**Listening to the press**

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On the occasion of the joint sitting of parliament, a large number of journalists were gathered outside Parliament House recording a protest against the decision of establishing the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PMDA) by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

No doubt, the presence of free and vibrant media is a prominent feature of a democratic society. Fearless journalists are supposed to keep a close eye on the performance of the institutions. Whether it is misuse of government funds or abuse of power, the media is to play a vital role in highlighting such matters. The United Nations has declared freedom of expression a fundamental human right under Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Every year, World Press Freedom Day is observed on May 3 under the auspices of the United Nations. Quaid-e-Azam was also a firm supporter of independent and responsible journalism.

Although freedom of expression is guaranteed under Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan, the practice of restricting journalism in different periods is also a shameful part of our national history. In the past, various laws were enacted to curb press freedom; sometimes fearless and independent journalists were flogged as a punishment; several journalists were pushed behind bars; and many times they were targeted by non-state actors. Even today, a few TV anchorpersons complain that they have been forcibly taken off the air from the TV screen.

The majority of professional journalists in our country are associated with government registered media organisations. While following high journalistic values, they have spent a valuable part of their precious lives in the field of journalism. However, many Youtube channels and news websites, being run by immature and non-professionals, are spreading baseless news for the sake of getting likes, comments and views on social media. Such so-called digital journalists do not consider themselves bound by any rule of law or journalistic ethics.

Recently, Federal Minister for Information and Broadcasting Fawad Chaudhry introduced a proposal to establish a new media regulatory body, the Pakistan Media Development Authority. The proposed institution will regulate all kinds of media including print, electronic and social media. The minister believed that the government's initiative would help in countering fake news and yellow journalism. Similarly, the protection of the rights of working journalists will reportedly be ensured under the said authority. The proposed authority is said to also ensure fair distribution of government advertisements.

However, almost all Pakistani media organisations are interpreting the establishment of the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) as an attack on freedom of the press and have been protesting this decision. These organisations include the All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Pakistan Broadcasters Association, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and other media organisations and networks.

In my view, our journalist community is facing a number of crises that must be addressed on a priority basis. Legitimate media houses are suffering from financial problems and on the other hand, those who spread fake news on the internet are not only making good money through online advertisements but also discrediting the sacred profession of journalism. That is why, the Supreme Court of the United States, Washington has declared that not everyone who creates a YouTube channel can be considered a journalist and part of the news media.

While the government seems committed to protecting the rights of all genuine media equally under the PMDA, the Pakistani journalists' community has faced very bitter experiences in the past. Today, it is time to call a round-table conference to take all the journalists' organisations into confidence. The government must listen to the legitimate demands of journalists for reaching a consensus on controversial clauses of the PMDA. Only after a series of fruitful discussions with journalists' organisations and civil society representatives must the proposed bill be presented to parliament for approval.

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