

# The assault on the print media

The Nation  
3-9-95

## ISSUES IN POLITICS

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The day when the world's 'better-halves' will be watching the other face of our internationally-acclaimed public speaker, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, her subjects at home will witness a countrywide shutdown by the print-media. If one were to believe her, she was ready to see the newspapers remain on strike for 365 days, for a whole calendar year!

With the passage of time, Mohtarma seems to be forgetting the days and years of her predicaments when her only hope, besides the democracy-loving people of Pakistan, were the print media. Despite facing all kinds of hardships, the Press did not fail in its duty to uphold democratic rights of the people including those at whose hands it had a very rough deal. Benazir Bhutto's latest utterances remind one of the years when the first civilian martial law administrator failed to reform even when he had become the first elected prime minister under an almost unanimous Constitution, of course, without fresh polls.

The latest assault on the print media is, on the face of it, directed at the Press barons but its victims will be the hundreds of thousands of newspaper readers for whom newspaper costs have already become prohibitive. Compared to neighbouring India, our newspapers are costlier by around 450 per cent! The Indian dailies neither have to pay import duty on newsprint nor any sales tax. Their production costs are also on the lower side while commercial advertisements are abundant. Even the rates of gov-

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ernment advertisements are on a higher scale than in our country. Comparatively enjoying much higher rate of literacy and reading habit, newspapers in India have several fold higher circulations. All this helps in the growth of print media, job opportunities and comparatively better wages, in view of the lower cost of living.

The Benazir government's decision to include the print media's inputs under import and other duties and herding them under the sales tax not along with their main source of revenue, the advertisements, is primarily directed at punishing the Press for the independence it has demonstrated in (howsoever partially and in unprofessional manner) exposing the misdeeds of those enjoying high places. It is typical of the feudal mindset of those who take policy decisions. The onslaught needs to be faced with courage and combated for it negates the growth of institutions so vital for evolving democratic traditions in our country. Through her slip of the tongue (or was it an intentional attempt at browbeating the media), Ms Benazir Bhutto has exposed her hatred for the Press as she seeks its closure for a whole calendar year's days.

It is true that the print media are not charitable to her, her spouse, her cronies and the all-times hangers-on. There are newspapers which published unconfirmed, scandalous and scurrilous stories about her and her government. With common readers having little experience of free and independent print media, many cannot even differentiate between bold and daring journalism as against what is known as yellow journalism. This situation puts the government in a disadvantageous position. To counter it, the servile media managers of the government-controlled print and electronic media, as also the undesirable Information Ministry and its departments, are trying to employ the same old arm-twisting, and carrot and stick tactics. They are

wasting their energies and tax-payer's money on stupid publicity, dished out as advertisements on commercial rates to low circulation rags and, occasionally, to black unsavoury stories from being carried on special positions in the newspapers outside government control. Efforts have been redoubled to black out the Opposition activities from both the controlled electronic and print media, including the news agencies. Few discerning newspaper readers (and even newspaper employees) can easily identify the officially-planted disinformation (which the Opposition also relishes to do). As if the wasteful but ever-multiplying and expanding information sleuths (whose basic job since the days of colonial British days has been collection of intelligence and planting favourable-to-government stuff) were not enough, the numerous intelligence outfits also engaged themselves in funding media organisations 'news agencies' and purchasing media personnel, particularly those employed by and working with the print media outside of government control.

The government of Benazir Bhutto, instead of stopping the wastage of taxpayer's money on such vulgar and wasteful activities, appears to have pressed in extra funds and hired hatchetmen for the same. Similarly, it has been misled into a course of action which will lead to total confrontation with the print media which are out of government control and are daring to be independent and bold, in the true sense. The incompetent plunderers of taxpayer's money also seem to have exploited the feudal mindset to employ expeditious punitive administrative action against the print media falling in the category of yellow press and bracketed the daring, bold and independent press with the same. Like in the authoritarian misrule years, the yellow, but servile, rags would continue to receive patronage, paying share in the booty to

(dis) information minions.

The whole exercise of imposing duties and other charges on the newsprint and sale of newspapers, besides advertisements to newspapers, appears to have been devised to fund the waste on (dis) information outfits, official plants and the servile yellow rags, having near nil circulation/sales on the newspaper stalls. It is obvious that newspaper managements will not bear the excessive burden imposed on the print media from their pocket. They will shift the same to the newspaper readers who mostly belong to the middle class, falling in the low-income groups. They will get punished and would have to pay through their nose in order to remain informed through the independent publications. Few print media managements with an abiding commitment to freedom, independence and democracy, may feel obliged to share the unwarranted and unjust burden.

As for the government, it should have realised that with almost 85 per cent of the country's population being illiterate, the common citizens only credible source of knowledge is independent part of the print media, whose news items and views trickle down to them through those who care to sift what is to be read. If the government had been concerned and was ready to encourage dissemination of knowledge and awareness, it would have allowed duty-free import not only of newsprint but all other inputs, including the printing and printed materials. Instead of imposing sales tax, it would have attempted to reduce the wasteful overgrowth of officialdom in the so-called Information Ministry and its various departments. The job could be better done with few official spokesmen posted in the Federal and provincial governments. It would have preferred privatisation of officially-controlled and funded news agencies, for with all its wasteful huge expense from budgeted and not-so-secret funds on its

incredible outfits and plants in almost every independent publications, the image of the government of Benazir Bhutto is sliding down. With all the media under its control, its loss of credibility is on the rise with each passing day.

Tailpiece: With her incisive piece entitled "Shaddy foolishness" (*The Nation*, August 31), Nadira has put into sharp focus the ongoing, "non-stop theatre of the absurd." Ten days after my return from a visit to my family in India (this time to attend the *chehnum* of my deceased mother), a man from the Special Branch of Police visited my residence and asked me the "actual" reason of my visit. In fact, he had a whole list of Model Town residents who had visited India in the recent past. Earlier, my wife and a son, who were to join me, were asked by some men at the Lahore Airport as to why were they proceeding when the situation is 'so grave'. Despite being told the reason, they insisted and appeared unconvinced while the two proceeded to board the aircraft for Delhi. My wife's first query, on reaching Lucknow, was: "will we be able to stay and return home safely."

Now, this is patent harassment of visitors to India, particularly those with divided families. To me, it was particularly agonising and has made me very angry. Will this stupid (mal) practice stop or will this humiliation and harassment persist now that Naseerullah Babar has claimed that insurgents are being trained near Lucknow by the side of river Gomti. While in Lucknow, I learnt that a raid was conducted at Nadvatul Uloom, the well-known seat of religious learning, situated on the banks of the same river Gomti, by Indian intelligence sleuths who claimed 'information' about the presence of Kashmiri militants! The then Chief Minister of UP, who was elsewhere, rushed back to apologise to the head of this institution and sent an angry note to those in New Delhi. Back home, and now that Naseerullah Babar has stated that Karachi's insurgents have established communication links through Saudi Arabia, the returnees from the holy lands should also be receiving knocks by the intelligence personnel. How long will it take to draw the curtain on this "theatre of the absurd?"