes the minister’s statement as just the expression of a wish that he has not had time to think through, or, given the experience of recent months, one should perhaps fear that something sinister may be under way.

There are several reasons that cause worry. Take social media. The PTI can rightly be credited with using social media like no other party to advance its goals and to try and silence its critics.

In doing so, its enthusiastic, or more appropriately, overenthusiastic, social media team has not shied away from carrying out intense attacks on critics from multiple handles seemingly set up for the purpose. Of course, it is difficult to say if approval for this comes from the top.

The others such as the PML-N and PPP have struggled so far to catch up with the PTI, although the PML-N social media team has betrayed a propensity to be as distasteful as the next party. It is characteristic of social media that this gap (compared to the formal or traditional media) can last for a short time. Perhaps just months. So, the governing party may have cause for concern once it loses its edge and there is a more level playing field.

Other state institutions have also expressed unhappiness with the power of the social media to disseminate information quickly and easily bypassing any attempts at censoring. This is the reason that a number of those who have used the medium to raise concerns about state excesses have been subjected to excesses themselves.

They were picked up and only freed after their captors reached the conclusion that they had been ‘persuaded’ to desist. The authorities were acting this way most likely out of concern that their key institutions were being targeted by ‘enemy forces’ deploying fourth-generation or hybrid warfare tactics.

Once such thinking takes root in institutions that feel they are not answerable to anyone, it is but a natural outcome that the distinction between enemy propaganda/ action and genuine local concerns about the well-being of the democratic order and human rights can get blurred.

That is why the authorities are not content with having set up their own social media teams that counter any comment seen as unfavourable on Twitter, for example, with concerted, coordinated attacks from dozens of handles. And this was just about social media.

Now look at what the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said as it blamed the “government and military agencies” for increasing curbs on the media. It said many distributors confirmed over the recent months they’d been ‘told’ not to distribute this newspaper or that but would not name those responsible for fear of retribution.

HRCP said a civil-military equation on the military’s terms alone created a situation where power was being wielded by the unaccountable who were averse to transparency. This, HRCP held, was at the root of extra curbs on the media. Many would also point to what has happened to ‘errant’ TV channels.

It is now up to the government to allay concerns that more curbs may be on the way and to state unequivocally that it is committed to media freedoms. At the same time, let me say no legitimate journalist approves of or reports fake news or other distasteful content.

If someone were to do that, the laws exist and the book could be thrown at them. I hope we can collectively safeguard our hard-earned freedoms and not be forced to give them up on one pretext or the other. However, as one social media rights activist in her 40s said: we have survived two dictatorships so will survive a democracy too.

I am just hoping it never comes to that. Aren’t we all on the same side — ie Pakistan’s?

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