

# The rider on press

## Damn 14/1/79 freedom

By Aziz Siddiqui

AT his meeting with APNS last week the Chief Executive said much which, coming from a military leader, was music to the ears. The promise of freedom of the press, for as long as it lasts, will be good for the regime too. It is a sort of cushion for the punch of the coup, and it will be a safety valve for what may follow, as the euphoria evaporates.

There was a mild clanger at that meeting too. One newspaper reported the general as follows: "There should be no compromise on national interests and if you got a correct information which may harm national interest it should not be published, he said". That does seem to shift the paradigm a bit, doesn't it? It may have the effect of taking away with one hand at least half of what it gives with the other.

Who will decide what is national interest? And how? It isn't always a cut and dried entity. One man's national interest can, in all conscience, be another's treason. Today's patriotism may tomorrow, on hindsight, prove to have been a treachery. History is replete with such examples. Let's take our own experience.

On last October 12, to the prime minister of the time and to all the loyalists around him, instant change of the COAS-CJCS must have seemed the ultimate in national interest, even if it took blowing up a plane-load of people to do it — or so we learn. If that particular change had indeed occurred, at least some of those who would have dared to differ given that opportunity would have ended up nursing not just metaphorical wounds in some of Mr Saifur Rehman's 'safe houses'.... As it happened, things turned out differently. The national interest suddenly changed. And it is easy to sympathize now with those others who have since unctuously been busy quietly or loudly rattling on their former loyalties. Is national interest always the victor's interest, then?

Another graphic example. In the East Pakistan crisis, it was normal, basic patriotism right until the world came of the ultimate humiliation in Paltan Maidan to damn Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his six points, and to applaud the military action and the doings of Al-Shams and Al-Badr. The rare irrepressible mavericks who dared nevertheless to publicly differ — the redoubtable Malik Ghulam Tilani and Abdullah Malik —

alternative versions were available from the Indian or the western media. They cannot be blamed for that, for their not depending entirely on local official reporting, after their experience of the Bangladesh war. But that didn't make them any less patriotic than anyone else, or less keen that their side should win.

Disinformation used to be a powerful weapon of war until a short while ago. Much less so now. With the communication barriers so drastically breaking down it is no longer possible for any one-sided propaganda to rule people's mind. In fact, it is less risky now that people have access to opposing sources of information and be their own judge, rather than if they are a captive audience and either resent the fact or give free rein to rumours and imagination.

As for the Indian press, it is no role model on external relations. Barring exceptions, it tends to depend rather heavily on daily official briefings, advices sought and given and occasional leaks and plants, and then it soldiers on even ahead of the government in hammering the established prejudices. The country scores heavily and positively on a number of counts, but not remotely so in the matter of uncritical stolidity of its press' 'patriotism' on external issues. It is doubtful if that has served the national interests best and if the Indian press deserves any laurels for helping to keep the Indian mind firmly closed on the merits of relations with the neighbours. If the Pakistani press appears by any means a shade more catholic in that respect, it is best not to urge it to liquidate that little advantage. It could do without any conformist imitations of the Indians.

In situations of border conflicts or tensions, factual reporting may, it is true, not always advance the national cause. But such matters already belong to the category of official secret and the press normally has no access to them. Even if a reporter does ever stumble on anything remotely sensitive-seeming the editors almost invariably opt for the easy option: 'when in doubt, cut out'. It is hard to recall a single instance of a newspaper indiscretion since the bizarre consequence of a minor lapse by the New Delhi correspondent of CMG way back in 1949. (He had talked, poor chap, of a move towards partitioning of Kashmir).

In fact, the error arguably has been all on the side of excessive caution. The press has been nearly as reluctant to go scouting for infor-

Jilani and Abdullah Malik — promptly paid the price for it. They suffered spells in jail at the hands of the military rulers, and had public scorn poured on them to boot. Yet, after the fall of Dhaka, hindsight began to overhaul the perception of national interest rather rapidly. Every one rushed to put all the blame on Yahya and Bhutto and rue the fact that they did not honour the election result and transfer power to Awami League. The loudest in the lamentations were — you guessed it — those who in those dark months of 1971 had been the fieriest in urging the action onwards. This is recent history. It is a matter of printed record.

That's how fickle and how misunderstood national interest can be.

The fact is, once you cease to assume that every citizen is inher-

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ently patriotic, and that national interest is based on certain fundamentals (including truthfulness) and it isn't something made to somebody's measure, you open the door to intolerance, to demands of conformity, to violent inroads into freedom of expression. The initiative is then seized by the establishment and by the chauvinistic and fanatical sections of society. They assume a monopoly over defining the national interest and blowing the whistle on every dissent.

The weapon has not only come in handy for the self-appointed guardians of the so-called ideological frontiers of the country; it has also served the purposes of dictators and dictatorially inclined rulers of the past. The tag of traitors and enemy agents hasn't been used with greater frequency anywhere else. Far more grievous wrongs were committed down the years in supposed defence of national interest than in wilful opposition to it....

The Chief Executive was also said to have complained at the APNS meeting that the press here highlighted statements of foreign leaders, unlike the foreign newspapers that gave no such coverage to Pakistani leaders. He had not seen anything against national interest in the press of a neighbouring country, he added. The context of those remarks was not clear, nor whether its reporting of foreign leaders was the only reason that the press here was seen as not sufficiently nationally minded. Gen. Musharraf might have had Kargil in mind.

He may have an arguable basis for his view, but the common newspaper reader did not particularly get the impression that by reporting what the Indian leaders were saying the press here was doing any damage to the national cause. It only made the readers better aware of what the common Indians were being told by their leaders. Besides, those who read newspapers also mostly watch television, and the Indian channels are only press of a button away.

Some also, no doubt, must have wished to check the official accounts here against whatever

mation as the authorities have been averse to making information available (except to the extent and in the way that suited their own purpose). We are for instance one of the very rare countries which do not even place their defence budgets before the parliament. All material information (or disinformation) relating to defence matters usually comes via the *Jane's Weekly*, the US Congressional or Pentagon records or the Indian press. The outsiders thus have the means to be better informed about our defences than the people here.

The press for that reason has become even warier than is necessary. During the Kargil crisis the Indians after a while started taking press teams on closely conducted tours of the fighting area. Virtually nothing of the kind was attempted here — partly for understandable reasons but partly not. Nor perhaps any newspaper on its own steam tried anything approaching proximity reporting. That also might have made a little contribution to the cause being lost on the publicity front too.

There is scope for change, but on the side of more openness in all areas, not less. The press has to be encouraged, and enabled, to be more enterprising, not caused to become further inhibited by the fear of 'National Interests.' all citizens must be assumed to be equally concerned about those interests. And what is true or what is honestly believed in cannot normally hurt a cause if there is justice in that cause.

Gen. Musharraf's initial instinct was correct. He should do nothing to hamper the press functioning in freedom. He should guarantee their access to all information not directly concerned with national security. And he should establish the mode to enable the electronic media to operate free of official control, under autonomous auspices. His military training and the realities of governing will in the coming days sorely test his resolve. He will need to stay the course while he is there. Freedom of expression is by itself a national interest. And it serves all national interests best.