

# Stifling of a Courageous Voice

**N**AJAM Sethi, the outspoken and courageous editor of THE FRIDAY TIMES, Islamabad, was dragged out of his bed, beaten up and abducted from his house on 8 May last by the police. Later the government admitted that Sethi was held by ISI for his alleged involvement with Indian intelligence. Only after eight days was Sethi able to see his wife, and that only after an order from the Supreme Court. Sethi's crime was to have given a speech in India criticising the present state of affairs, a speech that he has given on several occasions in Pakistan, including at its Defence College.

This was the latest of a series of attacks on independent journalists in Pakistan. We register our solidarity with the struggling journalists of Pakistan and express our strong condemnation at the attack on independent journalists who are exposing the failures of the government. We think that a threat to press freedom in any part of South Asia is a threat to press freedom everywhere and as such raise our voice in protest. We demand that Najam Sethi and all other journalists be released immediately and the right of every journalist to write freely be restored immediately. We want to remind the government of Pakistan that democracy stands threatened when free press is threatened.

Printed below is the full text of the speech Najam Sethi delivered at the India International Centre on April 30 this year and the ensuing question-and-answer session, and also *The Death of Democracy*, an article by Zahid Hussain which was printed in the May, 1999 issue of the NEWSLINE of Karachi.

## Pakistan on the Eve of the New Millennium

The speech that invited the wrath of the Pakistan government upon Najam Sethi, editor of *The Friday Times*

**Mr I K Gujral, Prof Satish Kumar, ladies and gentlemen,**  
I am honoured to be here among such a distinguished gathering of Indian policy makers, scholars, senior journalists, analysts and keen Pakistan watchers. I will keep my lecture short so that we can spend time on questions and answers and benefit from an informal dialogue at the end of the lecture. I assume that most people here today are broadly familiar with political developments in Pakistan.

At the start, I should like to inform you that the gist of this lecture has been made at various Pakistani forums already. Indeed, the part relating to Pakistan was published almost word for word in my newspaper as an editorial some months ago. So it should not come as a surprise to my Pakistani compatriots here and at home. I do not practice double-standards, as will be evident in due course. I am deeply and passionately concerned about what is going on in my country and I am not afraid of speaking the truth at any forum in my quest for posing the problem.

Pakistan's socio-political environment is in the throes of a severe multi-dimensional crisis. I refer to six major crises which confront Pakistan on the eve of the new millennium:

1. the crisis of identity and ideology
2. the crisis of law, constitution and political system
3. the crisis of economy
4. the crisis of foreign policy
5. the crisis of civil society
6. the crisis of national security

These crises haven't suddenly emerged out of the blue. I have been talking and writing about the inexorable germination and development of these crises for many years. Now they are all upon Pakistan simultaneously, with greater or lesser intensity.

1. The crisis of identity and ideology refers to the fact that after fifty years, Pakistanis are still unable to collectively agree upon who we are as a nation, where we belong, what we believe in and where we want to go. In terms of our identity and our demands, are we Pakistanis first and then Punjabis, Sindhis, Baloch, Pathan or Mohajirs or vice versa? Do we belong — in the sense of our future bearings and anchors — to South Asia or do we belong to the Middle-East? In terms of ideology, are we Muslims in a moderate Muslim state or Muslims in an orthodox Islamic state? In other words, are we supposed to be like Saudi Arabia or Iran — which are orthodox Islamic states — or are we supposed to be like Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Algeria etc., which are supposed to be liberal Muslim states? And if none of these fits the bill, what then? Whose version and vision of Islam do we follow? The Quran and Sunnah, say some people. Well, if the Quid-i-Azam and Allama Iqbal both had their own interpretations of how the Quran and Sunnah were to be applied in the real life of a modern state like Pakistan, the problem has been compounded by the myriad interpretations of their interpretations of an Islamic state. And the problem doesn't end there.

The Jamaat-i-Islami, the Sipah-i-Sahaba, the Jamiat-i-Ulema-i-Islam and countless other Islamic parties and Islamic sects all have their so-called exclusive Islamic axes to grind. So there is no agreement, no consensus on this issue. Indeed, there is so much tension, violence and confusion associated with this issue that it has begun to hurt Pakistan considerably. It has assumed the form of an identity and ideological crisis.

2. The crisis of law, constitution and political system refers to the fact that (a) there is not one set of laws in Pakistan but two — the Anglo-Saxon tradition which we inherited from the past and the Islamic tradition which we have foisted in recent times. Most Pakistanis are trained and experienced in the former but some Pakistanis hanker for the latter. The two traditions co-exist in an environment of fear, corruption and hypocrisy. Increasingly, they seem to be at serious odds with each other, as for example on the question of how to treat interest rates in a modern capitalist economy, what status to grant to universal human and fundamental rights, how to treat women and minorities, etc.

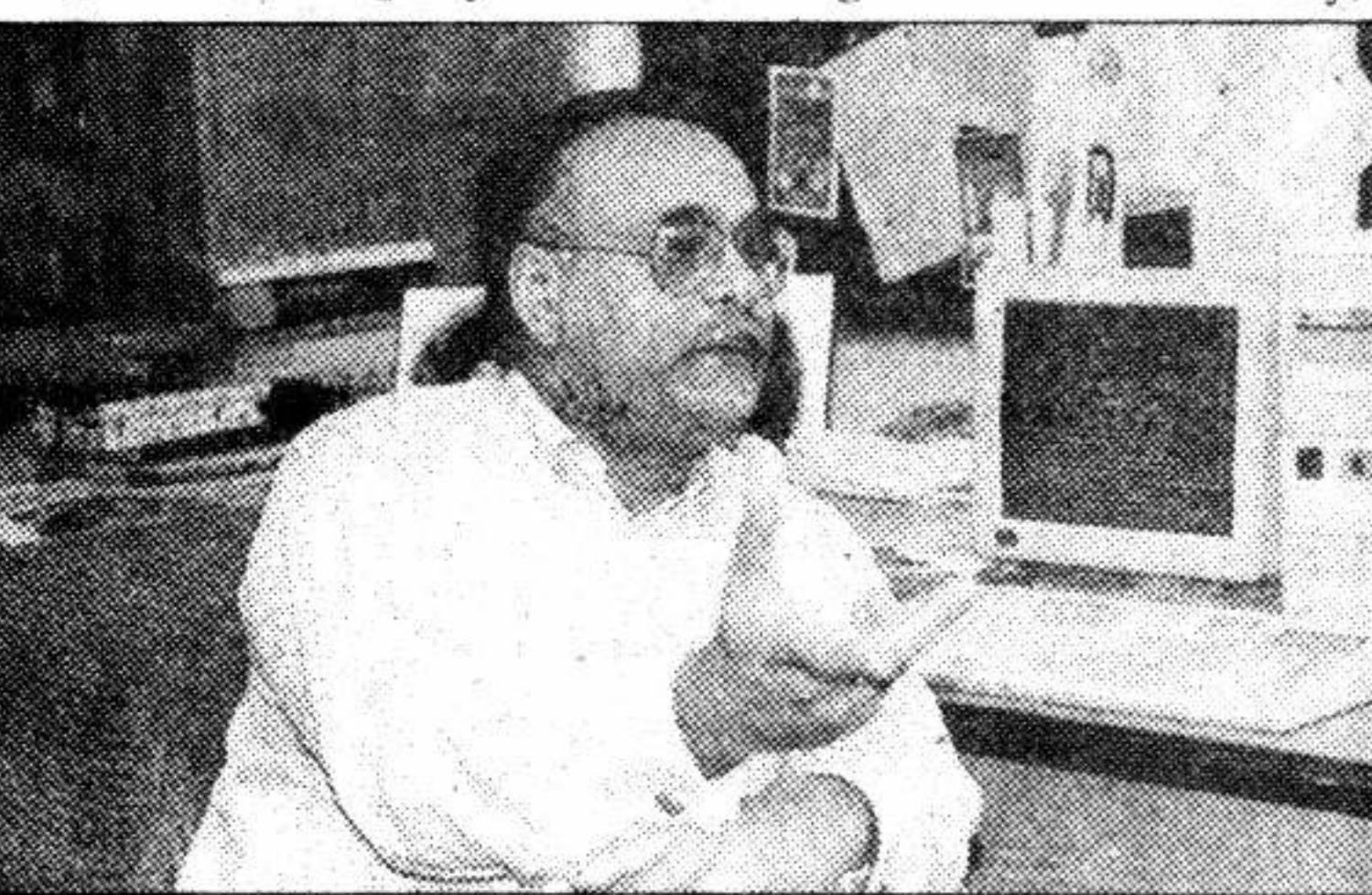
b) The crisis is also reflected in the nature and extent to which the constitution has been mangled by democrats and dictators, lawyers and judges, all alike. The reference here is to several highly controversial constitutional amendments, past and pending; but it is also to highly contentious, even suspect, decisions by the courts acting as handmaidens to the executive; and to the motivations and actions of certain judges in pursuit of personal ambition, pecuniary gains or political advancement. Indeed, many lawmakers do not obey the law and some of our judges are perceived in contemptuous terms by the public.

c) The crisis is manifest, above all, in the rapid public disenchantment with the political system of so-called democracy. Democracy is supposed to be about the supremacy of the law and constitution, about the necessity of checks and balances between the different organs of the state, about the going accountability of public office holders, and so on. But it has degenerated into a system based exclusively on elections which return deaf and dumb public representatives to rubber stamp parliaments. So we have the form of democracy but not its essence or content. We have the rituals of democracy but not its soul. I don't know what this system is, but it is certainly not democracy.

3. The crisis of economy refers to the fact that a) Pakistan is well and truly bankrupt — indeed if the international community had not bailed out Pakistan recently, the country would have succumbed to financial default. b) Worse, we appear to have no means left by which to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps without a massive convulsion in state and society. This is

manifest in our total dependence on foreign assistance. Indeed, the crisis of economy is so severe that it has begun to impinge on our sovereignty as an independent state and is eroding our traditional construction of national security. The economic crisis is reflected in a crisis of growth, a crisis of distribution, a crisis of production and a crisis of finance. It is threatening massive and violent dislocations in state and society.

4. The crisis of foreign policy is now coming home to roost. We are not only friendless in the region in which we live, we are being blackballed and blackmailed by the international community to which we are indebted up to our ears. If foreign policy is supposed to be rooted in and geared to domestic objectives and concerns we have reversed the order of things. Our foreign policy seems to have a life of its own. It dictates our domestic policies rather than the other way round. This is why there is no long term consistency or strength in it. One day, we say that Kashmir is the "core issue" without whose prior settlement none of the other contentious issues with India can be resolved". The next day, we say that progress on the other issues can be made without a settlement of the Kashmir issue. One day we say that Kashmir is a multilateral issue, the next day we emphasise the urgency of bilateral dialogue with India. One day,



Najam Sethi: facing the government's wrath

we are quick to recognise the Taliban government in Kabul and exhort the other nations of the world to follow suit; the next day we give our blessings to the idea of a broad-based, multi-ethnic, multi-religious "consensus" government in Kabul. One day Iran is our historic and strategic friend, the next day we stand accused by Iran of unmentionable actions. One day, Central Asia is billed as the promised land. The next day, it is arrayed against us in hostile terms. One day, the United States is our Godfather. The next day it is the ugly American. The worst has now come to pass. For fifty years we worried about the threat on our eastern borders with India. Today we are anxious about our western front with Iran and Afghanistan.

5. The crisis of civil society is demonstrated in many ways. In increasingly low turnout for elections. In continuing deterioration of law and order. In rising sectarianism, ethnicity & regionalism. In the breakdown of civil utilities and amenities. In the erosion of the administrative system. In violence and armed conflict. In mass criminalisation and alienation of the people. In a rising graph of disorders, suicides, drug abuse, rape, kidnappings and outright terrorism. The rise of criminal and religious mafias, kabza groups, extra-judicial killings etc. testify to the breakdown of social connections and civil compacts between the Pakistani state and the Pakistani people.

6. These crises have all culminated into a severe crisis of national security. Pakistan's political system, its political leadership, its structure of law and constitution, its administrative framework, its economic stagnation, its ideological hypocrisy and its friendless foreign policy are no longer tenable. They have all contributed to a comprehensive erosion of National Security. If the tide is not reversed quickly, it will engulf Pakistan in its wake. Indeed, the argument that Pakistan is a "failing state" made by some people is based on perceptions of this multi-dimensional crisis.

7. So, if Pakistanis know what the hell is going on, and if Pakistanis know where the hell they are going, the question remains: how the hell do Pakistanis get out of this hell? 8. This question has two parts. First, what sort of agendas are required to be implemented to get out of this hell? Second, who will implement such agendas?

9. The answer to the first question is simple enough. Or at least it is simple enough for me. I ask my fellow Pakistanis to look at each of the crises referred to above and then I demand that the factors which have led to the crisis should be swiftly addressed. Let us take each of the crises and remark on how to resolve the crisis.

a) Crisis of ideology: In my view, there is only one modern day ideology over whose application there can be bitter or divisive controversy and which will be acceptable to all Pakistanis, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, region, ethnicity, sect, etc. And that is the ideology of economic growth, the ideology of full employment, the ideology of distributive justice and social welfare. I say Pakistan should make this ideology the ideology of

the state and thereby bury all false consciousness and false ideologies.

b) Crisis of Law, Constitution and Political System: I say Pakistan must revamp the political system and revise the Constitution so that the political system and the constitution are made to serve the people below instead of the corrupt elites above.

c) Crisis of Economy: I say that the Pakistani state should honour its international contracts; enforce its domestic loan repayments; tax the rich; dispossess the corrupt; live within its means; vitalise its human resources; export the value of its scientific talents; establish and enforce a genuine private-public partnership in which the private sector produces efficiently and the public sector regulates effectively. d) Crisis of civil society: I say enforce the rule of law; disarm society; disband militias; decentralise decision-making and power; establish accountability; protect minorities and women; create social nets for the disadvantaged, poor and destitute; provide decentralised and quick justice

e) Crisis of Foreign Policy: I say make friends not masters or enemies; bury cold-war hatchets; renounce post-cold-war jihad; negotiate terms of trade not territorial ambitions; redefine strategic depth to mean emphasis on internal will rather than external space; f) Crisis of National Security: I say redefine security to mean not only military defence but also economic vitality, social cohesion and international respect; and I say Pakistan should determine its minimal optimal defence deterrent but shun an arms race.

10. The answer to the second question — namely, who will pursue and implement this agenda — is difficult only for one reason: I cannot see even one leader or institution in Pakistan who or which personifies National Power and has the three virtues or elements which are required to get Pakistan out of this mess. These are: vision, courage and integrity. The vision to chart a particular course; the courage to implement it ruthlessly; and the integrity to ensure that it doesn't get derailed. My hope, of course, is that someone or some institution will throw up such leadership in time to come. My fear is that if this doesn't happen soon enough, it may be too late later.

I would now like to turn briefly to one factor that impinges greatly on Pakistan's past, present and future, one which should concern all of you who are assembled here today. That is Pakistan's relationship with India. In one crucial sense, India remains a determining factor vis a vis Pakistan. The Pakistani state has come to be fashioned largely in response to perceived and propagated, real and imagined threats to its national security from India. The mentality and outlook of the Pakistani state is therefore that of a historically besieged state. That is why conceptions of national security, defined in conventional military terms, dominate the Pakistani state's thinking on many issues. Indeed, that is why state outlook dominates government policies. That is why Pakistan's foreign policy runs its domestic policy rather than the other way round. That is why Pakistan's economy is hostage to Pakistan's cold war conceptions of "national security" rather than being an integral part of it. That is why Pakistan is more a state-nation rather than a nation-state. This has had far-reaching implications for the lack of development of a sustainable and stable democratic political culture in Pakistan.

Indeed, and more critically, it has directly spawned extra-state institutions espousing Islamic fundamentalism and jihad. And it is these forces which are undermining the compact between the state and people of Pakistan, thereby adversely impacting on political discourse in the country. Pakistan's obsession with India hurts Pakistan deeply. But the roots of this obsession cannot be shrugged away by India. Indeed, India may be said to be the root cause of Pakistan's insecurity. Apart from pre-partition history, there is the fact of a great injustice done to Pakistan by India over Kashmir and the dismemberment of Pakistan in which India played a critical and leading role. For precisely this reason, one of the fallouts of this obsession is the decade long, low-intensity conflict in Kashmir. Another is the tit-for-tat nuclear and missile tests by Pakistan and its refusal to sign a no-first-strike agreement with India which in turn means that Pakistan cannot get a no-war pact from India.

In this way, if Pakistan's past is umbilically linked to that of India, its future cannot but be shaped by India's future, as well as have an impact on it. If the rise of fundamentalist Islam threatens Pakistan's body-politic, India cannot expect to escape its negative fallout. If a nuclear arsenal is assembled in Pakistan, India's security cannot be vouchsafed by all the nuclear weapons at its disposal. If Pakistan fails as a nation-state and becomes a rogue regime marked by social anarchy and upheaval, India's army will not be able to contain its disruptive and destabilising impact. If Pakistan is drawn into an arms race with India, the logic of the situation will fuel the sources of conflict between the two countries rather than provide security to either country.

Of course, this does not mean that India should constantly look over its shoulder while seeking to determine its own national security policies. But it does mean that India cannot ever be a great power or great nation if its own backyard is seething with resentment and turmoil. Indeed, as long as India's quest for great powerdom is based on its strategy of military outreach, it is bound to be thwarted in its ambitions by tit-for-tat Pakistan. Therefore India will be recognised as a great power in the new millennium not on the basis of its numerical military superiority in the region but by the extent to which the countries



of South Asia, including Pakistan, are economically interdependent on each other and take their lead independent of super powers. A pre-requisite for this is that India should make enduring peace with Pakistan on principled and honourable terms and resolve the Kashmir dispute, thereby helping the forces of civil society in Pakistan to fashion a new state which is subservient to the Pakistani nation instead of the other way round.

By way of concluding, I should just like to remind everyone one lesson of modern history: vibrant and stable democracies are less likely to go to war than authoritarian states which live and survive on the basis or threat of war. Thank you very much for your patience. I would be happy to take your questions now.

## Question and Answer

**Question: If Pakistan is in such a crisis, why should the Kashmiris want to join it?**

**Najam Sethi (NS):** That is a question which you Indians should ask the Kashmiris. But you know what they will say, that is why you don't ask this question of them. At any rate, if 100 million people in Pakistan are in a bad way, over 400 million people in India are worse off. So let us not try to score points over each other. Let us try and address the real issues.

**Q: Will Pakistan accept the LOC as an international border?**  
**NS:** No, never. It is only in India's interest to legitimise the status quo. We want to change it because it is illegitimate.

**Q: Is the Lahore Summit a historic event?**

**NS:** The Lahore Summit will only go down in history if it is an anti-history event, if it succeeds in burying the history of the last 50 years. But that is the great challenge. And this is not the first time that the ball is in India's court. In 1989, both countries agreed in Islamabad to resolve the Siachen dispute. An agreement was drafted and settled. But then Rajiv Gandhi went back to India and resiled from it. Again, in 1997, Nawaz Sharif and I K Gujral were said to have made a "historic breakthrough." Eight working groups on eight outstanding disputes, including Kashmir, were supposed to be set up. But India resiled from setting up the Kashmir working group some months later. This time, Nawaz Sharif and Atal Behari Vajpayee have agreed to the same agenda as in 1997. Will India start discussing Kashmir seriously with a view to finding a solution?

On Pakistan's side, this is the best opportunity for progress because Nawaz Sharif has gone out of his way to start the dialogue by implicitly making two informal concessions: there is no mention of Kashmir as the "core" issue in the Lahore declaration and there is no reference to the UN resolutions. This means that Pakistan is prepared to start talking with India over all issues simultaneously, something it was not prepared to do for many years. So the ball is in India's court yet again. Unless India makes an enduring and honourable settlement with Pakistan over Kashmir, there will be no peace in the sub-continent. If this dialogue doesn't take off, a great opportunity will be lost. No PM other than Nawaz Sharif could have gone so far, so quickly, readily up to India. Will India reciprocate?

**Q: Why doesn't Pakistan accept a no-first-strike agreement with India?**

**NS:** Pakistan's conventional defence capabilities have been greatly reduced since the Americans cut off all assistance to Pakistan in 1990. Its reliance on the nuclear deterrent is therefore all the greater. That is why India should be cautioned about considering "hot-pursuit" into Pakistani territory. Our retaliation would be swift and massive. My question to all of you is: why doesn't India agree to a no-war pact with Pakistan if its intentions are honourable?

**Q: Is Nawaz Sharif trying to Islamise Pakistan via the Shariah Bill?**

**NS:** No. The 15th amendment is a horrendous piece of pending legislation. It has nothing to do with Islam. Its sole purpose is to make Nawaz Sharif an absolute dictator. If that amendment is passed, it will lead to bitter strife and instability which will worsen the crises I have been talking about.

Courtesy: Himal Magazine of Nepal/SAPU

## The Death of Democracy

by Zahid Hussain

that the government used Sethi's comments in Delhi to build up a false case against him. The way Sethi's house was ransacked and the summary manner in which he was kidnapped by the ISI indicates that there is no respect for law or due process in the country and the proverbial midnight knock is being freely used to silence dissent. The series of attacks on journalists and midnight knocks are the onset of totalitarianism. The arrest of journalists also reflects the government's unwillingness to accept any dissent," says senior journalist Maseeha Lodhi.

The campaign against the press is a part of the Sharif government's objective of turning the country into an authoritarian state with fascist overtones, run by a family dictatorship. Since he returned to power 30 months ago, Sharif's main endeavour has been to accumulate all power in his own hands, regardless of the destruction of state institutions and civil society. He has already tamed the judiciary and the military through intrigues and manipulation and the federation now exists only on paper.

The smaller provinces have been practically disenfranchised and the Sharif family and a small coterie from Lahore

control the destiny of the country. The rule of law is in shreds as the FIA and other law enforcement agencies feel free to harass and detain those who fall foul of the government without any legal warrant. The number of alleged criminals and political activists killed in police custody has reached an all-time high. According to local and international organisations, Pakistan under a "democratic" government is now among the countries with the worst human rights records.

The Pakistani press has been under siege since the Sharif government returned to power in 1997. But the situation took a turn for the worse earlier this year when the administration clamped down on the Jang group after it refused to comply with its demand to sack some editors and senior journalists. Other publications also faced threats and intimidation for criticising government policies. Hussain Haqqani, a columnist and politician, was arrested, ostensibly on corruption charges, because of his critical writings. The series of recent actions against newspapers and illegal detention of journalists has confirmed the worst fears of state terrorism against the press.

As part of its move to chain the press, the Sharif government plans to introduce a Press Council Act and a new Press and Publications Ordinance. The proposed press laws will drastically curtail press freedom and give the administration sweeping powers to take action against any publications which transgress the laid down framework. Under the new laws, the press cannot criticise the army, the constitution, or any friendly country. It gives sweeping powers to the administration to stop publication of any newspaper or magazine accused of inciting people against the government. The new law also proposes to set up a six-member press council which will have the powers of a high court and may give any journalist a jail sentence for non-compliance. If enforced, these laws will make the press totally subservient to the government.

The government's exploitation of religion for its own political ends has strengthened the obscurantist and reactionary forces in the country. The marked increase in crimes against women and religious and ethnic minorities is largely a consequence of Sharif's regressive policies and politics of expediency. Human and women's rights activists even accuse

the government of patronising the perpetrators of such crimes. The administration's failure to arrest the murderers of Samia Imran gives credence to these allegations. The latest campaign against the press is obviously meant to silence any voice exposing the government's retrogressive policies.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's latest move to enforce a draconian anti-terrorism law has raised the fear of a clampdown on the opposition, trade unions and the press. Opposition leaders have described the law as the blackest promulgated by a civil administration. The ordinance empowers the government to set up speedy trial courts to try not only the persons involved in crimes ranging from murder to kidnapping, but also those accused of "creating civil commotion or intention to violate law."

The new law bans strikes, graffiti, agitation and any publication which "creates internal disturbance." Any violation of the law is punishable with seven years rigorous imprisonment and a fine. Independent observers fear that the charge of creating civil commotion may be used against political opponents and even the press for criticising the gov-

ernment's policies. They fear that the law will be used to victimise political workers, trade union activists and student bodies by framing them on frivolous charges of writing anti-government slogans on walls, pasting handbills or calling for strikes.

The presidential order enforcing the law, which came on a national holiday, caught everyone by surprise. Interestingly, the government chose to impose the controversial law through an ordinance despite its overwhelming majority in the National Assembly. Conveniently enough, Nawaz Sharif was visiting Kosovo refugee camps in Albania when the announcement came.

"We fought the tyrannies of martial law with courage and braved dark days, but the entire nation is again being dragged into the darkness through the enactment of black laws," said Aitzaz Ahsan, leader of the opposition in the Senate. "By blocking non-violent means, the government is inciting people to resort to violence to defend their political rights," he added. Most analysts agree that the controversial law will further erode the powers of parliament and reduce its status to that of a rubber stamp assembly.

Significantly, the anti-terrorism law was promulgated as the opposition Pakistan People's Party announced the launch of what it described as a "save Pakistan" march from Sindh next month. The draco-

nian law is bound to further fuel alienation and discontent in Sindh, which has effectively been disenfranchised. It is very obvious that governor's rule was imposed in the province to prevent a non-Muslim League government coming into power.

There is growing resentment in both urban and rural Sindh against the political and economic domination of the Punjab. The conviction of Benazir Bhutto and her impending disqualification from the National Assembly has created a very volatile situation which threatens the country's existence as a federation. "Sindh is being treated as a colony and even the police officers are appointed by the centre," contends a senior police officer. Others complain that Sindh has suffered most from cuts in development expenditure and is on the brink of financial bankruptcy as it has not been given its due share of funds by the federal government.

The creeping militarisation of civil institutions has also raised serious questions about the government's intentions. There is an increasing perception that Sharif is using the military to strengthen his own powers. This apprehension is quite damaging for the army and is likely to add to political discontent in the smaller provinces. The use of intelligence agencies to suppress opposition and to intimidate journalists has revived memories of repressive military

A BBC television crew visiting Pakistan to make a documentary exploring charges of corruption against the Sharif family had unexpected company — following in its footsteps were intelligence personnel who had been given the job of keeping tabs on the team and their contacts in the country. The theme of the 40-minute long programme, which is expected to be telecast next month, was enough to send a hypersensitive government into fits. In a desperate attempt to block the filming, the administration resorted to all kinds of coercive means. First of all, gumshoes from the Intelligence Bureau picked up Lahore journalist MAK Lodhi, who had been helping the BBC team, from his residence. He was released only after being grilled for several days. Then the car of another senior journalist, Imtiaz Alam, was picked up from his residence and set on fire.

Not content with these blatant acts of violence, the information ministry then launched a propaganda campaign through official news agencies against the BBC, accusing it of biased reporting and "projecting a negative image of Pakistan." In an amusing statement, the ministry, headed by Mushahid Hussain, himself a former editor, read into the programme a conspiracy by the western media to malign and destabilise post-nuclear Pakistan.

Never before had a govern-

ment in Pakistan displayed such a paranoid attitude towards the foreign press. The reason for its panic was obvious, as the administration could not refute the widespread charges of corruption in the country's ruling family. The harassment of journalists was not an isolated event. It was apparent that the desperate action against them was taken as a part of the government's resolve to stifle the independent press and any voice of dissent, paving the way for totalitarian rule.

Intimidation of the BBC crew was followed by perhaps one of the most sordid episodes in recent years. In the dead of the night on May 8, scores of intelligence personnel stormed the Lahore residence of Najam Sethi, the editor of *The Friday Times*, dragged him out of his bedroom and whisked him to an unknown place in a waiting car. The intruders, who did not have any warrant of arrest, reportedly locked Sethi's wife, Jugnu Mosin, in a bathroom. A few hours later, a statement issued by an unidentified federal government spokesman disclosed that the IPT editor had been detained by the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) for interrogation due to his alleged links with the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The statement also accused him of making anti-state comments at a seminar in New Delhi last month. This is a ridiculous allegation, made against one of the most well-known Pakistani journalists. It is quite apparent