

# More bad news for the Press?

Dawn

By Aziz Siddiqui

MR NAJAM SETHI'S ordeal is over, but the trial of the press may endure. The government came out crestfallen from the case but that is no guarantee that it is chastened by the experience. The series of its recent actions make an ominous pattern.

The press in this country has had a long history of open and insidious pressures on it. Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq were upfront in their methods. Ayub went and seized the Progressive Papers in broad daylight. He then set up a stable of his own named the National Press Trust and yoked a number of other newspapers in it too.

Later he contrived a set of press laws to keep all the rest of them under his discipline as well. The design worked. Newspaper owners, editors and journalists were not all convinced that it was worth risking palpable interests for abstract principles.

Zia-ul-Haq began equally crudely. He had benefit of the legacies of the Ayub era and the fangs of his own martial law. In addition, he imposed pre-censorship and had the restive elements in the press tried and convicted by military courts, a few even flogged. As he went along he also learnt subtler methods. He forged personal relations. Proximity to the throne was heady wine for some: it helped divide journalists, and it helped create a loyal phalanx.

In between came Bhutto. No model of tolerance himself, he was nevertheless hobbled by a need to observe a bottomline of democratic appearances. Any rigours he imposed were perforce, mostly, half measures by comparison, and survivable. The opposition press of his time managed to stay spirited and uncompromising.

The present government seems to want to achieve pretty much the same ends as the dictators'. But the circumstances have changed, and so must the methods. It has either to do that insidiously or combine it with finding the equivalent of a Swiss account to silence a critic and also appear above board.

The first demonstration of the tactic in the current onslaught came with the action against the Jang Group early this year. This "Swiss account" in its case was its stated failure to pay its tax dues and its supposedly obtaining excess quotas of newsprint to make a profit on them. The

hands of him. That brought him back like a hot potato into the government's hands. It juggled with it for a moment but seeing no way of hanging on quickly dropped it.

The Supreme Court had observed early on that it would want to use the occasion to examine the nature and scope of the ISI's powers. Obviously that too contributed to the relatively hasty retreat. So also perhaps did the ignominy the case had brought nationally and internationally. No such factors bear on the cases of the other two. They may unfortunately have yet to bide their time in the cooler.

There has now been this report of the government's assigned operators having decided on an alternative, extra-judicial, strategy. The new methods, it is said, may include their quietly picking off identified 'troublemakers' individually, and working them over for a day or two away from public knowledge. A starting hit-list of 35 persons is said to have been drawn up.

Mr Mushahid Hussain has denied the existence of such a scheme to Mr Haqqani of *Jang* and Mr Ziauddin of this newspaper, the two persons at the top of the purported list. That may well be true. But it will do no harm to suspend judgment for a while. From the official hatchet men's own myopic point of view, this method would seem to have merit. It will enable the government to deny all responsibility. It will save it from making a fool of itself in a court. And it may well have some effect.

After his car was mysteriously burnt down early last month, Mr Imtiaz Alam of *The News* declared that he had got the message all right but he was not about to act on it.

Not everyone who has lost expensive property or spent a lonely night or two being knocked around may be that stoic. Or so the official bullies might think. They ought to be defeated in this calculation too, if such exists.

Doubts linger because there is a visible tendency prevailing in official quarters to somehow get the better of every check on their freedom to do their will.

For instance, their continuous denunciation of "the system" is not really directed against the decadence that makes for the rampant inequities. It is meant to denigrate whatever in it acts as a constraint on them — such as the independence of the judges or the

demand pressed on the Group, it turned out, was not that it undo these alleged wrongdoings but that it better begin rendering full support to the government policies and to stay clear of any allegations of corruption against the ruling family.

It was not considered enough to thus coerce the owner into pledges of future good behaviour. Tabs were kept on individual journalists employed in his papers, and a long list of them were demanded to be sidelined. What was required was thus not just "correction" but also "cleansing."

Unsurprisingly, the gentleman put in charge of the operation was no other than Mr Saifur Rehman. Having won his spurs by pursuing and eventually facing down the prime minister's principal political rival, the leader of the opposition, herself who could have been better depended upon than he to take care of the remaining perceived threats to the government? His skills, and the efficacy of his methods, stood proven.

The tactic was not much different in the other cases that followed. Mr Rehmat Shah Afridi, whose papers, *The Frontier Post* and *Maidan*, were consistently critical of the government, was charged with carrying 20 kilos of charas in his car one morning early in April and has remained locked up ever since.

Hussain Haqqani, an opposition columnist, has been in FIA's hands since early last month on grounds that have shifted. There are now three complaints of financial wrongdoing against him, one from the federal information ministry and two from the House Building Finance Corporation, the organizations that he had headed at various times during Ms. Bhutto's rule.

Mr Sethi was of course charged alternatively with being a RAW and then a CIA agent, and finally with treason and subversion for his speech in India. In the event, even the ISI apparently found that it could not make those charges stick. So it eventually washed its

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freedom of the media, or the quality of evidence required for the proof of any guilt.

Similarly their making patriotism their last refuge (frenzied spectacles celebrating the 'Qaumi Parcham', swaggering observance of the anniversary of nuclear tests, etc) is meant to suggest that whatever they choose to do is alone what is in the best national interest. From which it follows that any criticism of them on any count from any quarter is treason and it deserves matching response.

In November 1997 the government operatives had bussed a large number of their henchmen to Islamabad to mount a raid on the Supreme Court. Having tested the success of that tactic they may want to make wider and more customary use of it now. Goon squads to take care of the recalcitrants may fall into just that pattern. The guards cannot therefore be lowered.

The government's keenness on a press council and a press code of ethics had been looked on with some suspicion. The present events must only have strengthened doubts and made any agreement on them even more remote. The proposed measures, possible of serious consideration otherwise, must in these hands seem only like softer faces of the ways and purposes of Ayub and Zia.

The doubts and fears can still be dispelled if the government's reaction to the Sethi fiasco is to reverse course, to release those held, and to resolve to leave the press well enough alone in future except when it is genuinely in breach of the law.

If instead of that the designated operatives set about casting for other ways to do more of the same thing, the situation can only worsen for both sides. One can only hope that good sense pre-