

Mass Communication (Journalism)
Press Journal

Let a free press bloom

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The press has reacted with anger and urgency to the promulgation of the Registration of Printing Press & Publication Ordinance (RPPPO), 1997. But the power it gives the government to confiscate any publication which it does not approve of is not something new. It is a colonial legacy from the time of Hicky's Bengal Gazette of 1780. Hicky exposed some corrupt practices of Warren Hasting's wife but she, like her notorious predecessor Caesar's wife, was supposed to be above suspicion. So in 1781 Hicky was arrested and in 1782 his press was confiscated. In 1823 an act was passed which is the father of all our present draconian laws against the press. One article of it read: No newspaper, pamphlet or book, concerning public news and containing criticism of government measures and proceedings could be published without a licence.

One has only to read the press acts from time to time to conclude that the basic idea remains the same—the government cannot bring itself to give freedom to the press. It may keep its claws in but it does not want to cut them off.

For the history of the freedom of the press one should refer to Zamir Niazi's indispensable trilogy: Press in Chains (1981), The Press under Siege (1992) and the Web of Censorship (1994). One thing becomes clear: the press is attacked both by the state and the public. The state attacks it under the cover of the law. It sends journalists and editors to jail and forces them to stop publication. At a less violent level, it denies them advertisements and paper. The public attacks through hoodlums and criminal roughs. These people attack journalists, burn newspaper offices and wreck furniture. Mr. Salahuddin, the editor of Takbeer, was murdered and almost all the newspapers have suffered at the hands of the supporters of political parties or powerful individuals. Indeed, come to think of it, the attacks of such people have been more vicious than those of the state though, of course, they have done less to stop good journalism than

the state has.

There is, regrettably, a third kind of attack on the freedom of the press. This comes from the intelligentsia; especially from the press itself. One notorious case of this is the suppression of the Civil and Military Gazette. In April 1949 the New Delhi correspondent of CMG wrote that a compromise formula for partitioning Kashmir was being worked out between India and Pakistan. The government of Pakistan denied the report and this was published in the CMG. Moreover, the New Delhi correspondent was removed from service. But this was not enough for the other newspaper. Nawa-i-Waqt and Dawn led the attack and later Pakistan Times and Imroze joined them. A joint editorial by 16 newspapers was published on 6 May 1949 asking for blood. The editorial was captioned 'Treason' and it asked the government to ban the paper. And sure enough the CMG was banned for six months and, of course, never recovered. Such a thing has never happened again but there is a growing tendency to equate difference of opinion with treason or heresy.

Thus, members of the press actually support, or at least do not oppose, stern state action against their ideological rivals. Moreover, by imposing self-censorship the editors have accepted either the power of the state, or that of the street, to consider certain things as beyond limits. Nationalism, religion and the military are such issues. Simply by avoiding honest expression of differences of opinion, the press has placed these subjects into a taboo area which careful or timid people do not touch.

In the light of these self-regulation measures, considerable social pressure not to discuss certain issues and the fear of public reprisal for expressing unpopular opinions does the state still need the draconian powers of the British colonial state or Ayub Khan's martial law state? Apparently, with the continuing faith our rulers repose in ordinances of this kind, the state is still afraid. Afraid of what? Of radical dissent. The present ordinance talks of taking action against those who spread 'rumours'. But this is surely a very vague criterion. Slander and libel laws are al-

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ready there to deal with cases of that nature. The legal processes dealing with such cases can be made faster and more effective, but how can one rule out all speculation as rumour-mongering? If there are events in need of explanation, people will hazard guesses. These guesses can be discredited but they are hardly the kind of thing a stable and secure government should worry about. Perhaps governments worry about them precisely because they are not secure. But laws would make very little difference. News would travel by word of mouth and, if it is felt that the press is not free, such news would discredit the rulers far more than a free press would. In such a press someone is going to be sober and responsible too.

A free press is required precisely because the public does not trust the government without one. Moreover, any controlled medium of communication (like TV), becomes redundant. It cannot speak the truth and nobody believes it. This loss of trust is the most harmful thing which can happen to anybody. The pact which makes a civilised society live in a certain way is based on trust. Part of the failure of state institutions and lack of foreign and domestic investment in business is because there is lack of trust. Even worse, when people can no longer speak out they become liars. Liars are cowards who lack moral courage which is the only thing which can save us from dictatorial misrule.

History is replete with example of sycophants showering praises on tyrants who abducted their wives and daughters and killed those who opposed them. In the beginning the sycophant feels he is safe and turns a deaf ear to the other victims of the tyrant. Then, when the himself suffers, he realizes that it is too late. All the dictators are supported by liars and cowards who are produced in a system where there is no freedom of the press nor academic freedom. But for the freedom of the press, democracy could not continue. What we need in Pakistan, then, is a press which is even more free and bold than it is at present. We need no ordinances nor laws nor ministries to regulate the press. We also need a free radio and TV.