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The News

Media make-up will hide little

Syed Talat Hussain

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto thinks that her government has an image problem and that it can be solved by tight management of the media. She is half right. Her government has earned a lot of bad name in an amazingly short time. In less than 20 months the popular perception of it has changed from that of a better alternative to Mian Nawaz Sharif's government to being just as uncaring, undelivering and incompetent. But bad press is not to be blamed for this; bad policies are.

This point Ms Bhutto does not understand and instead of improving the quality of political governance and public administration, she has re-done her media team for better projection. She has brought in a new information secretary, a new PIO, a DG External Publicity, a new MD Pakistan Television. And instead of tackling the problem of seething violence in Karachi that is causing public anxiety and anguish, a two-month ban has been imposed on six daily eveningers because they "were spreading sensationalism".

These measures will not rehabilitate her public credibility, nor improve her popularity ratings. The job of the ministry of information, if assumed that it is to propagate government's policies, only begins once the government has finished its own. What it cannot do is to build a positive image of the government without anything concrete and positive to inform the public about. It is not going to make any difference to the way the public measures the level of the government's competence if instead of

Hussain Haqqani, Haji Akram meets the press and tells the same white lies about Ms Bhutto's achievements that his predecessor had to, and then not even as eloquently.

Similarly what trick can Mr Anwar Mehmood pull on the public and the press as DG external publicity that has not been tried before to "popularise" his new pay masters. He will send the same kind of stale, incomprehensible articles to newspapers written by non-entities that lampoon the opposition and try to build the government as the best thing that has ever happened to Pakistan. He will talk to and deal with the same breed of bought-out journalists that those before him have and get them to do the same kind of hatchet job done that they have been doing for others for the love of money. In fact, to see him and Haji Akram at work will be an unforgettable reminder to those who suffered at their hands under the Nawaz Sharif government that now little else separates Ms Bhutto from her political rivals than gender.

Even more counter-productive is the mix of media management and manipulation the government is applying to arrest its falling credibility on Karachi. Here, too, there is nothing that the ministry of information or the Press Information Department can do except to put in polite requests to newspaper editors and owners not to over-play stories that the government perceives are damaging for its reputation.

But these requests can be granted only up to a point. Beyond that it is the fierce competition of not to be left behind in news coverage, the sheer gravity, which means

newsworthiness, of issues like the crisis in Karachi, and the commercial and political interests of newspapers that determine what is and what is not printed. In any case it is hard for any newspaper to screen out "20 killed in Karachi" from the front page and put "20 MNAs attend PM's dinner" in its stead. The first is a matter of national concern and will always come first, and second is that of government interest and hence must always come second.

Seen in this context, no good will accrue from banning eveningers in Karachi. The unbridled, unrestrained and wild style of reporting that characterise the nature of these newspapers violates many of the fundamental principles of journalism. The most cardinal of these is that press freedom without responsibility begets licentious behaviour which damages more than it builds. And given Karachi's peculiar political situation perhaps some of these newspapers are being used to strike the fear of terrorists and criminals in the hearts of the people, rather than give them news and information.

Still, to ban their publication altogether is an extreme measure that is wrong both in principle and on grounds of expediency. Democratic governments have to have a huge stomach for unfair criticism and inexhaustible patience for the inexcusable deviations of its critics. It goes against the grain of tolerant and democratic behaviour to muffle the voices of discord like the Bhutto government has by banning the eveningers. The more so since the savage method has been adopted without using less severe even if equally shameful tactics: ban on government ads to their parent papers, fines or filing of

cases in courts for publishing incendiary stuff, etc.

It is also inexpedient to take on the press at a time when the government actually needs its fullest co-operation to get its case heard on Karachi, and to garner support for whatever plan it may have to resolve the fast aggravating crisis. Its action has earned it the ire of all the newspaper organisations across the usually divided board. In a day it has become an enemy of press freedom, an autocratic regime, intolerant of constructive criticism and a host of other evil things that it is editorially called.

A broad, in the US, it is being read as a certification of the thesis that Benazir Bhutto has two faces, democratic and polished for the West and arbitrary and autocratic for her own people. Journalists and foreign correspondents have begun to analyse whether the ban is just an aberration or a summary of the government's whole approach towards the issue of press freedom, recollecting how at one time the government seriously wanted to introduce a code of conduct even for the mainstream press to regulate their behaviour.

The worst part of it all is that the ban has not made a whit of difference to the ground situation in Karachi that is bloody as ever. It has neither made the terror that engulfs the city any less frightening for the public that gets to read about its new victims in morning newspapers and through satellites anyway, nor has it helped the government catch its agents. That itself is proof of the absolute futility of the hope that the thick layers of media make-up can hide the wrinkled face of policy failures.