

Press and information

Underlining the importance of the free-flow of information, President Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari has rightly recognised the need to allow free access to information which is hindered by bureaucratic red-tape and a pseudo excuse for secrecy in every government department. Speculations and publication of one-sided versions of an event take place when high government functionaries treat developments like highly guarded secrets. Despite the restoration of democracy and a marked movement towards an open market, state institutions and government departments are still closed to public scrutiny; even routine files are not available for research or investigative journalism.

Access to information is not possible without changing the rules and regulations dictating the conduct of officials who are given over to pursuing a policy of secretiveness. The inculcation of a culture of openness and transparency in the bureaucracy is yet another prerequisite. Ensuring the free flow of information can only be materialised by unshackling all formal and informal censors in the spheres of research, academia, official records and all other information sources, including the print and electronic

media. In this age of information revolution, no ideological, cultural or legal measure can stop the flow of information from reaching the people in the most remote corner of the world. The unprecedented developments in communication technology have not only made it possible to spread information far and wide, but also difficult to curb it. The best way is to open up and be prepared to compete from a better position and with superior technology.

While responding to the proposals presented by the journalists, the President supported the idea of evolving a code of ethics to enhance a sense of responsibility and the creation of a press council for self-accountability. The proposals with regard to a code of ethics or a press council could not be materialised earlier due to mutual suspicions, despite the willingness of the newspaper industry. The press has assumed the role of a powerful watchdog of the interests of the society and cannot be obstructed in the exercise of this duty. Moreover, greater the responsibility on the press, the more will it become accountable to the people, and of course, without any infringement of press freedom.

The President has rightly censured a policy of handouts or promotion of shady journalism. His solidarity with the working journalists over their demands, such as the abolition of contract labour, will be appreciated by the community. A consensus has to be reached to save both the newspaper industry and its employees.

Unfair taxes

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It is unfortunate that the print media, which bears the onerous task of being a vehicle for information and knowledge, has somehow been treated as an industry and placed at par with lucrative corporate organisations. The result is that newspapers have been required to shoulder the same sales taxes (ST), taxes and duties applicable to business and industry.

This situation is compounded by the fact that some of the main inputs of the print media — newsprint and film — have become costly in the international market, pushing up the prices of newspapers. If the newly imposed 18 per cent ST on newsprint and five per cent ST on newspapers are added to the ultimate cost, the real news in the daily will be its soaring price.

It was in this context that the government had earlier given relief by reducing the sales tax on newsprint from 15 per cent to 12 per cent. However, in the budget 1996-97 the government has raised the ST to 18 per cent and imposed a five per cent ST on the product. When the budget comes into effect in its present shape, newspapers will go out of the reach of a considerable proportion of the readers, who are already woefully small

compared to the population.

It is this aspect that is particularly surprising as the leaders on the one hand have declared a veritable crusade to eliminate illiteracy and popularise the reading habit, while on the other they have struck at the very institution that can help them in achieving this aim. This dichotomy in the approach does not make sense, and is likely to prove disastrous to both the efforts to spread literacy and to the print media. The sales tax on newsprint apart from making dailies expensive will also considerably raise the prices of text books, which are vital for spreading education.

Seen from another perspective, the heavy imposts the government has placed on the print media could be interpreted as another method of acquiring a handle on the press. With the black law — the Press and Publication Ordinance — having been scrapped, the press has become relatively free, a freedom it is exercising with great enthusiasm. But, with the imposition of the new heavy taxes, it will be difficult to avoid the impression that it is meant to achieve the same purpose as the black law. It is obvious the industry will be in no position to face a pressure that comes in the form of a taxation claim. It is time the government weighed the limited benefits accruing from the industry against the damage the information media will suffer.