

# Prime Minister on Press freedom

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## ISSUES IN POLITICS

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It looks a bit odd when the head of a government which controls the electronic information media, refuses to enact a freedom of information law, heavily funds dubious 'information/news' agencies in collaboration with intelligence outfits, refuses to discard, even trim, the so-called Ministry of Information, is most reluctant to dump the stupid Registration of Press and Publications Ordinance, and is least inclined to withdraw the various curbs under a dozen enactments including the most arbitrary ones under the Official Secrets Act, and on top of it all pontificates upon the inseparability of freedom and responsibility in a discourse on the importance of Press freedom in democracy.

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto who like the recently dumped Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee, did not wish to enter politics and desired to be a professional journalist, has started contributing articles to different newspapers, both Pakistani and foreign. In her latest piece appearing in the Press, she is reported to have equated free flow of information with democracy. She has also castigated dictatorships which, in Pakistan, went to the extent of ordering and executing whipping of working journalists. Dictatorships, she cor-

rectly reminded, muzzle the media to maintain their stranglehold on power because a culture of debate fostered by a free Press paves the way for democracy. It not only keeps the public informed but also makes the political leaders accountable for their actions. Authoritarian regimes curb the Press to project oppression as social justice, stagnation as dynamism, labelling dissent as treachery. These are welcome thoughts that votaries of dissent here and elsewhere fully share with her.

In the same article, she points out that baseless reports could cause serious damage to institutions and that the responsibility of thoroughly checking the facts lies with journalists. No journalist true to his profession would dispute this assertion. But in Pakistan where the Press is denied right of information and a mere printed tag inscribed with the six-letter word, *Secret*, prohibits the use of any information contained in any official document, even the journalist who has fulfilled the requirement (of verifying her/his facts) would attract the punishments provided under the Official Secrets Act, which was made more stringent during the first term of the PPP rule in the 1970s. Even in countries like the United States and several other countries where citizens enjoy freedom of information, it is no easy job to avail of sensitive information about the bigwigs' actions. Nevertheless the law, instead of punishing, protects those who expose crime in high places.

Despite Pakistan's return to an electoral process and repeated pleas and representations by the media, Prime Minister Bhutto's government is sticking to the outdated laws and the print media, instead of waiting for the government's largesse, has started exercising

freedom of Press, a few in a licentious manner. What intrigues most is the fact that little anger or coercive action is focused on that same section while the forthright and truly independent section of the print media is harassed and penalised in different ways. Those who try to keep the public informed and make the political leaders accountable for their acts and endeavour to foster debate on issues of serious concern for civil society, are despised and sometimes even hounded like during naked dictatorships this country has suffered.

More dubious, nay sinister, is the continuing effort of dumping the print media, including the relatively independent and free section, with intelligence sleuths in the garb of 'mediamen'. No more do those persons serve and get paid to keep their benefactors informed. They are used to plant information and disinformation that serves the whims of one or the other outfit. It is no more a secret that the source of many such plants which are patently scandalous can be traced back to the highly politicised and misused intelligence outfits. Their acts, despite being totally outside their charter of duties, are not only excused but appear to be appreciated as welcome 'initiatives' by those who matter. Their subversive activities in and through the print media as also elsewhere go unchecked. The Opposition leaders have even named some of those whose duty is to identify crime and curb criminal activities but they are notorious for their totally unlawful acts of intent. The growing anarchy, lawlessness and infringement of citizens' right to life, property and human dignity is no less the work of these protected and privileged criminals.

As for the social roots of the prevailing situation, the President, Sardar Farooq Ahmed Khan Leghari, touched upon them in his address at the annual dinner of the Lahore Chamber of Commerce and Industry the other day. He called upon the country's geopolitical strategists and economists to determine the minimum level of security essential for the country's existence as an independent country and the growth rate required for the same. In this context, he also mentioned the collapse of the Soviet Union because of its poor economy despite having 8,000 nuclear warheads. This reference, coming from the head of the state, is quite meaningful particularly when he also desires of the planners that they should identify Pakistan's role in the region.

President Leghari's polite plea to the government to trim bank borrowings, take steps to arrest galloping inflation and cut expenditures is a pointed reference to the bad health of the country's economy in contrast to claims that our listeners of controlled electronic media are condemned to hear, now round the clock and via satellite too. His criticism of the provinces for their failure to mobilise resources and the poor performance of public sector undertakings (being run by incompetent favourites), only reconfirms what the much maligned independent print media discovered quite some time ago. Broadening of the tax net, even covering the farms and the suggestions mentioned earlier will, however, not go a long way towards raising industrial and agricultural productivity to world standards. The potential is certainly there but the same will not attain even the regional standards unless our sacred cows are milked, even if not sacrificed. Mere payment of Farm Tax

by the feudals, in the absence of reforms to multiply the number of real tillers in possession of lands, will not matter. And if the feudals are not ready to share their possessions with the landless rural populace that makes them move towards urban areas to share in the already overburdened urban facilities, turning them into huge and unmanageable slums, with attendant social tensions, then the only alternative is that the feudals join the ranks of bona fide income tax payers. There is no reason whatsoever that landowners continue to stay out of the income tax net and get away with paying paltry amounts under the so-called farm tax/agricultural tax.

It should not be taken as an aspersion on feudals but the fact is that those who can enjoy services of bonded *haris* can hardly realise how massive financial burdens are shifted to the tax payers when armies of appointees are added to the various government departments. The malignant overgrowth needs surgical intervention to cut expenditures. While the employees' salaries need to be enhanced, their numbers need to be reduced to the minimum required and the unpaid and subsidised facilities withdrawn. A sense of social responsibility is required on the part of the ruling feudals and other members of the elite groups to learn to live as citizens belonging to average income groups. Tax payers money, being wasted to provide for luxurious comfort of those in authority whether they be political elected persons, bureaucrats or the top-brass, needs to be diverted towards providing basic health, education and shelter to the low income groups. No higher growth rate or increase in productivity is possible without taking the needed steps, particularly in the agricultural sector. Even under the present electoral process the few hundred feudals cannot expect to continue their clout and political stranglehold for long, even if the auxiliaries continue to favour and support them. That will only increase the existing anarchic tendencies.