

World Press Freedom Day

Most Communicable
Nation
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BY GHULAM ASGHAR KHAN

Tuesday, May 3, when the journalists around the world were celebrating the World Press Freedom Day, it was another black day in our history when the police in Islamabad and Lahore unnecessarily manhandled journalists.

The worldwide observance of the day was marred by the miscalculated use of force by the police, which in its exuberance of loyalty to the rulers over-reacted with the enlightened journalist community and treated them as a crowd of hoods and created an ugly situation for the government.

The Islamabad police harshly thrashed about three-dozen mediemen, battered their valuable equipment and locked them at Sihala police station. They were alleged to be violating the security rules when they insisted to lead their peaceful procession from the parliament house to the PM house. It was a peaceful rally from all accounts when they were intercepted by the anti-terrorist squad commandos and ordered to disperse immediately.

Their march to PM house was to present a memorandum pressing for their demands which in no stretch of imagination was a terrorist act. What was the wisdom behind this foolish exercise to humiliate the journalists when they were set free after a couple of hours? Either the government gave a wrong signal or the police misinterpreted it in their usual senility.

It did expose the rhetorical oratory of press freedom that is the foundation upon which all the humbug in our governmental system rests. The tragedy of an authoritarian state is that it always regards freedom of press as a crime, and there are no degrees.

The dilemma with a totalitarian ruler is that he cannot become so democratic as to permit a free press. While he could tame the judiciary and terrorise the opposition into silence, it is not easy to curb newspapers because some of them have a tradition of independence.

They can possibly be forced to stop criticism but would not shower uncalled for praise over the governmental failures. Jean Paul Sartre conceives the function of the writer to be the voice of the people. A time comes when the ruling clique comes out of the cover of its false magnanimity and tries to shackle the independent media.

In a similar incident in Lahore, the police attacked the PUJ peaceful rally that was heading for a seminar at the Lahore Press Club. The procession had started from the Dyal Singh Mansion and was intercepted at the Charring Cross, a short distance short of the LPC and roughly handled the journalists just for the heck of it.

Of late it has become customary

muscle flexing. The PUJ sharply reacted to this harshness and termed it as an attack on free journalism and demanded action against the cops who were responsible for the imperious behaviour that converted the "Freedom of Press Day" into a day of mourning.

Freedom of expression and press are amongst the fundamental rights enshrined in the 1973 Constitution. Whither constitution? Instead dissent with the rulers has become culpable offence; media independence and objectivity are still the abhorrent stuff with the rulers. Conformity and obedience continue to be sacrosanct traits while freedom and objectivity are the despised products.

The mediemen who acted according to the dictates of their conscience found themselves being hounded in every manner. The meeting of the standing committee of the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) in Lahore highlighted the official pressure to inhibit publication of special feature regarding a political figure.

It was pointed out that on April 14, the Federal and Provincial Information Ministers and provincial secretary exerted undue pressure to compel newspapers to desist from publishing ads and special supplements on Asif Zardari's arrival in Lahore. Those who gave in to the pressure were patronised while the others were spurned.

There seems to be no positive change in the police attitude, as the newsmen who had gone to cover Zardari's arrival in Lahore were maltreated with impunity by the cops on duty.

From the National Assembly to the common man, people from all walks of life have en masse condemned the police brutality and expressed solidarity with the journalist community which in the face of enormous difficulties and risks keep them abreast with the national and international events in their true perspective when the official electronic and print media is around the clock busy in sermonising the imaginary governmental achievements as true disciples of Goebbels.

All this goes to show how we are in a period of uncalled for police violence that is beyond common sense. It seems to have become a routine muscle flexing by the police department to cause annoyance to the journalists at the cost of government popularity.

The police officials at the spot tried to absolve themselves of all the responsibility by telling the journalists that they did it under orders from the top. Did they mean that the government had ordered beating, intimidation and detention of the journalists? Who is right? Was it the government or the police by itself? We need Prometheus to solve this Sphinx's riddle.

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Of late it has become customary with the Lahore police to unnecessarily harass the journalists and many a time the provincial government had to intervene to pacify the mediamen for the ruthless law enforcement that has become a hallmark of the Lahore metropolitan police.

Over a dozen journalists and a labour party member sustained injuries as a consequence to the police

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The MMA Chief, Qazi Hussain Ahmad has an answer when he said in Lahore that state terrorism on World Press Freedom Day had exposed the real face of the media-friendly military government, and this blatant use of terror against the press in Pakistan once again proved that civil liberties had never been acceptable to military rulers in any form.