

# Why this press bashing?

Dawn  
18/5

Mass Comm

By M. B. Naqvi

BY the time these lines appear, Mr. Najam Sethi, the editor of *The Friday Times* of Lahore, will have been released from detention either by the government itself or through the benign intervention of courts — unless of course there is something terribly wrong with the government. For one thing, international pressure for the release of Najam Sethi and even Hussain Haqqani is strong and insistent. The ostensible difference in the two cases does not really matter.

Haqqani is said to have been put in the jug for embezzlement of secret funds while Sethi is said to have uttered supposedly treasonous thoughts and that too on Indian soil. In any case, these are not the only events. There has been a series of incidents: Sethi, Haqqani, M.A.K. Lodhi's arrest and earlier the *Jang* affair, not to mention innumerable incidents of violence, arrest or harassment of journalists at the hands of local administrations.

These cannot be ignored as isolated incidents; taken together, they form a pattern. They underline a tendency on the part of primarily Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and shared by many leading PML(N) ministers to be as intolerant of criticism as it is authoritarian. Liberal opinion has to take purposeful notice of this and mobilize its forces before it is too late.

First, it is necessary to question the credibility of the government, especially of its propaganda apparatus. Few believe that Sethi has been arrested for saying uncomfortable truths in India (that he had already said and perhaps later also repeated in Pakistan) or Haqqani's alleged financial misdemeanours were the only motivating factor for the midnight knock on his brother's door or for detaining Lodhi as a security risk. They were picked up because of what they wrote or told the BBC's filming unit about the PM's own financial dealings. There were other incidents of what seemed to be dacoities in the houses of other senior journalists in Karachi that were suspected to be the handiwork of "agencies".

They signify a frightening state of our rulers' mind: it is compounded self-righteousness, paranoia and extreme narrow-mindedness which is especially inimical to independent-minded journalists. If it is not stopped dead in its tracks, it is going to destroy the freedom of the

many.

In this light punishing the opposition leaders becomes unfair despite there being no presumption in favour of BB, much less her husband. It is, the pursuit of untrammelled power by PM Sharif that, viewed against the murky background of his questionable financial dealings and economic policy making by the PML (N)'s government (for instance, the net effect of the "incentives" for sugar exports) has shocked most citizens. It is in this light that many people see the November 1997 attack on the Supreme Court. The intention could only have been to overawe and politically subdue the judiciary in the sense of making it subordinate to the government's will.

The occasion for it had arisen over the protracted tussle between the Sharifs and the superior judiciary, especially the former Chief Justice of Pakistan, Syed Sajjad Ali Shah, over some contentious issues. The Sharifs are somehow obsessed with the simplistic idea that justice should be cheap (inexpensive) and swift. The language the PM habitually uses suggests that he desires nothing so much as a guilty person being administered harshest possible punishment at the earliest: 'within hours if possible'. In the PM's idiom the 'murderers should be hanged publicly by the lampposts'. He is on record upbraiding the human rights activists and other liberals who insist on the ends of justice being met through due process of law for "being concerned so much with the human rights of the criminals" - obviously confounding the accused with the convicted criminal.

The ease with which the PM sent the Sindh ministry packing in October last year under an obscure enabling power was primarily for the purpose of his government directly ruling over Sindh. That he made use of the first perceived opportunity of Hakim Said's murder is proved by the fact that the initial evidence provided by the police has not stood any scrutiny. Anyway, governor's rule gave him the satisfaction of setting up ATCs again in the shape of military courts. His government lost no time in hanging two young men after a nine-day trial — before the Supreme Court could take up their case. The SC held the military courts illegal altogether, though it was barred from taking up the two executions.

But the apex court did take up the acceptable part of the expeditious justice idea and agreed to new ATCs being set up under its direct supervision and for which purpose it laid down ground rules, the main one being that they would have Sessions and Additional Sessions Judges already in service,

factor for the midnight knock on his brother's door or for detaining Lodhi as a security risk. They were picked up because of what they wrote or told the BBC's filming unit about the PM's own financial dealings. There were other incidents of what seemed to be dacoities in the houses of other senior journalists in Karachi that were suspected to be the handiwork of "agencies".

They signify a frightening state of our rulers' mind: it is compounded self-righteousness, paranoia and extreme narrow-mindedness which is especially inimical to independent-minded journalists. If it is not stopped dead in its tracks, it is going to destroy the freedom of the press — one of the two institutions that still seek to keep the government on the right track, the other being the judiciary whose job it is to keep the government restrained and civilized. But in the recent past the government had managed to restrain the superior judiciary itself, though it is trying hard to regain some of its prestige. Press freedom is anyhow the last rampart. The two will stand or fall together.

The current background has to be kept in mind. The efforts of the Ehtesab (accountability) overlord, Senator Saifur Rahman, have been crowned with success by having the leader of the opposition, Benazir Bhutto, and Senator Asif Ali Zardari sentenced by the Lahore High Court to five years' imprisonment each, a fine of 8 million dollars, and both to be disqualified from holding an elected public office, including the member-

shipway, Governor's rule gave him the satisfaction of setting up ATCs again in the shape of military courts. His government lost no time in hanging two young men after a nine-day trial — before the Supreme Court could take up their case. The SC held the military courts illegal altogether, though it was barred from taking up the two executions.

But the apex court did take up the acceptable part of the expeditious justice idea and agreed to new ATCs being set up under its direct supervision and for which purpose it laid down ground rules, the main one being that they would have Sessions and Additional Sessions Judges, already in service.

---

Why does the government want to overawe the press? Because a press so conditioned does not contradict or expose the government, especially its leading lights. It wants the press to behave like the PTV and Radio Pakistan.

---

ship of national or provincial assemblies. This effectively knocks out the chief rival of PM Sharif from the political arena — the main credible challenge to his power has been removed. Has the government covered itself with glory for having corruption punished? Well, this is not how the public has reacted.

It cannot be said that everybody believes Ms Benazir Bhutto or her spouse to be above suspicion; her conduct while in office made all, except her acolytes and cronies, suspect that a lot of money was being illegally made. Senator Saif thinks that the case regarding Cotecna contract and purchase of a diamond necklace is of an open and shut kind. Insofar as the specifics of the case are concerned, there is not much doubt on that score. But there are doubts of another kind: the accountability has been a one-sided and so blatantly focussed on the misdeeds of BB while ignoring all facts about the questionable financial dealings of the Sharifs that it has disgusted

as presiding officers. They should not be overloaded with cases and the police should send properly investigated and processed cases for trial. The decisions can then be quick. But apparently this was not what the government had wanted: it wanted the ATCs to be presided over by lawyers of its own choice.

This could only be the reason for the PM and his government to sulk and procrastinate for over two months over setting up the new ATCs and try to bargain with the Supreme Court that it should leave at least two courts to be presided over by government-nominated persons in Sindh.

A beaten judiciary will enable the government to subdue the press. Why does the government want to overawe the press? Because a press so conditioned does not contradict or expose the government, especially its leading lights. It wants the press to behave like PTV and Radio Pakistan. Remember the *Jang* affair last year: what was the nature of the government's demands? Apart from wanting its own nominees in key positions, it wanted the paper not to publish certain kinds of stories dealing with the PM and his family. That was the purpose behind all the fracas. The judiciary should not upset government's pet projects.

The press should not show the other side of the coin or expose the linkages of a decision or its background. And it certainly should not go on prying into the prime minister and his family's financial dealings.

If the government succeeds in its quest, it would make a farce of the democracy such as the one we have and would render the citizens' nominal rights nugatory. That will be another name for tyranny. It must be resisted and the freedom of the press is among the last ramparts that we must defend and protect as resolutely as we can.