forum

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discusses

FREE THE PRESS

It is now over eleven years since the lights went out all over Pakistan and freedom of the press was unceremoniously buried. Since then the gibbets erected by the Ayub Raj have taken a heavy toll on those papers and journalists who had the temerity to doubt the Great Khan's divine mission to rule Pakistan. The *Pakistan Times*, *Outlook*, *Imroze* and *Songbad* were the most spectacular casualties of this assault. But a much larger number of papers have had to tolerate the dagger thrusts at their integrity during this dark decade.

A major campaign against the press was reinforced by the hated Press and Publications Ordinance. Visible demonstrations of the costs of dissent reinforced by the explicit message contained in the Press Ordinance, imposed its own discretion on potential dissenters. As a result for a full decade the Pakistani public was served by unreadable papers which vied with each other to extol the imaginary virtues of this corrupt despot.

The decade took a heavy toll of the journalists. The combination of bribes and bullying used by the regime to keep the journalists in line drove out the ablest talents at incalculable cost to journalistic standards. Those who survived did so at the expense of severe damage to their professional integrity and personal dignity. It was no surprise that journalists played an active role in the movement against Ayub in order to recuperate their lost prestige.

The journalist's role was made more intolerable because of the pressures on the press owners. The Press Ordinance was a perpetual threat to the survival and even personal security of the owners. Whilst many owners were quite happy to serve the regime and enjoy its favours others were forced to curb their journalists to protect their investments or face destruction. This self-imposed regimentation was merely reinforced by the Press Trust, which institutionalised servility to the regime.

This onslaught on the press and the working journalists was inevitable. Suppression of press freedom was a potent weapon in the arsenal of a corrupt and unpopular regime. A self-anointed monarch who sees himself as a divinely appointed messiah sent to save a 100 million people from themselves cannot afford to have his divinity questioned. Such a ruler cannot countenance criticism or allow truth to undermine the bases of his power. As a result a skilfully woven veil of lies had to be invented for this tyrant by his sycophantic courtiers to conceal the rot within and to project the fabricated image of a paradise on earth. Any choice of the truth intruding into this world of fantasy had to be ruthlessly excluded by controlling the press and supressing it, were it to refuse to be controlled. An army of diligent bureaucrats skilfully led by a home-grown Goebbels aquired new skills in blacking out inconvenient news and rewriting facts tailored to the current obsessions of their master.

The Raj is dead but its legacy unfortunately lives on in the shape of the Press Ordinance, the Press Trust and the sovereignty of the bureaucrat. Unfettered journalism is still the vision of the future. The political threat from the Ordinance to the press owners' investment as much as apprehension about the unpredictable temper of the present administration still keeps the press on a tight rein. All writing is done with an eye over the shoulder and dissenting journalists still live in fear of the midnight knock on the door.

The time has come to free the Press. The Ordinance must be irrevocably removed from the statute books, the Trust broken up. Whoever wants to establish a paper must be able to do so without satisfying some power-obsessed bureaucrat of his patriotism and *bona fide*. Press advice about what is fit to be printed can no longer remain the whim of the administration. If the press prints sedition or treason, there are established courts of law to try what are already statutory offences. The idea of bureaucrats acting as both prosecutor and judge over the freedom of Pakistanis to write and read what they want continues as an intolerable affront to the self respect of a free people. The regime is pledged to return power to the people. Let them lead the way by returning freedom to the press.

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Cover by Rafiq-un-Nabi

The views expressed by writers in these columns are not necessarily shared by the journal.

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Showdown on the Punjab Campus

Editor
Hameeda Hossain
Executive Editor
Rehman Sobhan

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