**Tumultuous Times**

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There’s a lot that needs to be understood in the signing of the Official Secrets Act. Those who may not believe in it or call it the latest onslaught on fundamental freedoms would not be alone. For as long as one can remember, those living under the flags of the free world have been complaining to their respective governments about the rationale behind pushing the gauntlet down their throats. But no matter how nasty the jokes or louder the uproar, even the likes of Great Britain, the torchbearer of modern civilisation and its progressive values, saw it better to draw some boundaries and stick to them. Writing closer to home, the now-retired National Assembly had, upon reaching the finishing line, decided to pass an amendment to the Official Secrets Act 1923. In essence, it would make it a criminal offence to publish or disclose protected information that could prejudice the national interests and assist, directly or indirectly, a foreign power. Anyone who commits an unauthorised disclosure would be severely punished for up to five years. That the Official Secrets Act 1923 had its roots deep within the culture of secrecy and control was instantaneously pointed to by the opposition. The assent accorded to the Amendment Bill by President Arif Alvi was nothing short of an astonishing surprise for those counting on his support in this battle. Now that the bill had been hammered into the law of the land, the counter-terrorism wing of the Federal Investigation Unit lodged a complaint against former foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi for allegedly conspiring to use a secret diplomatic cable to scuttle a no-confidence vote against the then premier Imran Khan. On Saturday, Mr Qureshi was arrested from his residence in Islamabad to be booked under Section 5 of the Official Secrets Act.

Another arrest took place in Islamabad where PTI stalwart and former federal minister Asad Umer were arrested from Islamabad. Also nominated in the FIR, incarcerated PTI chief Imran Khan, is also being interrogated over the diplomatic cable that reportedly went “missing” from his custody.

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As if the enigmatic cypher saga was not enough to make waves all over, a startling revelation by none other than the country’s president about his role in greenlighting the said legislation has further exacerbated the political turmoil in the country. After sitting on a crucial piece of information for hours, honourable President r Arif Alvi decided to launch a rocket launcher from his own personal Twitter handle and seek forgiveness from Allah for the consequences of a domino he “did not” push. Categorically denying giving his assent to the bills amending the OSA, he admitted the nefarious foul play by members of his staff. Between legal eagles calling for an urgent investigation against allegations of forgery and subterfuge (where the president is asked to “immediately sack all those involved)” and an elaborate discussion on what Article 75 of the constitution entails, a lot has transpired in the last few hours in this country. Still, one thing is quite certain: Having stayed in the office for a significant amount of time, neither this bill nor the procedure of legislation was a new exercise for him. He had approved a long list of bills and sent back many others with his observations to the legislature on numerous occasions before. Army Act Bill was received in the Presidency on August 2, 2023, and the Official Secret Act Bill was received on August 8, 2023. If the said instructions had, indeed, been passed to members of his staff and he repeatedly inquired about them, why was no concern shown for no such progress being reported in the media? If he had no control over his staff, he should have made the same tweet on an earlier occasion. Therefore, this air of mysterious obscurity that becomes all the more critical because of his “extraordinary” position in the given scenario does not allow him an easy escape. We may talk about how stiffling or all-encompassing the bill is on a later date, but today, offices cannot be run by throwing hard passes to the Divine’s court. By choosing to discredit his own support system, he has, by extension, opened himself up to a long list of discomforting questions. Tumultuous times lay ahead.

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