

Press freedom and responsibility

The Nation
23.6.96
Ishtiaq Ahmad

The Press is the guardian of man's right to life, liberty and property. A free flow of information is a must for democracy. The Press must foster a culture of tolerance. It must debate issues vital to people by including every shade of public opinion. That is how people are best informed and their leaders made accountable. The Press must oversee and judge the performance of the State's three pillars—the Executive, Parliament, and the Judiciary. The Press plays these universally agreed roles fully and effectively only when it enjoys freedom.)

As regards the present state of Press freedom in Pakistan, no one can be a better judge of this than members of the diplomatic community, especially of the democratic Western states. You ask them what is their observation of this country. And the first thing they say is, "Your Press is really free. Newspaper people can write anything, and can go to any extent in criticising the government or humiliating a politician..."

Beyond any doubt, our Press is freer and much more advanced than that of most of the states in the Muslim world, and freer than that of India and even the United States in the area of foreign policy. On many foreign policy matters, media in the United States and India is closely linked to the establishment. In the American media, for instance, you can hardly find any anti-Israel material. Even if it is there, it may not be as propagandist in nature as is usually the case with reports or columns on Iran, Iraq or Pakistan. The latest example of how closely America's media is linked to its establishment is the consistent anti-Pakistan propaganda in newspapers like *The Washington Times* and *The Washington Post*, some times on the ring magnet issue and sometimes on the deployment of M-11 missiles, which is often preceded or followed by "grave concern" of the State Department spokesman or the CIA chief.

In India also, one hardly finds two opinions among journalists on issues vital to Indian foreign policy. It is a record that as long as the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan was on, none of the Indian newspapers ever wrote anything contrary to India's official line on the issue. But in Pakistan, even if the government makes a positive move on Afghanistan, it has often been opposed by mediemen.

At a time when the last of the government owned newspapers in Pakistan have also been privatised, the country's print media, by and large, enjoys freedom of expression. Since this development has taken place after long spells of martial law, the post-Zia governments have also curbed the freedom of private newspapers and periodicals by restricting advertisement and newsprint quotas. Sometimes the owners and workers of the print media themselves exercise checks on their freedom—the former for the sake of advertisements or newsprint and the latter for some personal benefits.

Many of the problems confronting our print media today are the making of the Press and Publications Ordinance (PPO) which was promulgated in 1963 by the military regime of Aynub Khan and which was put to maximum use by General Ziaul Haq. In his initial years in power, it was a

tion of Press and Publications Ordinance, 1988, was and is far more flexible than the PPO was. Just look at the number of newspapers and periodicals which have sprung up in the last seven or eight years! This number may be three times more than what came out in the entire eleven year period of Ziaul Haq. To get a declaration is not that difficult today. And that is why today we have nearly 300 hundred newspapers and over 2000 periodicals. In a democratic country, it is everyone's right to bring out a publication.)

When we talk about Press freedom, one thing that we cannot ignore is Press responsibility. The Press must be free but it must be responsible as well, especially in a country like ours which is facing an endless number of grave challenges like the ever-widening rich-poor gap, the crisis of identity, and intolerance of all sorts. Tragically, however, the situation is otherwise.

It is quite common in our print media to publish libelous and defamatory reports, articles and editorials. Many reports are based on just one-sided accounts. Many of them do not quote credible sources. What you find at the end or the beginning of the quote is "informed sources, high level sources said this or that"; and, the very next day, one or two lines contradicting the story. Then, there are news items which can provoke violence, can hurt public feelings, can spread obscenity. All these things are there, and they are there on an increasing basis. If they are there, then there has to be a mechanism to check the growth of negative, so-called yellow or sensational newspapers and periodicals. Some of the Urdu eveningers are outrightly spreading obscenity and encouraging violence. The Press has to be free but this freedom will not be freedom as such if it is not complemented by universally agreed journalistic ethics.

Not to speak of the editorial pages, even the news pages often show partisan tendencies. A newspaper can be liberal or conservative in its editorial policy. But this does not mean that it should adopt as confrontational a stance on issues of vital national importance as some politicians have been doing since the demise of the martial law regime. Journalism is too sacred a profession to embroil itself in the filth of politics of confrontation. Instead of statement oriented journalism, the main agenda of our mediemen should be to produce full-of-substance material on how to bring about a real social, economic and political change in Pakistan.

The print media should be a guiding light for the democratic forces in the country. It must strengthen democratic forces. It is only in this way that the media can fight those who terrorise it. The owners and workers of the print media must unite to safeguard freedom of the Press. And they must unite to rid the media of all those who are using their journalistic positions to blackmail people, to incite them, to spread violence, to defame Pakistan in the rest of the world. For this purpose, all the representative bodies of the owners and workers of the print media can seek the government's help in taking credible steps to implement journalistic ethics in the letter and spirit. |