**Journalists under threat**

BY I. A . R E H M A N 2020-11-12

THIS year`s report on impunity against journalists facing trial by law in Pakistan, issued the other day by Freedom Network, a widely respected media watchdog, will cause much distress to all those who consider the existence of a strong and independent media essential to good governance and social progress.

The report begins by recalling the regrettable fact that Pakistan continues to be ranked as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists, as more than 140 journalists and media assistants have been killed in the country since 2000. After this introduction the report notes the emergence of a relatively new form of persecution of the media, namely, institution of legal cases against journalists and entangling them in legal battles.

During 2018-2019, the Freedom Network documented 17 cases against journalists for which it could secure complete data. Cases started in 2020 were not taken into consideration as it was thought advisable to allow a one-year period to lapse before determining the seriousness of the challenge. The authors of the report have found the result of analysis not only startling but also shocking. The more significant findings are: Journalists working for the print media are twice more likely to be targets of legal action than their colleagues in the electronic media.

Sindh is a three times riskier region for journalists than any other province or the capital territory.

Most journalists (over one-third of them) are charged with offences under the Penal Code while another one-third are likely to be charged with terrorism, while some others may be tried under electronic crimes or defamation laws.

The most common allegation against journalists is `acting against state institutions` or `defaming state institutions`. Other allegations can be `illegal possession of arms /explosives`, `drug running`, `keeping proscribed literature`, or `harassing citizens` In 15 out of the 17 cases (88.2 per cent) analysed action was initiated by the state or its functionaries.

Those initiating cases often demanded morethan one remedy from journalists. The most common demand was proof of journalists` assertion in their reports, followed by a demand for an apology.

In the two-thirds of the cases in which investigations were completed by the police, only half of them were declared fit for trial. The trial in 60pc of the cases was never concluded, leaving most journalists without a chance to prove their innocence. In over 80pc of the cases in which the trial did conclude, the journalists-accused were found innocent and acquitted. However, 10 out of the 17 cases never reached a conclusion and thus most of the journalists concerned did not receive justice at all.

This study leads to the conclusion that during 2018-2019, the law was used more often than not to harass working journalists with a view to preventing them from offering the people truthful accounts of happenings around them.

This year`s report should be read along with last year`s findings that there was 100pc impunity for killers and zero per cent justice for 33 murdered journalists. There are no signs that the situation has changed for the better.

Both of these reports`, however, cover only part of the journalists` concerns. They do not extend to the crisis confronting the media houses that has been caused by a shrinking of their revenues, discriminationin the distribution ofstate-controlled advertisements, unlawful restrictions on the circulation of some newspapers in certain areas, and other insidious campaigns against the dissidents or vehicles of independent opinion.

The bitter struggle for survival that has been forced on the media as a whole is gravely undermining its capacity to help the rulers govern justly and guide the people to fulfil their unexceptionable responsibilities of responsible citizenship. Unfortunately, the traditions of civil discourse have been undermined to an extent that the expression `the fourth estate` itself has gone out of currency. If there are any people in authority or who have access to it who believe that a responsible and pro-people dispensation is possible without a healthy and independent media, the sooner their minds can be disabused of such outlandish ideas the better for all concerned.The humanitarian dimensions of the media`s economic crisis are much too evident to be discounted.

More than 15,000 journalists and support workers have been rendered jobless, and the process has picked up speed over the past few weeks. Many more journalists have been compelled to accept unbearable cuts in their wages thereby causing a sharp decline and deterioration in their services and lifestyles both.

That this should cause serious concern to the powers that be is self-evident. Like other industries, the media industry deserves a rehabilitation package.

But media is much more than an industry, for it plays a significant role in the dissemination of information, promotion of knowledge, advancement of democratic values and refinement of culture. To ignore it amounts to disregarding a vehicle of political development and sociocultural flowering. A holistic view of the trials and tribulations of the media will clearly bring out the urgency of a full-scale debate in parliament on the need for a high-powered parliamentary commission to examine the media crisis in all of its dimensions, identify the causes and suggest both short-term and long-term remedies.

Tailpiece: The method of crowd management adopted by the Punjab government has obviously been copied from the textbooks of Italian and German dictators of the 20th century. These European dictators used state employees and their so-called volunteer forces to harass and manhandle opponents and dissidents and used methods that were eventually condemned across the globe. The 1(isan demonstrators were subjected to impermissible violence at Lahore`s points of entry. They were dispersed by force and at least two of the injured have died. Afterwards, a mockery of negotiations was staged and an enforced settlement announced.

Such unwarranted and indefensible tactics will shorten the life of the regime faster than all the labours of the opposition. All those advising the government to use such tactics or keeping quiet about these matters can hardly be counted as its friends.

Headline of the month: Pakistan`s economic difficulties caused by the Pakistan Democratic Movement.