

# Press freedom & democracy

WORLD press freedom day is a reminder of two things: the importance of a free press to the functioning of democracy and the threats that continue to exist in many countries of the world to independent newspapers and journalists who try to write the truth. The press can be venal, it can be corrupt. But at its best it holds aloft the banner of freedom and imparts meaning to democracy and pluralism. In this country it has had a chequered history: beginning with a broad measure of freedom, then lapsing into the clutches of authoritarianism and, last of all, emerging slowly and tentatively into the light of freedom once again. The press in Pakistan suffers from many failings and faults. On the fringes of journalism there are newspapers and journals which scarcely add any distinction to the roll call of the Pakistani press. Fat cats in the profession have been known to let their business interests override their commitment to principles.

If governments have been keen to corrupt individual journalists, such journalists themselves have often been equally ready to succumb to temptation. In such allegations there may be a large measure of truth. But it is also true that the mainstream press, often against heavy odds, has upheld the cause of democracy and tried to present the truth even when it has been unpalatable to the rulers of the day. Over the past 15 years, when present trends towards the freedom of the press started, the press has acquired a powerful voice and it has played an increasingly important role in both reflecting and shaping public opinion.

While draconian laws to curb press freedom are no longer on the statute book, the infamous Press and Publications Ordinance having been consigned to oblivion, successive governments have tried to control the press by other means: the doling out or withholding of advertisements, manipulating newsprint quotas, giving money and other favours to journalists and, when all other things fail, by various forms of intimidation. Indeed, the information ministry, with the enormous funds at its disposal, seems to have no other purpose than to control the media. The official news agency gives out copy which is no better than government handouts. Radio and televi-

sion are firmly in state control. What good this does is unclear but the harm arising from this monopolistic tendency is pretty well known.

Governments are the first victims of their own propaganda while the people, instead of believing the tales churned out by the state-controlled media, tune in to foreign channels to know what is happening. The case for deregulating state-controlled radio and television would therefore seem to be compelling but successive governments have been mortally afraid to do so, thinking perhaps that thereby they would be relinquishing a powerful instrument of control. This government has said that it wants to allow private television channels. This would be a step in the right direction although its efficacy will only be realized if private channels, instead of being confined to dramas and music programmes, are allowed to handle news and current affairs programmes as well — without any kind of regulation or control by the government's information managers.

It goes to the credit of the present government, however, that although it is dressed in khaki it has not tampered with press freedom. Indeed its attitude to the press has been pretty open and it has shown the stomach for some fairly strong criticism. In this respect, its record is better than many democratic governments, which, while paying lip-service to press freedom, were not above the use of gangster tactics to keep recalcitrant journalists or newspapers in line. Long may it remain this way because with political parties discredited and in a state of disarray, it has been left to the press to fill the vacuum and give vent to the voice of the people.

The mainstream press is playing a pretty responsible role: praising where praise is due, criticizing the military government for its perceived shortcomings and quite ably and effectively articulating the national viewpoint on a range of issues from Kashmir to the West's selective interpretation of such fresh bogeys as "fundamentalism" and "terrorism". Today the nation is passing through a critical phase and the responsibility on the press to operate in freedom and help in the forging of a national consensus on important issues is greater than ever before.