[**Politics of intolerance**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647289/politics-of-intolerance)

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JUST when the PTI government seemed comfortably ensconced in power it gratuitously opened new political fronts. Perhaps the ruling party’s growing confidence as it embarked on its fourth year in office drove it towards missteps that provoked an expected backlash to its plans. On both the intention to introduce sweeping new media regulations and its ministers’ unseemly [attack](https://www.dawn.com/news/1645601) on the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) the government’s efforts to get its own way mired it in intense controversy.

The front that has already exacted a political cost is the collision with the country’s media. The government seems to be backing down now and has agreed to set up a joint committee with media representatives to review regulations. But the damage to its credibility will not easily be undone. In a [meeting](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646644/media-bodies-term-pmda-unacceptable-form-committee-to-address-issue-of-fake-news) with the information minister, representatives of media bodies left him in no doubt that the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) was “unacceptable”. Meanwhile PFUJ [announced](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646747) a countrywide ‘long march’ in protest and declared that such a regulatory body was non-negotiable.

Pakistan’s history testifies that no civilian government has won a battle with the media when it united to resist pressure. The last military government too paid a heavy price for taking on the press as this contributed to its ultimate unravelling. Most governments in the recent past used divide-and-rule tactics to manipulate the print and broadcast media — efforts that were always transient and never paid off in the long run. The time-worn tactic of patronising some while penalising the more critical has continued under the present government. The [incarceration](https://www.dawn.com/news/1540366) for almost nine months of Mir Shakil ur Rahman, owner of Pakistan’s largest media group is the most significant case in point.

The arbitrary and far-reaching nature of the government’s proposal for a PMDA united the entire media in opposition. Journalists and owners alike saw their fundamental interests under threat. All media representatives and professional associations denounced the move as a “draconian” and “unconstitutional” effort to impose a regime that would be intrusive, coercive, punitive and beyond judicial oversight. In a joint statement a coalition of the country’s press and broadcasters’ bodies rejected the proposed PMDA and cast it as an attempt to stifle the freedom of expression. The curious justification offered for the move by the concerned minister was that it aimed to end ‘fake news’. As if merging different laws that govern the media, film industry and digital platforms and setting up a single government authority has anything to do with that objective. Journalists pointed out there are already cybercrime laws which can be more effectively implemented, and libel laws that can also be strengthened to deal with this.

The independence of both the media and ECP is fundamental to democracy.

The media’s pushback against this move received wide support, from lawyers’ bodies, civil society, human rights organisations and virtually all opposition parties. At a [sit-in protest](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646173) by journalists outside parliament the day of the presidential address to its joint session, top opposition leaders showed up in solidarity and pledged to reject any law if the government went ahead. The irony was not lost that the issue of media freedom united an otherwise fractious opposition engaged in bitter verbal duels with one other.

The PMDA proposal was not a random move. It followed official efforts in recent years to control the more independent sections of the media and silence critical voices. This reflects the mindset of many in the ruling party who have long exhibited an intolerance of criticism and proclivity to equate opposition to their policies with lack of patriotism. Critics are seen as enemies to be demonised and not engaged. Going it alone on key policy fronts without consulting stakeholders has been a familiar aspect of PTI’s governance. This is what happened in the case of the PMDA when no media stakeholder was consulted.

The government’s unwillingness to accept a view other than its own is also evident in its ministers’ very [public spat](https://www.dawn.com/news/1647299/ministers-prod-ecp-members-into-defying-their-boss) with the ECP, a constitutional body. Smarting from its electoral setback in Daska earlier this year when the ECP came under fire by ministers for not conducting that by-election ‘fairly’ the government continued to direct criticism at the electoral body. The latest and most egregious attack on the chief election commissioner (CEC) came in the wake of the ECP expressing its inability to accept the government’s proposal to institute electronic voting for the next election. The ECP cited a slew of cogent reasons — [37 objections](https://www.dawn.com/news/1645100) — for its position, which included capacity issues, shortage of time and funding and above all the apprehension that it could be manipulated.

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During last week’s meeting of the Senate Standing Committee for Parliamentary Affairs, PTI vice president and railways minister Azam Swati lashed out at the ECP accusing it of “taking bribes” and ballot fraud. He also accused it of working hand in glove with the opposition. Worse, he said such institutions should be “set on fire”. Instead of being reprimanded for these inflammatory remarks by the party high command Swati was later joined by the minister of information, Fawad Choudhry, who made similar allegations at a press conference. Subsequently other PTI spokesmen accused the CEC of partisanship even though he was appointed under their own government by a constitutionally mandated procedure.

The ECP’s response was predictable — to issue notices to the two ministers asking them to furnish proof of their allegations. Indications are that the government’s feud with the ECP is unlikely to end anytime soon. The aim seems to be to force an independent-minded CEC from office. Whichever way this confrontation plays out it exposes an attitude on the part of the ruling party that insists on getting its own way and is averse to accepting independent views.

Although the battle with the media and ECP have different implications what is common to both is the government’s evident desire to have pliant institutions. Even though Prime Minister Imran Khan has often extolled the value of a free press, his government now seeks a docile media that acts as its cheerleader rather than does its fundamental job of subjecting government actions to critical scrutiny. But the media cannot be a handmaiden of the government any more than the ECP can be an arm of the executive to blindly do its bidding. The independence of both is critical to democracy.

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