

Midnight arrest of an editor

By Sardar F.S. Lodi

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THE arrest of Mr Najam Sethi, a senior journalist and editor of The Friday Times, Lahore, was an act unworthy of an elected government which came to power after taking a solemn oath to uphold the Constitution and the rule of law.

The manner of his arrest in the early hours of the morning, when he was dragged out of his house, was utterly deplorable. It was contrary to all norms of propriety and civilized behaviour.

This was done without even the pretence of following the requirements of the law. It was a case of trespass and kidnapping at the behest of the government.

The government's insistence that Mr Sethi was arrested because of his association with RAW, the Indian intelligence service, is rather far-fetched and, in fact, an insult to the people who are well aware that Mr Sethi was critical of the government's policies. His revelations were becoming a source of great embarrassment for the ruling elite. Aside from this, the government's policy of suppressing the freedom of the press was becoming somewhat alarming. The treatment meted out to the Jang group of newspapers and the *Frontier Post* is there for all to see. This trend if not checked will soon lead to authoritarian rule in the country and snuff out our fragile and nascent democracy.

This attitude of intolerance of even a semblance of dissent or mild criticism was also characteristic of the previous People's Party government. A leading English daily in its issue of March 8, 1996, had reported that the US State Department's 1995 Human Rights Report on Pakistan was handed over to Senator Iqbal Haider by American Ambassador Thomas W. Simons Jr. It carried a detailed study of "freedom of speech and press" in Pakistan. The report mentioned attacks on newspaper offices and harassment of journalists for writing unfavourable stories. Political parties and police specifically targeted, arrested and harassed newspapers and reporters.

Giving a few instances, the report mentioned that in February and June rockets were fired on the offices of *Nawai-Waqt* in Karachi. In March the office of *Observer* in Islamabad was attacked. In May, a Karachi reporter was attacked in his house for criticizing the government, his son and brother were also beaten up. In June a journalist of the Urdu daily *Khabrain* was

suspended the publication of six Urdu newspapers for 60 days.

The report goes on to say that on Aug 17 in Karachi police asked Razia Bhatti, editor of the monthly magazine *Newsline* to send a reporter who had written an "unfavourable" story about the Sindh governor to the police station for questioning. During the next 16 hours, police visited the *Newsline* office and Bhatti's apartment (at night) looking for both Bhatti and the wanted journalist.

In this episode I was personally involved as well. When I wrote an article and a letter critical of the Sindh governor's action, he hit back by asking the principal of the Law College where I teach to relieve me of my assignment. The principal dug his heels in and said I was indispensable to the college. On hearing of this development I offered to leave, but the principal would not hear of it. It is refreshing to know that in Pakistan there are still many who will stand up to an arrogant politician or government.

With the shameful episode of Mr Najam Sethi's arrest and the brutal manner that it was carried out, the government has shown itself in a weird light. Washington has therefore been forced to intervene and ask the Pakistan government to release Mr Sethi immediately and stop the crackdown on non-conformist journalists. Freedom of the press in Pakistan has now become an international issue along with corruption in high places.

People have started questioning the wisdom of the Lahore High Court in denying relief to a man arrested without warrant and taken away in a gangster-like manner. Where is the law? they ask. On appeal the Supreme Court has, however, given some relief by asking the government to allow Mr Sethi's wife and lawyer to see him, which has been done.

It is the opinion of many dealing with the press that the government's action of arresting Mr Sethi was ill-advised and without any legal justification. Its policy of intolerance has now backfired and placed it in an awkward position internally and externally.

Why does it become unavoidable for the People's Party and the Muslim League, when in power, to resort to suppression of the freedom of speech, expression and the press? These freedoms are guaranteed to the people and the press under Article 19 of the Constitution, which all the legislators have sworn to uphold and protect. One reason could be that the

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Why does it become unavoidable for the PPP and the PML, when in power, to resort to suppression of the freedom of speech, expression and the press? One reason could be that the origins of the leadership of these two parties lie within the ambit of military rule.

origins of the leadership of these two political parties lie within the ambit of military rule and some facets of absolute authority were inherited by them from that background.

After all, the Bhuttos of Larkana came into prominence owing to the grace and patronage of Field Marshal Ayub Khan. Similarly, the Sharif brothers of Lahore were proteges of General Zia-ul-Haq. Surely it is now time to shed the past and imbibe some democratic values which the people now expect and demand.

Indeed, every government should ask itself whether, 51 years after gaining independence from foreign rule, the citizens of Pakistan are entitled to the protection of the law or not. Can a man be dragged out of his house at dead of night by policemen in uniform and civilian clothes and take him away without explaining why and where?