**The mighty pen**

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Political dissent implies disagreement, criticism or protest against coercive decisions, unjust laws or imposed policies. It holds enormous power in times of occupation and oppression. By taking risks to criticize repressive governments or the powerful, journalists, poets and writers work towards freedom of the oppressed.

Engaging peacefully with these dissenting voices is constructive and leads to the strengthening of democratic principles, undoing injustices and social transformation. Dissent has been used as a political weapon in anti-colonial movements and against autocracies around the world. Pakistan itself was born of dissent and broke up on repressing the same.

In a country where social media platforms like X are already blocked and internet outages are a normal occurrence, the recently passed Punjab Defamation Bill, seemingly crafted to protect public officials, is a continuation of repressive laws and measures. It further compromises even the semblance of democratic integrity if anyone dare claim it.

This bill allows punitive measures without proof of actual damage. Its vague definition of journalists and the print media has been extended to the digital realm. This enlarges its repressive reach to the general public as a tool of coercion and political repression. The bill has been rejected by journalists and civil society groups.

This is in no way an advocacy of speech being unfettered. However, laws to regulate it should be inclusive. They should not be tailored to be a whip in the hands of the state but be crafted keeping in mind the constitutional obligations ensuring freedom of expression.

Our governance cycles have been anything but exemplary. Out of power, our rulers are the champions of freedom of expression. In power they are its biggest detractors. A May 2024 country report on Pakistan released by the International Federation of Journalists is as telling as it is appalling.

It says: “Over 300 journalists and bloggers were affected this year (2023-24) by state coercion and targeted, including dozens of arrested journalists and nearly 60 served with legal notices or summons for their journalism work or personal dissent online. At least eight were charged for alleged sedition, terrorism and incitement to violence; all serious charges carrying lengthy sentences and even the death penalty”.

The Human Rights Watch World Report 2024 too is critical of the Pakistan government’s policies. Elaine Pearson, its Asia Director says: “The Pakistan government has failed to take adequate measures to assist the millions of Pakistanis who have been pushed into poverty this past year. The authorities appeared more focused on muzzling dissenting voices than protecting the rights of everyone in Pakistan. They increased pressure on media outlets for perceived criticism of the government. Journalists reported government intimidation, harassment and surveillance.”

It is a matter of great concern that in these five months of 2024, at least five journalists have been murdered in Pakistan. A Pakistan Press Foundation report speaks of at least 72 journalists and media professionals having been attacked during 2022-23, resulting in two deaths. This sanction of impunity questions the very legitimacy of government while pointing to the decay of the system. It is the hallmark of a tyranny that those in power enforce absolute compliance.

During British colonial rule in the Subcontinent, restrictions on freedom of speech and expression were imposed and laws regarding sedition, hate speech and defamation were introduced to enforce the same. Using and crafting laws on the same lines by former colonies is what scholars’ term colonial continuity, albeit with a change of masters.

Famed German playwright Bertolt Brecht, along with many other members of Germany’s literary and artistic community, fled Germany after Hitler came to power. Known for his plays against fascism, Brecht’s Lullaby has Mother Courage addressing her son: “My son, you must listen to your mother when she tells you, it’ll be worse than the plague, the life you’ve got in store. But don’t think I brought you into the world so painfully, to lie down under it and meekly ask for more.”

King Louis XIV of France thought he was the only one responsible for governing France. A quote attributed to him had him claiming in the parliament of Paris: L’etat, c’est moi – I am the state. In Pakistan, this mindset of what was once called the divine right of kings prevails. However, autocracies, despite their veneer of power, are plagued by insecurities.

Why else would a frail Habib Jalib be seen as a challenge with his ‘Dastoor’ chorused even in protest movements of today? Why else would the rendition of Faiz sahib’s ‘hum daikhain gay’ evoke frenzied reactions by the make-belief mighty and powerful even today?

Ghassan Kanafani was a famous Palestinian resistance writer and revolutionary politician. At the age of 36, he was assassinated by Mossad. The assassination was carried out thinking it would fatally weaken the Palestinian liberation struggle. Fifty-two years on, Kanafani’s glorious legacy prevails while Israel has been relegated to a genocidal and pariah state. One of Kanafani’s sublime phrases seen on the remaining walls of Gaza continues to warn tyrannies across the world – ‘Bodies fall but ideas endure”.

Throughout the ages, pen and the sword have been adversaries. The sword demands total compliance; the pen – abducted, tortured and coerced – refuses to oblige, sometimes even till death. The outcome of this duel was, once and for all, immortalized by playwright and novelist Edward Lytton in his political play Richelieu with the line: “The pen is mightier than the sword”. It has been so in the most oppressive of times; it shall prevail in all tyrannies to come.

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