



Saeed Malik

Seeking guidance from the Press

New
15/11/50

SPEAKING at the certificate-distribution ceremony for the participants of workshop on photo journalism at the Press Institute of Pakistan, the Punjab Chief Minister held out the assurance that the government had complete faith in a free Press. He also declared that the PML government would seek guidance from the Press in managing the affairs of the country.

One of the points made by the Chief Minister was the need to keep the Press free so that it could discharge its duties in accordance with dictates of a rapidly changing socio-economic environment. There is no denying the fact that a ruffled Press cannot help any government in its attempts at solving the problems of people.

Democracy and freedom of expression, it is recognised the world over, are the two wheels of a cart on which the edifice of statecraft rolls. The role played by an unfettered Press have become one of the basic pre-requisites of a modern society. The right to speak and write freely is one of the essential tools for the attainment of truth.

In addition to causing irreparable damage to vital national institutions, despotic rulers of the past have eroded the confidence of the people in the credibility of the national Press. They caused this damage by denying the people their inalienable right to speak freely. By pursuing a policy of threats and inducements, the so-called socialist and pseudo-democrats created a special breed of flatterers, singers of praise and sycophants among Pressmen for whom money and a little share in power became the only objective in life. They did not bother about the politically and socially harmful consequences of their participation in the anti-people activities of the dictators. While, on the one hand, the dictators applied all sorts of pressures and coercion; on the other, they also used inducements like allotment of residential plots, permits of all sorts; and free foreign trips to rope in the unscrupulous among the fraternity of journalists.

Autocrats and rulers with despotic tendency are more fearful of the power of a pen than the force of physical violence. So they muzzle the Press so that information about misdeeds and anti-people policies are not disseminated on a wide scale, or is

totally blacked out.

A free Press, on the other hand, is the *sine qua non* for a modern welfare state, because it serves as a watchdog to protect the interests of all segments of society. Through constructive and well-intentioned criticism it puts a check on the excesses, aberrations and idiosyncrasies of the rulers. It also serves as a medium for inducing dialogue among people holding different points of view. In this way, a free Press helps in synthesising a national consensus on important political, economic and social issues. These exchanges of views among men who are informed, broad-minded and open to reason is the life-blood of a system of accountability and civilised behaviour. And this exactly is the essence of democracy. At its best, a free Press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst, it is a mean by which few exploit social unrest and disorganisation to achieve their own end as has been the case in Pakistan during the dictatorial regimes of men in uniform and pseudo-socialists.

Under a totalitarian rule, there is no organised opposition which can take over the reigns of government when the party in power fails. All the eggs are put in just one basket in a regime fostered by a dictator and everything is staked on one coterie of individuals. When the going is good, they move quickly and efficiently in contrast with democracy where the opposition has to be persuaded and conciliated. But when the government of a despot crumbles there are no reserves. There are no substitutes to fill in for the fallen rulers. The result is democracies based on the concept of party government have outlived all other forms of government.

The functioning of a democracy is much facilitated by a free Press which, with the help of constructive criticism, keeps the rulers on their toes. Excesses of the ruling party are exposed by the Press without losing a moment, which results in the tempering of the proclivity of the rulers to transcend their constitutional limits prescribed by a democratic set-up. A free Press, therefore, is the life-blood of democracy and should be protected at all costs.

The Chief Minister of Punjab did well by stressing the role of a free Press and his desire (and also that of the PML government in Islamabad) to rely on the considered opinion of the Press in matters that are so essential for the good of the country and its people. These words of the provincial Chief Executive will not only strengthen the belief of the people in the functioning of a free Press, but will also encourage media persons to express their views on national and international issues in constructive, unbiased and objective manner.

Dialectic is the most effective instrument that can be used in ascertaining truth, particularly moral and political truth. "The ability to raise searching difficulties on both sides of a subject," said Aristotle, "will make us detect more easily the truth and effort about the several points that arise." The right to speak and write freely, therefore, is one of the essential tools for the attainment of truth.