

# Threats to freedom of the Press

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The Pakistani Press has gained whatever freedom it possesses today as a result of prolonged struggle and suffering, mainly on the part of the working journalists. The journalists agitating for the right to report acts objectively went to jails and some were even awarded lashes during the dark days of the Zia Martial Law. Here and there owners of the newspapers also stood up to the oppressors trying to put curbs on the freedom of the Press. It is, therefore, natural that the Pakistani Press should guard its hard-won freedom with jealousy.

The struggle of the journalists was to continue during Mian Nawaz Sharif's tenure when the journalists of Sindh insisted on reporting facts objectively despite threats extended to them by the minions of Jam Sadiq Ali as well by the MQM leadership which was a coalition partner both in the Province and at the Centre. Hooligans supported by the government harassed and physically assaulted the journalists while false cases were initiated against editors. Even in the Punjab, a number of incidents aimed at intimidating the journalists were reported.

One had expected that things would change for the better with the arrival of the Benazir Government for one gave the PPP leadership the credit for spearheading the struggle against dictatorship and for the restoration of democracy. It pains one to note, however, that things have started happening now that tend to belie these expectations. The recent news regarding a cabinet decision to form a code of conduct committee is the latest of the series.

Hegel had noted that things often

change themselves into their opposites and had made a provision for this unhappy turn of events in the system of his dialectics. There are incidents in history wherein the oppressed defeated their oppressors only to take on their much-condemned position. That is how the French Revolution of 1798, for instance, with its promise of Liberty, Fraternity and Equality, degenerated into the bloody Reign of Terror, forcing many a sensitive soul to lament about "what man has made of man" and to seek refuge in avenues like nature, losing all hope in political parties with high-sounding slogans. Is the PPP-in-power going to take up the position against which the PPP-in-opposition fought so bravely and that too in less than a year of its rule, one wonders?

That some of the PPP Ministers have made it a habit to blame the Press for their own howlers, and to use threatening language against it, might be pardonable keeping in view their inefficiency matched by an equal amount of impatience. What worries one are policies or decisions that are initiated from the very top. And they are coming now in quick succession.

There is, for instance, the decision to sue the newspapers that have published some of the statements of the Leader of the Opposition which the government considers to be libelous. If the Leader of the Opposition has issued statements

that fall into this category, the aggrieved party has every right to take recourse to the law. But why victimise the Press which is only performing its duty by reporting what an important political leader of the country has said? The Leader of the Opposition, irrespective of whether he is Mian Nawaz Sharif or someone else, is too big to be ignored by the Press. He is not supposed to be irresponsible while issuing statements. But if he happens to be frequently indulging in frivolity or inanity, God help the nation that has made him the honourable Leader of the Opposition. The Press can neither teach him how to issue a statement nor can it improve upon his pronouncements. It can only publish them just as they are, leaving it to the people to pass judgement on them. If the government had decided to sue him, it could have called in the Press as a witness rather than charge it as a co-accused, as Mr. Irshad Ahmad Haqqani has rightly suggested.

There are reasons to believe that it was decided at the top to reveal the names of a few journalists who were allegedly the beneficiaries of the intelligence agencies, while the names of the rest were to be kept secret. Two of the names originally given were later on cleared. Why were certain names given, while others were withheld, if not to blackmail the journalists? Why did the government not issue a comprehensive fact-sheet containing incriminating evidence

against all those who had benefited from the largesse of the intelligence agencies? If the government had been sincere in putting an end to what is often called *lifafa* journalism, it would have given the whole list of the black sheep along with proofs, and vowed it would itself never encourage the practice. As things have turned out, the whole exercise has proved to be no more than a smear campaign against the Press.

The worst in the series is the proposed code of conduct committee that the cabinet has decided to form in order to avowedly discourage the publication of slanderous material. The committee would be empowered with the authority to impose penalty up to Rs. 50 thousand. The committee is to be presided over by a judge and a couple of journalists, nominated by the government, are also to be included in it. With the type of appointments being made in the judiciary, a time is fast arriving when the title of a judge may no longer automatically confer the halo of judiciousness or integrity on a man. The journalists appointed by the government too will not be regarded as neutral by many.

There is a strong feeling among the journalists' community that the measure is actually meant to curb the freedom of the Press has gained as a result of its prolonged struggle both during and after the Zia Martial Law. The feeling is not unfounded keeping in view the frequent

outbursts of some of the Ministers against the Press.

It has been correctly pointed out that the committee is totally unnecessary because the government can deal with irresponsible or slanderous journalism by invoking the laws already present in the statute book. A private citizen or a government functionary can sue a paper for damages in case they find they have been targeted falsely. Journalists have been punished under these laws in the past. There is no reason, therefore, to create another body to deal with the problem when the already existing courts are efficiently meting out justice to anybody who cares to take recourse to them.

The creation of the code of conduct committee would indeed be tantamount to the creation of a court for speedy trial, an infamous institution which is a legacy of the days of the dictatorship and which the government is wrapping up all over the country.

The government has not cared to take into confidence the professional bodies of the journalists as well as newspaper editors before launching the idea of a code of conduct committee. One wonders why the government is in such an uncalculated haste to implement the idea. Why does it want to alienate itself from the Press for good? Attempts of this sort have never helped the governments in the past. The Federal Secretary Information has assured the journalists recently that the proposal will be enforced only after consulting the professional bodies of the journalists. Even if this was an after-thought, the government would do well to beat a hasty retreat rather than start a war it is anyway bound to lose.