

Is it the turn of the press?

By Aziz Siddiqui

It is sad to hear of the authorities' growing anxiety to bring the press into line. The fear has been rife after the taming of the presidency and the parliament and the assault on the judiciary. To many the question since then was not whether but when and how.

The process has in fact already been on for some time. The bulk of the press and the pressmen were in any case considered sound and open to suggestion. They were that either by conviction or because of the government's ways of winning friends and influencing people in that sphere. It was always a minority that had to be taken care of.

There has recently been evidence of that effort. Some people have been 'working on' sections of that minority. *Muslim*, Islamabad's first English language newspaper, had been languishing for a long time. Its financial worries were recurrent, which was also probably a reason why, except for short spells, it often gave the impression of being rather indifferently managed and edited. But it was completely squeezed out of sustenance over the past year for lack of advertising and the accumulation of arrears of advertising revenue. Its being owned and guided by an active opposition political figure no doubt contributed most to its worst travails.

Its prolonged agony eventually came to an end last month when it announced, euphemistically, that it was suspending publication. That was one irritant out of the way.

Newsline has been a thorn in the flesh of successive governments. The most recent demonstration of it was when a pack of tax hounds were sent after it. That was apparently a warning shot. Recently, a CIA bunch descended on the *Herald's* (also BBC's) reporter Idrees Bakhtiar. They ran through his house claiming to be looking for a terrorist, and finally made to take the reporter's son with them. It was such an utterly dumb act that the official plea afterwards of its having been the result of a mix-up sounded plausible by comparison. But of course a mix-up does not continue in face of all the evidence of transparent innocence and impeccable proofs of respect-

in Sindh. Then, as the chief editor revealed at a press conference, they want a number of persons on the staff to be dismissed or put out to pasture. And the replacement of them to be made in consultation with the authorities! Even Ziaul Haq must now seem a devotee of press freedom by comparison.

If all this is true, it is scandalous. And scandalous as it is, it is not implausible from the people running our show. It fits in the desired pattern.

The ambition to 'overhaul the whole system' in the country, the yearning for unshared power to prescribe what is right and prohibit what is wrong, the yen to quickly judge a crime and promptly and publicly hang whoever is judged to be the criminal — that, and all that has actually been attempted, including the neutering of the presidency, the bonding of the parliament, the taming of the judiciary, the stalking of the opposition — each is of a piece with the rest, and with the attempt now to lasso the more popular or the more independent of the press. The pattern is unmistakable.

If it is one group of papers today, can another or a third be long left in peace? The evidence may still be thin on the ground, but it is the straws that show the direction of the wind. The method may differ from the past. It may be sly and selective. It may be slow, yet grind exceedingly small. With prospects on critical issues looking as grim as they do after this American visit of the prime minister the tendency to use the press to herd public opinion along may become even stronger.

It has been customary in the press to claim credit for a long struggle for the attainment of the current level of freedom. The history of curbs on the press has been long, yes, but of resistance against them too? Struggle implies sacrifice, suffering. How many, especially at the superior levels, really suffered through the years of dictatorship of various hues, and how many prospered? The evidence, from that joint editorial of the early year on, has been less of struggle and resistance and more of acquiescence, compromise and credentials-waving.

Which is not necessarily to everyone's discredit of course.

ability.

But perhaps the most brazen and unrelenting exercise yet in trying to break a newspaper is the one that has been mounted against the *Jung* group of papers. The group these days is banned virtually all official advertising (private advertisers are also apparently under warning — they do a thorough job, don't they?), and it is reportedly under continuous siege from the tax and customs people.

That might have been some mercy for the reader if it had only given the publications a far leaner and tidier and not also a very sepulchral look.

It seems odd on surface that the group should inspire such passionate official hostility. It has prospered for the most part on a studied policy of lack of apparent political conviction. The forerunner of the group, *Jung*, for long made wishy-washiness the hallmark of its editorial-writing.

Its news coverage tried to be as all-inclusive as possible, catering to a variety of popular tastes and interests, but observing the conventional priorities and affording the establishment even more than its due.

It built up a shrewd line-up of column-writers from across a great part of the spectrum, but always making sure that the self-righteous ones and the flag-wavers retained a strong and dominant voice. It was careful in its balancing act to lean enough on one side to justify a slight occasional lurch on the other. If the authorities were particularly keen on any point it bent over backwards to accommodate them, as one of its owners publicly and a trifle self-flagellatingly confessed recently.

The formula worked. And the home-grown mix of the tabloid and the professional kept the paper at its dizzying peak for all concerned — the reader, the advertiser and the government.

Not this government though. This one sets extraordinary store by propaganda. It wants only the best things said about it and only the worst about its opponents. It must in particular consider anything negative on the sensitive points of its schemata from a group of the reach of *Jung* disruptive of its whole design.

An honest investigation into the drug charges against Mr Asif Zardari for instance would seem to puncture a vital part of its anti-opposition handiwork.

A reasoned proposal for an alternative ruling establishment would appear to strike at the very root of the present order. And searching questions about the nuclear policy would take the hot air out of much of the current proud bombast. Even if these are a tiny part amidst a plenitude of bromide they stand out. They put the focus where it hurts.

The group is perhaps targeted not just because of its size but also because it must be believed to be possible of being twisted every which way. It is obviously being pressed to offer fully support to the government on all key issues — such for now, presumably, as the 15th Amendment or the action

The newspaper owners', editors' and journalists' bodies ought to recognize the possible dangers. They can only face them together. And only by sticking together can they ward off the camel's insinuating its eager head into their tent. It will be unfortunate for them to get divided on the phoney pleas of patriotism or ideology or national security.

Compromise, even retreat, in the face of brute force, or prospect of starvation, is sometimes the better part of valour. One has to survive first. One can fight another day. But short of that stage of the knives coming out there can be no excuse for the stiffest resistance not being put up against all threats. The present may develop into a situation like that.

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That often only puts a gloss on professional and business rivalries and on the opportunity one sees in advancing one's own interests at the cost of the other. The enemies of the free press have also used just those appeals to divide the ranks of the press.

It should be asked anyhow if there could be a legitimate excuse for a *Newsline* to be hounded by taxmen, for the family of an Idrees Bakhtiar to be subjected to midnight terrorism, for a newspaper establishment to be told what to do with its staffers or to be questioned every morning for its headlines and made to swing further in the wind.

Those not affected may even find excuses, but then such excuses will be found when they get affected too.

As in the memorable parable of Pastor Martin Niemoller, one may not speak out when they come successively for the Jews, the communists and the trade unionists just because one is none of those. But in that case there will be none left to speak out when they come for oneself.

Worse still, by then, the very practice of speaking out may have gone out of vogue.