

Good governance and access to information

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Information is the currency that every citizen requires to participate in the life and governance of society. The greater the access to information, the greater would be the responsiveness of government to community needs.

✓ Today there is wide acceptance of the principle that right to information is an indispensable instrument for increasing citizen control over the exercise of executive power, and for enforcing transparency and accountability.

It is also an undeniable fact that in the present day world information is power, and the bureaucracy at all levels attempts to withhold information to increase its scope for control, patronage and arbitrary, corrupt and unaccountable exercise of power.

For years, indeed centuries, the people have been in their daily lives habitual victims of an unremitting tradition of acts of corruption by state authorities—graft, extortion, nepotism, arbitrariness, to name only a few—but have mostly been silent sufferers trapped in the settled despair and cynicism.

In Pakistan today, the state has spread its tentacles to virtually every aspect of public life. As a result the person on the street is condemned to grapple hopelessly with corruption in almost every aspect of daily work and living. In the Land of the Pure most government offices typically present a client public bewildered and harassed by opaque rules and procedures and inordinate delays, constantly vulnerable to exploitation by the so-called public servants and touts.

In the quest for systemic or systematic answers to this chronic malaise, it is important to identify the sources of corruption inherent within the character of state machine. These include a determined denial of transparency, accessibility, cumbersome and confusing procedures, proliferation of mindless controls, and poor commitment at all levels to real results of public welfare.

Therefore demystification of rules and procedures, complete transparency and pro-

very strong safeguard against corruption.

Ultimately the most effective systemic check on corruption would be where the citizen himself or herself has the right and initiative to seek information from state, to enforce transparency and accountability.

From time to time courageous individuals, journalists, political leaders, officials and social activists have attempted to fight chronic corruption in order to bring relief to the people. But it is also a fact that in such efforts, the role of the people who are victims of various types of corruption has mostly been passive. There has not been any concerted and organised campaign by the citizens to combat corruption.

✓ The electronic media (radio and television) basically meant for education, information and entertainment have been shamelessly used by the successive governments to dole out propaganda against the opposition parties and to trumpet the imaginary achievements of the rulers.

Unfortunately, the print media in Pakistan as a whole has not been able to perform its basic duty to inform and educate the masses and to mobilise public opinion on the issues of national importance because of the control exercised by the ministry of information through government advertisements and newsprint quotas.

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) a representative body of the working journalists of the country, since its inception in August 1950 has been striving for a democratic society based on justice and fair play.

It believes that freedom in the honest collection and publication of news facts and the right of fair comment and criticism, are the principles which every journalist should defend. In short, to defend, maintain and struggle for freedom of the Press is the main objective of the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists apart from striving for better working conditions for its members.

The working journalists of the country under the banner of PFUJ have waged many movements against the arbitrary actions of the successive regimes against the newspapers and journalists during the past five decades. The latest battle was successfully

ing party tried to dictate the management of the Jang Group of Newspapers to dismiss sixteen journalists who refused to toe the official line.

The PFUJ does not subscribe to the concept of unfettered freedom for the press. It believes that the press should be free as well as responsible to society. If at all any individual, section of society or the authorities have any grievances against journalists or the newspapers they should proceed against the erring party in the courts according to normal laws of the land.

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists has always vehemently opposed the arbitrary closure of newspapers through executive order. During the past 48 years the

The PFUJ has been demanding introduction of Freedom of Information Bill in parliament and repeal of all anti-people black laws including the Official Secrets Act

civilian governments and military regimes closed down dozens of newspapers for refusing to pursue the conformist policy. The PFUJ always challenged these arbitrary actions. During the movements for the restoration of the declarations of the banned organs the leaders and members of the representative body of the working journalists had to go through all sorts of pains, sufferings and hardships. To protest against successive regimes' unjust actions of becoming the complainant and the judge at the same time, the PFUJ members courted arrests, were convicted to various terms of imprisonment and even whipped. A number of their leaders and activists had to suffer victimisation at the hands of newspapers managements on the recommendation of the minions of the ministry of information.

The representative body of the working journalists has always contended that the ministry of information and broadcasting over the decades has been turned into a ministry of disinformation and media control.

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists

Confederation (APNEC) have time and again demanded the abolition of the ministry of information. It was because of the anti-people policies of this much-maligned ministry that the people of West Pakistan were kept in complete dark about the happenings in East Pakistan in 1970-71. The ministry of information and broadcasting by implementing the commands of the power-drunk coterie of generals led by belching booming usurper Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan (whose rule was later declared illegal and unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in Asma Jilani case) got Pakistan dismembered by feeding black, brown and white lies on the electronic media.

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists of-

ficial stand is that nowhere in genuine democracies such ministries exist as they do not need to control and manage for partisan purposes the print and electronic media, the news agencies and indeed the advertisement.

Particularly since the days of Ayubian dictatorship (1958-69), the ministry of information and broadcasting has been made a white elephant and an instrument to suppress the freedom of information and expression. It was during this period that under the supervision of this ministry draconian measures were introduced such as the imposition of infamous Press and Publication Ordinance, the setting up of so-called National Press Trust (NPT), the taking over of Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) and such reputed independent newspapers as the Pakistan Times and Imroze.

Huge amounts of public money were placed at the disposal of ministry of information along with secret fund for bribery and corruption purposes. A so-called information service (information group) was created whose officers were trained into what

may be called the art of disinformation, media control, and indeed corruption to name a few functions of this service.

The PFUJ sincerely believes it is high time the government not just abolished the ministry of information but also undertook steps to totally free the useful and valued media. The re-organisation of radio and television corporations and APP be done in such a way that they can only be subjected to an annual scrutiny and review of their workings by a joint committee of parliament which should have representation of the opposition parties. Similarly the right of issuance of advertisement should be reverted to the industrial concerns and corporations on merit basis.

✓ Politicians in Pakistan are like elephants. They have two types of teeth. One for eating and another set is for demonstration. When they are out of power, they preach justice, fair play, rule of law and democracy. When they are on campaign trails they make innumerable promises to the people. But the moment they get power they conveniently forget their pledges thinking that public memory is very short.

The President of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz Group) had declared during the election campaign of February 1997 that after coming into power his party will abolish the much maligned, anti-people and anti-state ministry of information. But following in the footsteps of his predecessors Prime Minister Mohammad Nawaz Sharif has also kept the white elephant which is a burden on the national exchequer.

On its part, the PFUJ had reminded Nawaz Sharif as early as in the fourth week of February 1997 (within one week of his assuming power for the second time in seven years) to fulfil his obligation and honour the commitment he had made to the nation by dismembering the obsolete outfit. Since then PFUJ and APNEC have reminded the rulers several times of their promise to get rid of the ministry whose activities are counter-productive and against the interest of the nation. But, as usual, all pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Along with the abolition of information ministry the PFUJ has been demanding introduction of Freedom of Information Bill in

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parliament and repeal of all anti-people black laws including the Official Secrets Act. Since under the garb of guarding official secrets the corrupt and unscrupulous officials take refuge by using their undefined discretion.

It is high time the legislators belonging to ruling party and opposition forged consensus for the repeal of all anti-people black laws. In national interest they must mount a combined move for the presentation of much delayed Freedom of Information Bill which should seek to secure for every citizen the enforceable right to question, examine, audit, review and assess government acts and decisions, to ensure that they are consistent with the principles of public interest, probity and justice. It should also seek to promote openness, transparency and accountability of administration by making the government more open to public scrutiny.

The Freedom of Information Bill must also bring in its purview the judiciary and legislature while making the government explicitly responsible to supply information to the citizen on demand related to corporate sector and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

It must also contain powerful provisions for penalties and autonomous appeal mechanism. Most importantly, the proposed legislation must make disclosure the rule and denial of information the exception, restricted only to genuine consideration of national security and individual privacy, with the highly significant proviso that no information can be denied to citizens which cannot be denied to Parliament and legislatures.

It would then truly be the most significant reform in public administration, legally empowering the citizen, for the first time, to enforce transparent and accountable governance.