

New challenges to the Press

By Javed Jabbar

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ONE of the most accurate indicators of a country's bad health is when the Press goes on strike. The fact that no newspapers were published on 2nd July, 1996, goes further than the immediate cause of a general sales tax on newspapers and enhanced import duty on newsprint. Despite the independence of our Press, there are deep and abiding contradictions in mass communication through print in Pakistan.

Instead of addressing these basic and unresolved issues, the executive pillar of the state is engaged in merely doing combat with the fourth estate which continues to be misperceived in largely adversarial terms.

Rapid urbanisation, new technology, the advent of electronic media, social change and gradually increasing print literacy pose dramatic new challenges to the Press in Pakistan. Government and Press share the responsibility to respond quickly to these challenges. In the case of government, we find a failure to recognise the importance of these challenges.

The fact that the Press is free in Pakistan does not free the government from formulating a comprehensive policy for the future growth of the Press. Indeed, the responsibility increases.

With Pakistan having one of the lowest levels in the world of popular access to print media, there is an urgent need for government to enhance literacy and vigorously promote reading of newspapers, magazines and books to spread and share the enormous expansion of human knowledge. And to enable the application of that knowledge for economic advancement. Electronic media are complements to the print media but are not their substitutes. From a purely self-centred viewpoint as well, a government ignores the health of the Press at its own peril.

The Prime Minister is reported to have said recently that the crisis of the country exists only in newspapers. This remark well summarises the unwillingness and inability to recognise the principle that the Press is an institution far greater than the sum of its parts. Even if there is an intrinsic tendency in the Press to magnify bad news in place of good news, to take an almost morbid interest in failure rather than in success, it is the Press alone, with all its limitations and excesses that feels the pulse of the people and which most often knows the truth of the times.

Just as controversy and conflict within a peaceful and containable context are inevitable parts of a democratic system, so too is the relationship between an independent Press and an elected government bound to be marked by tension and grievance. Yet each of the two parties can only thrive and prosper if one strengthens the other. In Pakistan, most governments suffer from the delusion that the more the pressure upon the Press, the less the pressure there will be on the government.

To take comfort from the fact that, in a nation of over 130 million people, only about 15 million citizens regularly read newspapers and magazines is to delude oneself about the role and significance of the Press. The printed word has a remarkable fallout effect. It is something like the fallout from a nuclear explosion, though far less destructive. People who have neither seen the flash of the blinding burst nor are anywhere near its site are often effected by the power of print, through word of mouth, through ripples that multiply outward from the epicentre.

More pertinently for political leadership, there can be no democracy and no freedom of association without the freedom of expression that the Press alone affords.

The broadcast media of radio and TV may provide more sensory pleasure than the coldness of print but print alone respects the quietude and

applying the mind to any given subject. So if the Press is seized with a self-created sense of crisis, it should be a matter of serious concern for the political leadership of the country, not something to be brushed aside in a casual manner.

At the same time there is need for the Press to be self-critical about itself, as it is about other institutions. While the Press deserves plaudits for its conscience-keeping role and for its sacrifice of life and security for the public interest, there is an omission in the Press of candid internal appraisal. Except in a few instances, there is a lack of professional competence at various levels, an absence of ethical integrity in certain cases, an unwillingness to gracefully concede error, a low investment in training, skills development and new technology, a reluctance to

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improve working conditions and facilities, an inability to establish and operate institutional checks and balances in the form of a Press Council or Press Ombudsmen.

The singularity of the term "The Press" obscures the quadrangular nature of this sector. There is the proprietary segment comprising publishers, printers and owners of titles. In the second segment are editors who represent the pinnacle of professional seniority, the specialists who gain rank out of sheer merit. They are outnumbered by proprietor-editors but the segment still retains a separate status.

The third part of the Press comprises working journalists. This is a broad category that encompasses desk-bound assistant editors as well as roving reporters, that includes flash-bulb photographers as also designers and proof-readers. The fourth category represents machinists and administrative staff who are normally described as "press workers."

All four segments, but most specially editors, working journalists and press workers have rendered valuable services in the cause of democracy and in the opposition to dictatorship. Many have endured repeated imprisonment, public lashing during martial law and several have paid with their lives for having performed their duties as journalists.

While all share the outwardly unifying identity of being a part of "The Press", each of the four segments has a distinct class or cadre character with related interests that can be in sharp conflict. Often the interests of the first segment, that of proprietors and publishers, are in conflict with the interests of the other three segments

that government renders to the maxim of respecting the freedom of the Press, there is a faint yet discernible attempt to divide and conquer, to disunite the Press and weaken it. After the announcement of the 6th Wage Board Award, the initial indicator came in the form of a threat to link newspaper licences and government advertising placement to the implementation of the awards by newspaper proprietors. This indicator obviously received applause from the third and fourth segments of the Press, these being working journalists and press workers. There was then some confusion about non-linkage. Then in May, the award was challenged in the Punjab High Court along predictable battle lines.

Though the four segments that constitute the Press may have individual economic interests, there is a strong inter-dependence between them. The sense of fraternity is best expressed when the freedom of the Press is under attack or threat.

The closure of newspapers on 1st July is primarily a reaction to the threats to the economic interests of this first segment of the Press. In principle, there should be minimal or no import duty whatsoever on newsprint and paper in a country with less than 30 per cent literacy. Government policy should be to optimise low-cost availability of printed material. Equally, certain proprietors need to curtail the resale of newsprint to other users such as producers of textbooks, printers and publishers.

One of the reasons for the conflict over newsprint import policy is the curious reluctance of the publishers to print actual figures for daily sale and circulation of newspapers. Because of corrupt or inefficient practices, the circulation figures certified by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting have little credibility. Journals with very limited spread are able to obtain certificates for inflated numbers. This damages the claims of journals that do enjoy wide readership.

The bogus figures enable certain proprietors to get licences for newsprint imports in disproportion to their real needs. The discrepancy strengthens the conviction in the CBR and the Ministry of Finance that some part of the revenue shortage can be offset by taxing newspaper proprietors who earn fat profits from the re-sale of imported newsprint.

In April 1989 when this writer served as Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, a cabinet decision was taken to abolish the newsprint import licence system in order to curb malpractices and, more importantly, to reduce the governmental role in the supply of paper in a democracy. At that time as well, the introduction of an import duty along with the abolition of the licence system was condemned by Press proprietors as an anti-Press action even though such was not the intent. Regrettably, the Nawaz Sharif government re-introduced the official newsprint licence system in the 1991-93 period and malpractices returned immediately thereafter.

The new tax measures on the newspaper sector have united previously divided groups. The separate representative trade bodies in the form of the All Pakistan Newspapers Society and the Pakistan Newspaper and Periodicals Organisation came together to form the Council for Joint Action in order to campaign for the withdrawal of the taxes.

One simple non-fiscal measure that the government could have attempted in place of the import duty was the privatisation of the Audit Bureau of Circulation. Or it could have attempted to make a significant improvement in the operations of the ABC through induction of non-governmental, private elements into its management. This would help rationalise the gap between the claims and the reality about circulation figures and reduce malpractices.

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institution such as the Press otherwise does so much to get the truth about other institutions should practise what it preaches. The publication of the verity of actually printed copies of a journal will, at one stroke, eliminate the falsehood associated with certificates and raise the credibility of newspapers to a new level. Undoubtedly there will be embarrassment and pain. This small price to pay for the gains of truth. Such gains will actually enhance the capacity of newspaper proprietors to operate effectively

and advertisers some, though not all, of the relevant data revealed through research studies. But only independent research conducted by an institution of repute and only regular publication of circulation figures as is done in numerous countries in North America, Europe and Asia, including India, will lend believability to claims.

Artificially bloated circulation figures fetch newspaper proprietors rich dividends in the form of advertising from governmental institutions at rates and in volumes determined formally by official circulation figures.

Government advertising in the media in general and the Press in particular has increased substantially in recent years an ironic coun-

terpoint to privatisation and deregulation. From simple tender notices to specially designed advertisements, from deputy commissioners placing announcements about district development to chief ministers welcoming the Prime Minister to the inauguration of a road, advertising from the federal and provincial governments as well as state corporations and local bodies has grown notably to become a major factor in determining relations between the government and the Press.

One indicator of the newspaper proprietors' preoccupation with profit is the fact that out of about 16 awards presented annually by the All Pakistan Newspapers Society to advertisers and advertising agencies, at least 10 are for volume of commercial space used in

the Press and a minority for creative excellence. A unique practice which has no parallel in other countries is the awarding of a large number of titles rather than for skill or writing ability.

The large number of titles awarded in Pakistan offers a fairly wide choice and yet the focus from the relative unpopularity of the mainstream Press, large newspaper groups amounting to more than 80 per cent of the total, leaving over 90 other dailies cater to the remaining 20 per cent. Whether this lop-sided coverage accurately reflects the pluralism and diversity of public opinion of the different segments in

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furiated Botha.
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the homeland administration
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