

Press as a development agent

Hasan Askree

Handwritten signature and date: M. N. 13/11/98

In Pakistan, the government finds little need to promote the principle of public's right to know, perhaps because of the following main reasons: one, public opinion does not rule the democratic polity and two, the news media is unable to nurture an enlightened public opinion.

Not surprisingly, the executive has tended to interact with the Press more for public relating purposes than for the sake of higher principles. Yet, successive governments have accused the Press of being unfair to them spreading cynicism, becoming prophets of doom and eventually causing the downfall of the government. A reconsideration of the government policy with respect to the Press is called for.

Zamir Niazi writes, "Mr Zulfikar Ali Bhutto put a number of editors into jail; General Ziaul Haq put editors and publishers into the cabinet.... Those that came out of the jails spoke for the freedom of the Press with a stronger voice. And those who were put into the cabinet, even for a brief period, look forward to the same kind of opportunities and prerogatives, and are ready to pay the price for that at the cost of freedom of the Press."

A few weeks before her dismissal in November 1996, Ms Bhutto inducted the owner of an English daily in her cabinet, sending a clear message, whether intentional or not, to all owners of newspapers to reap similar rewards by toeing the line of the government.

There may be other subtle ways of seeking patronage from Press personnel. It is doubtful whether any such manipulation serves the government interest, though it may serve the interests of individual government departments.

The demand for loyalty in return for favours does not work very well with the Press. When, for instance, a newspaper owner seeking government patronage infringes on the independence of the editor, the whole journalistic staff becomes aware of the government's manipulation. Also, other competing newspapers become acutely aware of the unfair competition. This naturally results in cynicism which is manifested in various ways in the news reports and editorial columns.

Press is at least partly motivated with the noble mandate of freedom of expression and public's right to know. Journalism is both a career and a mission at the same time. It is this mission part of journalism that falters all government moves to manipulate the Press. The manipulation of Zia era continues to bear strong resentment among many senior journalists.

The whole journalistic community cannot be pleased by winning over individuals. The only foundation on which a healthy government-Press relationship can be built is perceived sincerity: the government must appear to be sincere for the cause of respon-

sible and flourishing journalism.

The government need not view the Press as an adversary bent upon hindering its work but a friend appreciating its good work and checking its faults to avoid blunders. Press is both a check and a balance on the government. Just like it attempts to contain government excesses, it aims at facilitating government's prerogatives.

Press shall serve government interest when the government interest matches the public interest. It is a desirable institution not just for the public but for the government itself. When the government views the Press as an adversary, it hurts the government's self-interest more than anyone else's.

Before proceeding further, some responsibilities of journalism need to be clarified.

It is not enough for the Press to report facts truthfully but to report the truth about the facts. Journalistic responsibility requires that issues be put in their proper perspective, then only the truth is served. There is, therefore, no limit to which the standard of journalism can be raised.

The capacity of the Press to serve the truth is directly linked with two key factors: the availability of finances and access to information. There may be some genuine political reasons for not enacting the Freedom of Information Act until the administration becomes more accountable and the Press becomes better poised to serve the truth.

A financially stronger Press, on the other hand, is in the interest of the government in several ways. One, it will be better able to serve the truth and hence have less tendency to be unfair to the government. Two, it will be able to conduct public opinion surveys and be guided by them and thus be less inclined to mould public opinion with a cynical attitude. Cynicism gives powers of coercion to the journalists and a low standard of journalism is unable to check cynic tendencies. Three, its improved comments and analysis will guide the government and keep it from committing blunders. It can be safely stated that the foremost cause of the downfall of successive governments was their own follies. Four, better salaries in the Press will work in a multi-dimensional way to present the news reports and analysis from the *status quo* perspective, which will go a long way in serving the interests of the incumbent government.

Press in Pakistan may be suffering from excessive problems: interruptions to its freedom due to bad governance; semi-educated and unaware readers due to bad governance; lack of access to information due to bad governance; inability to penalise misleading reporting due to bad governance; etc. A less-than-satisfactory news media has everything to do with bad governance in the country. Now, the Press may qualify for government's assistance on two grounds: compen-

sation for past neglect and cost-effective-ness of assistance.

The Press in Pakistan is constrained with the following two limitations. First, the newspapers have limited readership because of widespread illiteracy and poverty. Limited readership translates into limited resources for its operations. The overall readership in the country is not sufficient to sustain a healthy news media. Second, the newspapers can get by with mediocre reporting and analysis. The readers, because of their lack of awareness, cannot always decipher between good and bad analysis. The result is that newspapers can sacrifice quality and still survive financially. Printing a daily newspaper is feasible with minimal resources - experts need not provide the 'expert' opinions, fact-finding and investigative reporting may be curtailed, grammatical mistakes may be ignored in the less-conspicuous sections, etc. When some newspapers can survive with minimal expenditure, all competing newspapers have to harness their expenses.

This scenario is further aggravated by the fact that government advertising, which is a major source of income for these businesses, is quite independent of the quality of the newspapers, and gets distributed fairly evenly and, therefore, gives little incentive for quality reporting.

Successive governments in Pakistan have sought an efficient and forward-looking administration to achieve the objectives of growth and progress, often at the cost of sidelining other institutions, such as the legislature, the judiciary and the Press. It is time to consider Press as the key development agent. A Press Council may be a suitable platform for achieving this objective, as is explained below.

The present government is interested in setting up a Press Council. In evolving and maintaining the Council, the underlying principle should be complete transparency with no technical involvement and undue influence of the government.

If the Press Council is completely transparent, the government could provide monetary incentives through the Council for raising the standard of journalism. The mode of disbursement of government funds may be determined by the Council to be approved by the government. Several chronic problems of the Press could be tackled in this manner.

Over the years, successive governments have struggled to devise an accurate method for determining newspaper circulation. To resolve this issue, the government merely needs to give appropriate financial incentive to the newspaper industry through the Press Council, and the unions of publishers and owners would themselves supply the honest and accurate figures.

The history of capitalism is witness that even minor financial incentives in the right direction spur immense human initiative and innovation. A mere billion rupees a year to be disbursed by the Press Council may do wonders for the Press and the country, as is explained below.

Financial capital available to the Press most likely to be spent in the right direction because the Press is an institution based on open competition and truthful dissemination of information. It is intrinsically responsive and accessible. It is the only industry that cannot be dictated to by the government authorities and by and large has maintained ethical business and professional practices. Thus, of all the institutions, the Press has far greater likelihood of reforming itself if money is spent on it.

Imagine what investigative reporter would be willing to unveil to get their share of the subsidy. Imagine how balanced and accurate news reports would become; how prompt and comprehensive news analysis would become; how perceptive news columns would become. Imagine how relatively plausible solutions to the country's problems would come to the fore, when expert and experienced people are attracted to the profession.

The Press is different from other watchdog institutions like audit, intelligence, etc. One, it acts as a watchdog of the whole society at large, not just of the government and business institutions. Two, it acts both as a check and a balance, as has been explained earlier. With these functions Press is expected to direct society toward greater collective good. The higher the standard of journalism, the greater its capacity to serve the purpose.

It is contemplated that the vested interests in the country are backed by foreign hands threatening the whole social fabric of society. A responsible Press may be the only way of countering the threat.

During the various turning points in the political history of the country, an intellectual crisis was always deeply felt. A responsible Press attracts the intellect of the intelligentsia/experts and gives it a utilitarian shape.

Presently, the financially weak Press is barely able to act as a watchdog of the Federal government while the provincial governments and local administration get grossly neglected. Not surprisingly the centralisation of the government is unfeasible, even when the power concentration in the Centre is unwieldy.

The politicians have been unable to conduct a study of the government expenditure priorities despite an impending financial collapse. A responsible Press may be able to rationalise government priorities.

Amid fears of institutional collapse, the case for a robust Press is even stronger.