

# Role of the press.

**T**he fast changing complexion of the so-called Mohajir question insofar as it relates particularly to contemporary Sindh, has reposed an especial responsibility in the print media of Pakistan. (Any mention of the local electronic channels in this context would be a pitiable detraction from the issue.) And it must be acknowledged right at the outset that our independent national press has, by and large, acquitted itself remarkably well on this score.

Nevertheless, as indicated in these columns last week, there are reasonable grounds to believe that the worst—in terms equally of the government's offensive against the Urdu-speaking community and its concomitant effects on the equation between the executive and the press—could yet come.

The present respite (touchwood) provided in both these related areas by the fragile truce, struck with great difficulty between the government and the MQM leadership for the sake of the ongoing parleys between the two sides, has brought an ideal opportunity to take a closer look at this singular role of the press. It is only such an exercise which can help determine the momentousness of the task and, even more pertinently in terms of the possible challenges ahead, evaluate the relevant lessons that the crisis ought already to have brought home to the media.

The independent dailies and periodicals of Pakistan should not really have had to bear this burden almost entirely on their own in a truly operative democracy. But, if this brings a good cheer to the body of professionally committed journalists in this country, the situation only speaks of the relative strength and resilience acquired by their institution over the chequered history of Pakistan. If a democratic system is, in the ultimate analysis, to be at least reflective of the national concerns of the day, it is the press alone among the supposedly participatory institutions of Pakistan, which comes anywhere near the requirement.

In larger terms of the basic relevance of all the state organs to these domestic national preoccupations, as also the real or potential efficiency of the former

ing such a principled stand on both the Karachi situation and the professional challenges emanating from the crisis. The July 5 newspaper strike which was in the event not to be, demonstrated a rare solidarity of the institution in many years.

The protest of the independent media over the closure of Karachi's Urdu eveningers was not about the defence of any alleged impropriety committed by the targeted publications, but was informed with the fourth estate's determination to resist the arbitrary infringement by the executive on its inherent right to the freedom of expression. If the banned publications had indeed violated any law—and, mind you, the relevant legislation in this country is exceptionally strict—they should have been proceeded against by the executive in absolute conformity with the requirements of the legal process.

**T**he most important question that arises in this overall context is with regard to the possible motivation for the media is not shying away from accepting and discharging such a steadfast and solidified role. The answer is rather simple (The media correctly perceived and carried out its responsibility as the only available forum from voicing the heightening national concern on state policy towards the Urdu-speaking community. And one is referring here basically to the editorials of newspapers and magazines which are statements of a publication's own views.

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tial efficacy of the former in resolving them, the major responsibility has, again, come to fall on the fourth estate. (The political role of the armed forces constitutes a case apart which, in the present circumstances, remains far from being clearly defined.)

At the same time, this pivotal position of the media is neither the outcome of any largesse on the part of a ruler of Pakistan, present or past, nor has it surfaced overnight. The all but uninterrupted development of the indigenous institution since much before independence and all through the political ups and downs in Pakistan's history, while conforming mainly to the exacting demands of the calling, is the only rationale of the unique place which the press in this country has come to occupy. The same cannot, obviously, be stated of any other national institution.

The evolutionary aspect of the press in Pakistan is best illustrated by a comparative look at the less than responsible role played by the institution with reference to the first Pakistan crisis in the early 1950s, and its position on the current situation a quarter cen-

However, that still leaves another vital question unanswered. If the press was responsible and courageous enough to keep the executive on the mat for the latter's refusal to seek a political solution to the Sindh imbroglio, how did it choose to treat the peddling of the government line, in the same newspaper columns, which flew in the face of its own considered assessment as articulated in the editorial comments?

The present writer would be the last to advocate the stifling of any honest view, howsoever outlandish it may be. It is also, normally, neither fair nor proper to sit on judgement on anyone's intent. God alone knows better. However, one can in this case go around the entire debate by recognising some of the virtually incontrovertible features associated with the issue.

The first is the question of editorial judgement and its consistency. The second is the emergence of a veritable national consensus on finding a negotiated political settlement to the Sindh crisis. These two aspects are, of course, interrelated insofar as the first should, in the main, be a reflection of the