

Press freedom: from coddling to condemnation

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The answer to the problem that is provoking the government into revising the anti-defamation law lies not in curbing freedom of the Press but in helping channel it into healthier lines, writes GHANI EIRABIE

Extrémism seems to be the bane of our society: of the two major news breaks this month, one revealed incidents of government coddling of the Press to the extent of corrupting it, and the other disclosed government plans of a crackdown designed to choke it off. Such wide swings point to immaturity of policy formulation and need to be curbed.

We are not making here a distinction between the PPP government or PML regime, nor between a civilian administration and a Martial Law dispensation—for the simple reason that they are all alike in their approach: each prefers to silence criticism with the dual-track strategy of carrot and stick. We have just been told how the last government sought to woo the Press, not only with allocation of corner-plots but also with provision of chauffeur-driven cars and all-paid vacation in luxury hotels in the hills. And we have also just learnt how the present government, after having tried the carrot approach with offers of diplomatic assignments and frequent trips abroad, has now chosen to wield the stick, with the threat of tightening the anti-defamation law. Both extremes are regrettable.

This is not to suggest by any means that the Press is free of blame; far from it. It shares with the rest of the nation, of which it is an integral part, all the faults and flaws that besmirch the nation as a whole, such as casualness and incompetence, greed and corruption—although the moral epidemic cannot be invoked routinely to condone the failings. For, unless the journalists occupy higher moral ground, they can neither preach nor inspire nor help retrieve the people from the depths of the morass into which they have fallen.

The possible area of damage resulting from the moral and professional deterioration of mediemen, is much larger than injury to the reputation of an individual.

which somehow seems to be bothering the government the most. Irresponsible reporting or writing can hurt the national cause; it could compromise the state policy on Kashmir or nuclear capability, or jeopardise our relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran or Afghanistan, or fan sectarian strife, or give a fillip to ethnic rift or parochial mistrust. Therefore, if the government is sincere in its intentions, it must address itself to the totality of the national interest and not get preoccupied with a small segment of it, namely, the reputation of a Minister or a Secretary or a prince of blood royal.

Even within this restricted preoccupation, while revising the anti-defamation law the government would need to make a distinction—as elsewhere in the world—between protecting the reputation of a private person and of persons in public life, that is those who specifically seek public approval for their performance, such as politicians, artists, actors, poets, writers and journalists. All those soliciting public approbation must be prepared to face public censure.

Further, there are certain fields in which “perception” is more important than “fact”, or “reputation” more relevant than “character”. For instance, would a newspaper reporter be within his professional rights to question the nomination of a particular person as warden of a girls’ hostel on grounds that she did not enjoy a good reputation. Reputation being a matter of perception rather than hard fact, would a reporter warning against the proposed appointment be liable to be hauled up before a court of law. Alternatively, could he afford to wait for the completion of

on the said appointment; by then his story is likely to have ceased to be news.

If the anti-defamation law is amended to shift the burden of proof to the newspaper reporter, the newspaper’s entire field of operation would be reduced to investigative reporting, a slow and costly affair, which few papers can afford. The newspaper would be forced to carry routine colourless government handouts, on privatisation of cement plants or dangers of escalating birth rate. For fear of inviting the formidable penalties under the anti-defamation law, newspapers would not dare question the lack-lustre policy-presentation of a Minister, the bunglings of a bureaucrat, the insipid performance of an actor, or a singer, or the unpoetic poetry of a versifier. All that a clever politician or a smart businessman would need do to immobilise a reporter is have a case registered against him through a battery of lawyers and leave him to establish his assessment of an event, action or a statement, to the satisfaction of the judge—failing which he would be required to cough out a million rupees as fine. Most newspapers would fold up. If this be the intention, then surely an amended anti-defamation law would do the trick.

One presumes, however, that that is not the intention of the government. All that it wants is show of more self-restraint by the Press, exercise of greater sense of responsibility by the nation’s newspapers, sincere effort by newspapermen to double-check on their “facts” and pay more heed to the legitimate sensitivities of those they report or comment upon. In short, increased evidence of balance, objectivity and fairplay in

The government might be surprised to know that this is precisely what most newspapers and newspapermen desire. But what has happened is that the Press has undergone the same institutional erosion which the government administration has. One of the key-institutions of the print media—the pivotal office of News Editor—has virtually vanished. A versatile, veteran journalist, he “policed” the paper, and nothing could get into the paper without his seal of approval and nothing could get past him or escape his vigilant watch. He “tasted” almost all copy; he personally vetted all staff stories; and he—and only he—could ask the reporter to tell him in confidence what his sources of information were or whom he meant by “well-informed or diplomatic sources”, or “political quarters”. His right to know put a curb on the reporter’s kite-flying. All reporters and correspondents were answerable to him, much the same way columnists were subject to “blue-pencilling” by the Editor. Most of today’s “professional pandemonium” is to be blamed on the disappearance of that crucial newspaper anchor.

The only way to end the prevailing chaos and indiscipline is to restore the key job of News Editor and resume the old practice of having all copy vetted by him. The restoration has become more important than ever before, firstly because politics has become more tumultuous than in the past, and the quest for power has become less restrained and more unprincipled and still more ruthless; and secondly, because journalists are being entrusted with sensitive as-

previously and they are morally less restrained and professionally more ambitious today than in the past. Many of them are in a hurry to “strike it rich” and need tighter supervision.

Consequently, the answer to the problem that is provoking the government into revising the anti-defamation law lies not in curbing freedom of the Press but in helping channel it into healthier lines through enlightened collaboration between the government and newspaper editors and owners. The government is welcome to establish friendly relations with newspapers’ field staff—reporters and correspondents—but it must do nothing to subvert the internal discipline of newspaper organisations by offering their employees undue concessions and favours over the heads of the Editors. They should not be corrupted with offers of land allocations, foreign trips and all-paid vacations; and in no case should the country’s security agencies hire them for any “dirty” work.

And exercising tighter vigilance, newspaper Editors must promptly fire those employees found working for or advancing the interests of a political party or clandestinely representing any vested interests such as the drug trade and they must demand absolute accuracy and authenticity of the material produced by the staffers. Underwriting the personal and professional integrity of the young newspaper staffers is the collective responsibility of the entire nation, including the government, whose interest should extend well beyond amending the anti-defamation law to protect a few individuals, no matter how important. It must extend to protecting the Press as a national institution against forces seeking to corrupt it or enslave it, and to ensuring that it remains free to cover all news in good faith and offer any fair comment, designed to advance “public interest”, which is the hallmark or lit-