

Journalism in Pakistan

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Imagine being expected by the government to paint a colourful rainbow of its "democratic progress" when you have no brushes and only two pots of paint. Welcome to journalists' world in Pakistan. You either find yourself finger-painting messy and inaccurate piece of work to please the government or try to understand the root causes of chaos and anarchy and present workable solutions to the never-ending problems at hand and suddenly end up in prison in cooked up charges.

The chief executive of *The Frontier Post* happens to be just another victim of the recent spate of democratically embarrassing onslaughts against the press in Pakistan which suggests that something more disheartening is at work than an epidemic of insecure leaders tightening the screws on journalists for exhibiting "too much freedom." Prison now seems to be the only destination of the journalists who failed to learn the way most of our public — which has been living under one or another form of dictatorial regime for decades — think.

(The press in Pakistan is now systematically being targeted and the government is paranoid of those journalists who present the "wrong" side of what appears to be progressive and people-friendly policies of a "democratic" government.) Having tamed the Parliament, presidency, military and the judiciary, no one knows whether the prime minister has taken on media critics on his own democratic instincts, or the crusade is being carried out on the advice of those in Washington who have closed minds of their own public to seek out the truth and protect convictions, interests and interpretations which are especially dear to majority of the Americans?

According to Mir Shakilur Rehman, publisher and editor-in-chief of the Jang Group of Publications, he has been told by two senior officials close to Nawaz Sharif to dismiss 16 journalists on his rolls. Shakilur Rehman has been told that "nothing adverse should be written concerning their (the Sharifs') loans, business, personal matters, etc." Apart from the raids on *The News* offices, last October, plainclothed officials landed up at the office of the Karachi-based monthly *Newsline* demanding the home phone numbers and addresses of its correspondents.

The husband-wife couple, which runs the weekly *The Friday Times*, Najam Sethi and Jugnu Mohsin, have for long been complaining about their phone being tapped and other harassment. According to Mohsin, when they "go to Islamabad, senior government officials jokingly quote bits of [their] conversations" to them. Still they are lucky to have not been framed like Rehmat Shah Afridi — a victim of a well-calculated conspiracy that can be professionally hatched against any journalist with as much perfection and ease as we have witnessed in the present case. And no victim would ever be able to protect himself or prove his innocence in this lawless land.

I have repeatedly pointed out that Pakistan is an Egypt in the making. A Scottish journalist working for *The Cairo Times* recently discovered "we do [our work] with a hand tied behind our back," and if you become a victim "you are guilty until proven innocent." Contrary to the general belief that the more information you have, the better equipped you will be, but in Egypt, according to Miriam Mesbah, a staff writer for *Egypt Today* magazine, "the attitude is that the more information you have, the greater threat you pose" and the quick victim you become. Imagine contributing a weekly column or a report each day knowing that a job well done could end your life or your freedom in prison.

The campaign of harassing the press in Pakistan is being carried out at a time when unprecedented number of Pakistanis are questioning the "official stories" on mainline news media and the government which they serve. The PTV and Radio Pakistan have joined the government as one of the least trusted institutions in the country. Their emphasis is neither on informing

rather the stress is on producing anesthetising material to cover up incompetence and sinister designs of a sitting government.

The print media is the only source that is not as much under the civilian dictators' control as the electronic media is. (The idea of taming the press is part of the guidance our ruling party leaders are getting from their masters in Washington.) Each attempt, like the recent arrest of Rehmat Shah Afridi, to muzzle the press has a piece of the big puzzle, and we do not even know our left foot from the right when it comes to understanding what's going on. Just like the news and views on radio and TV, the government expects the press to craft and design deceit, distortion and deception in its favour.

(Without pondering the impending consequences of the American system of indoctrination through media, our journalists too are expected to follow suit with political bias and fluff; so that readers and listeners in Pakistan lose their interest in substance and perceive news and analysis as mere entertainment like the Americans and the government continue its perpetual rule like Hosni Mubarak. Such continuation of power is impossible if journalists have better data on which to base their suggestions

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and recommendations, and those on the receiving end are much better informed about what those who rule are doing.)

Mostly the dictators believe that the insidious invasion of the truth here and there would unleash resentment rather than satisfaction and any attempt on part of the journalists to inform the public is seen to be unleashing a sense of peril than power. (A democratic regime, claimed to be founded on the free determination of important choices made by a majority, condemns itself to death if most of the citizens who have to choose between various options make their decisions in ignorance or reality, blinded by passions or misled by fleeting impressions created by the controlled press.) And a journalist would certainly not like to betray his duty by becoming part of a hypocritical game played out by the government for its survival.

(Apart from the cooked-up case against Rehmat Shah Afridi, a cold-headed analysis reveals that the press is not all that innocent either. Although in a democracy the law guarantees freedom of expression to its citizens; it guaran-

nalists, not of legislators.

But when a journalist is criticised because he is inaccurate or dishonest, the profession as a whole lets out a howl, pretending to believe that the very principle of free expression is under attack and that a new attempt is being made to muzzle the press. The press cannot defend itself with the argument that it was merely fulfilling the "task of informing." It would be just like a restaurant owner who, after serving spoiled food, fend off criticism by exclaiming: "Please, let me fulfil my mission as a nourisher, that sacred duty! Or are you in favour of starvation?"

Many of our journalist friends have dropped the cloak of impartiality and as a result all of us are expected to do so. They can see Nawaz Sharif to be an all-time ruler but they have serious objection to Benazir's lifetime chairpersonship, or vice versa. (A sincere journalist needs not to be partial and affiliated to a single party or leader irrespective of his undemocratic policies and anti-people deeds. Most of those who launch newspapers or other means of communication do so to impose a point of view and not to seek the truth.) It is simply that when one wants to impose a certain point of view, it is better to seem to be seeking the truth. Just as, among millions of books that are published, only a tiny proportion are devoted to literature in the highest, artistic sense of the word, or to the communication of knowledge, so only a minority of press and communications enterprises are founded and managed with the primary aim of informing.

Newspapers geared to this particular objective — *The Frontier Post*, I found to be one of such newspapers — occupy a tiny niche in the gigantic mass of purely commercial or partisan press. The difference between speaking rationally and talking nonsense is very clear. Similarly, printing false information and holding a paper from printing information are also very obvious acts. For a democratic government it is better to accept the inconveniences than to try to remedy the pro-opposition press-related problems by force or by legislation; for public wisdom, fruits of experience of freedom and the habit of confronting different theses, would take care of discrediting defamers and factitious elements.

(Furthermore, another ritual piece of nonsense consists of defining the press as a "counterpower.") It is true that the role of the press is to tell the truth and that the government in power does not much like the truth when it is unfavourable. But it is also true that the truth is not always unfavourable if spoken through an impartial mouth. Thus the press has no business claiming to be a counterpower by virtue of a selective automatism and in every circumstance. Besides, the very notion is absurd, for if things really happened in this way, and if the government in power invariably deserved to be opposed, it would be sufficient reason to despair of democracy, for it would mean that a democratically elected government is always mistaken — at least in Pakistan — and therefore that the people electing it are afflicted with a congenital, incurable idiocy.

Undoubtedly, some of the partisan journalists are indulging in committing the pernicious ill of disguising opinion as information, but the government need not to subject the whole press to collective punishment because its agenda of not letting an average Pakistani understand the facts behind all that glitters is being undermined. (It seems to be a bit early, but when Washington and Islamabad have all the pieces in place, when they have all the power that they need to effect our national agenda, then we will find out the government's motive of going after the press, like the people of Egypt, when it's too late.) Right from robbing the public of their foreign currency to the establishment of anti-terrorism and military courts and to the harassment of the press, every step is in the direction of establishing a one man's "democratic" rule in Pakistan. (It has been said, "For a nation's monetary system to be artificial, its system of justice must also be arti-