

Government vs the Jang Group

Dawn 31/1/89 By Aziz Siddiqui *Press*

MACHIAVELLI had advised the prince to stop just short of the point where the subject, from sheer desperation, may turn right on him. Mr Saifur Rahman lacked the instinctive wisdom even of ruthlessness. So did the others who stood behind him in this latest shindy he is at the centre of.

The Jang Group may be guilty of all the seven deadly sins and some more. That is irrelevant. The current exposes are about the doings of the minions of the government, and these stink. Saying how bad Jang is does not excuse these acts. And lying about them quickly takes a tumble, since a lie is a cripple. Jang's present response was apparently so altogether unexpected — it has had no precedent — that the knights of the inner sanctum took time adjusting to it. They still look clumsy in their swagger.

Are the Group's misfortunes, then, all because it has been dithering with its tax returns? Or because it was trying to rock the throne and had to be taught a lesson or two? Or is all this nothing but the Group's petty blackmail of our pure of heart? They ought to make up their mind what they want to say. Though even after that there will remain this small business of their explaining their own conduct.

Take the blackmailing part, since according to the latest defence — or really offensive — that is 'the actual bone of contention.' The blackmailing, said Mr Mushahid Hussain, was for the materialization of Mir Shakilur Rahman's long-cherished project of a TV channel.

First, for a print-media establishment to want to branch into electronic business is not an unheard of ambition. In fact, that is what often happens. It follows more or less naturally. And the reason why three governments here have kept refusing it to Jang is no surprise at all. Any other applicant would have fared no better. The one semi-official channel they somehow permitted to squeak through they haven't had the guts to let function in any kind of freedom. But that apart, Mr Mushahid Hussain will have to come up with some evidence that all the grievances that Mr Shakilur Rahman has been broadcasting to the world are a fiction in order to make the people believe that the latter's present campaign is really for the benefit of a TV channel.

He will have to show that there is no truth to the charge that the Group's bank accounts were

proof of the Group's perfidy! Surely any government that would want to hang anyone just on such bases must qualify for the clowns' gallery.

The Group is known to have never in normal circumstances been a partisan of the opposition, or a consistent ally of the dissenter. Averse to seriously offending authority, it has defied labelling and has been accommodative of all news and views with a market and a following. It was apparently because it was assumed to be pliable that Mr Saifur Rahman set out to lean so hard and so blatantly on it.

If for all that these papers turned out to be not supportive enough of this government during all its tenure, much of the responsibility for that must lie with the government itself. And if even this Group was finally pushed into open defiance of the government, that is largely thanks to the exertions of the ehtesab chief and those egging him on from behind.

The policies of the government must sometimes have seemed so disruptive of the national consensus that even papers with traditions like these ones' could not prevent the balance of opinion in their pages from leaning towards the negative: how could any paper of national standing be effusive, say, about the assault on the Supreme Court, or even the decision on Kalabagh or the 15th Amendment, and retain national acceptability? And how could any section of the press be asked to be faithful to the official line in the manner of the ministers or the ruling party MPs or the PTV and still maintain even a pretence of independence?

All political governments find cause to be annoyed with an independent press doing a reasonable job. But only autocratic ones seek to silence it. Mrs Indira Gandhi during her Emergency could stoop to cutting off the power supply to the *Indian Express*, and Dr Mohathir Mohammad could suspend the licence of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and throw out a string of foreign journalists from Kuala Lumpur — since only outside papers could dare to be critical of him. Islamabad should seek to adopt better models.

Mr Mushahid Hussain's proposal for setting up a committee to resolve the issue presumes that the Jang Group's present contretemps is linked to some extraneous issues and is dependent on some give-and-take. Even if this is true, it should not be accorded respectabil-

ordered frozen, its stocks or newsprint were got bonded in the warehouses, it was bombarded in short order with a raft of income tax notices and always given just a few days in which to cough up, it was urged to render support to the government in all its deeds and misdeeds, and it was advised to replace named senior staffers with government-approved functionaries.

Just now the balance of evidence happens to be on the other side. Mr Saifur Rahman has in fact admitted in a roundabout way the truth of almost all of that. His cassettes too have now been heard far and wide. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court has been petitioned and all the details have been listed for it at great length. It is hard to believe that a person who is lying will take the risk of going to the court. The government in any case will now have the opportunity to prove the alleged lie or the mala fide at the highest judicial level.

In case the complaints are not untrue, then surely telling the world about it cannot be called blackmailing. Blackmailing consists in seeking a benefit by *threatening* to reveal, not actually revealing, a discreditable secret. Any hope Mr Shakilur Rahman might have ever had of his TV channel coming through he must have buried fathoms deep to come out in the way he has done, all guns blazing. This could only have been in reaction to a grievous hurt, even if that hurt, as the government argues, is for sound reason.

If that reason is that the Group was in default of those two billion rupees in tax payments, the obvious question will be, why was that not left to be sorted out in the normal way, which included conceding to the defaulter the right to contest a reassessment? Why was the punishment began to be meted out ahead of the due process in terms of the freezing of the bank accounts and blocking of the newsprint? Was a recourse of this sort ever adopted in the case of any other running business in a comparable circumstance of tax default? If the answers to these is that this was a special case then there had to be special reasons for it.

Which brings us to the political aspect of the government's case. The prime minister had some time ago, while bitterly criticising the press, declared, "It is now our turn," meaning, of course, turn to settle scores with the press. It was soon clear that the reference mainly, or to begin with, was to the Jang Group.

A couple of stories have since then continued to be trotted out to emphasize its misdemeanour, in fact its being a traitor to the national cause, no less. The Group has every time contested that those were its stories. But even if they were they could only have triggered the action, not, just by themselves, caused all that besetting anger Mr Saifur Rahman even cited some New Year forecast fea-

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ity. What will be decent is to separate the financial from the political aspect. There should be nothing for any ad hoc committee to negotiate on the matter of the tax claims if any. There are tribunals for the purpose. They should be left strictly free of all promptings from the rather bumptious ehtesab chief and everyone else and allowed to get on with examining the issue on the basis of justice, fair play and precedents. The punitive acts should immediately be withdrawn so as not to prejudge the legal process.

That leaves the government's complaints against the Group, which can even be legitimate. It makes sense that a committee more or less of the kind proposed by the information minister sets out to get to the bottom of the government's obsessive grievance, listen to the views of the other side and coolly appraise if there is an element of wilful malice or persistent non-professionalism in what is complained of. It should in good time reach conclusions to satisfy everyone's honest expectations.

There is another aspect for the Group itself to consider. The minister did some finger-pointing at its personnel management. This may not be so much for the love of the employees as out of spite for the employer. But there is a point to it. The bane, including the rampancy of the system of contract labour in the industry, is not peculiar to the Group. It needs to be tackled widely and across the board. But the Group ought to give a lead immediately when — and if — it comes out of its present straits.

A happy workforce under a progressive management may impose some extra cost. But that is nothing compared to the longer term difference this can make to the quality of work it produces and — not least — to the support it musters during periods of trial like the present. This may not necessarily be the last crisis the Group faces; nor is this the only group to face one; nor, hard to believe as this may be, is this the most intolerant of governments we shall have. It is important to close professional ranks.