

Attempt to gag the press in Pakistan

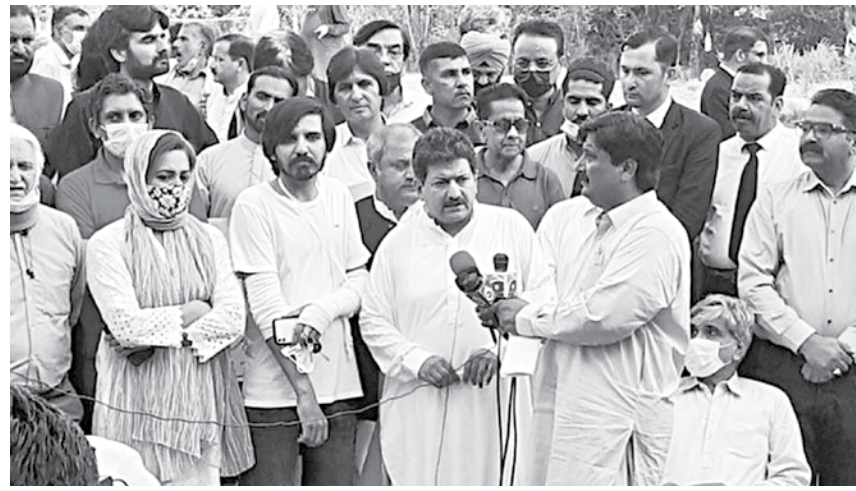
HUMA YUSUF

YOU may not be aware, but a long-running effort to deny you access to independent information is culminating. The state's attempts to control the media are blatant and blunt. If they succeed, Pakistan will be authoritarian in all but name.

Attacks against outspoken journalists have become shameless. They are shot at while strolling in the nation's capital, or thrashed in their homes. Inquiries are launched, but the culprits are never apprehended. Online, armies of trolls baselessly accuse journalists of reporting fake news, eroding both their mental health and credibility with threats of rape and murder.

Meanwhile, the government is trying to push through with the Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) Ordinance 2021, which media and rights groups have termed as akin to "media martial law". This seeks to centralise media oversight under one draconian authority. Media outlets will need annual NOCs to remain operational, and would be subject to suspension and arbitrary fees and penalties, with no onus on the government to provide warning or rationales for clampdowns. The law might enable the break-up of large media groups and extend control to digital platforms. What better way to turn media outlets into state mouthpieces than by making them entirely reliant on the government to stay in business?

Ironically, despite years of pleas by



In a display of press censorship recently, celebrated Pakistani journalist Hamid Mir (in white panjabi) has been taken off the air by Geo News, which suspended his show "Capital Talk" indefinitely.

PHOTO: TWITTER

the journalists to end impunity for killings and harassment, the PMDA also calls for media tribunals to mete swift punishment to journalists for violating the new rules. This is what it looks like when you formalise censorship.

And yet, the information minister still insists that Pakistan is "one of the freest states as far as media is concerned". To Mr Fawad Chaudhry, I want to say that simply publishing and broadcasting (and that too under threat, and on the direction of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority [PEMRA] and other backchannel directives) do not amount to freedom. Freedom is

about what you can say, and how. And those options are ever-diminishing.

No government wants to deal with a free press. Who wants to be criticised? Who wants to be held accountable? And this is precisely why the fourth estate is essential in functioning (even hybrid) democracies. Sadly, this simple point seems lost on a key constituency—large sections of Pakistan's burgeoning middle class.

For ages, this group was politically apathetic. Now mobilised, it has bought into the PTI's populist politics, which paints the press as complicit and corrupt. It doesn't help that this

constituency's main engagement with the press is through political talk shows, which over the past two decades have brought out the worst in an industry gasping to survive while playing a cut-throat ratings game. Middle-class audiences assume that journalists who are killed, beaten or disappeared "deserved" it—that journalists cry foul because they are anti-army "traitors" trying to emigrate to the West.

This fugue state is exacerbated by the narrow middle-class conception of the media as hostile to the state. This us-versus-them dynamic is a by-product of Pakistan's fumbling political trajectory and the existential crisis that the press has faced through each martial law, and most democratic spells too. Our history has clouded over the fact that a free media defends the public's interests—not only against state institutions but also

Roman Protasevich, Jamal Khashoggi, and Daphne Caruana Galizia?

The extent to which media freedom has been reduced to lip service was laid bare by the recent cabinet-level approval of a journalists' protection bill, which will help Pakistan retain its GSP-Plus trading status with the EU. Days later, Asad Ali Toor was tortured by *na-maloom afraad* ("unknown individuals") exposing this bill as the cynical ploy that it is.

The only hope for Pakistan's media is for the middle class to realise how critical an uncensored press is for their own freedom, safety and prosperity. This is a tough ask: it requires the public to deconstruct deep-running institutional power tussles in Pakistan. Who has the patience to consider this? And who has the credibility to deliver the message without being undone with an allegation of foreign funding, a death threat, or worse?

Journalists also need to get better at documenting the nature and scale of the pressure they face. This will require unprecedented solidarity, which has been absent in the face of the state's divide-and-conquer strategies of recent years. We are at a tipping point now. Senior journalists at protests last week indicated that it's time to name the "known unknowns" who harass and attack journalists. Let the press do what it does best, and hold them accountable.

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Courtesy: Asia News Network (ANN)



corporates, international actors and any others who hold power.

These dynamics are not new, but they are playing out in a changing world. Previous regimes had to indulge a free press to keep up their appearances globally. But who can defend Pakistan's journalists at a time when there are few repercussions for those who persecuted

The idea of a university: Newman's vision and our reality

MASWOOD AKHTER

THE title of this article invokes the name of an important book by a 19th-century British thinker, John Henry Newman. While the shadow of this great theologian-academician pervades the following musings, my primary objective, however, is to situate Newmanian insights into the very context of ours, and thereby expose the tragic discrepancy between the university that Newman envisioned as ideal and the kind of universities that we have created for ourselves.

Over the past few years, our universities have been in the news mostly for the wrong reasons, and rarely for academic excellence or even for other achievements—be it in sports, theatre, scientific discoveries, or other fruitful human endeavours. Also, who would deny that our universities, like many other institutions here, are increasingly becoming question-sensitive, and suspicious or intolerant of dissenting voices? In universities, difference and heterogeneity should be the norm. But what we often witness instead is the criminalisation of difference and an obsessive quest for homogeneity.

The university, as Newman ideally conceives it, should exist as a system of engagement with differences, thus ensuring a vibrant intellectual and philosophical culture. The university will not only aim at giving a comprehensive coverage of available knowledge areas, but will also allow apparently conflicting thought systems to operate with their full energy. The university will encourage imagination of alternatives, and establish a congenial atmosphere for the birth of new, hitherto-unknown ideas and skills.

Newman emphasises the essential need for interconnectedness of diverse branches of knowledge. He conceives knowledge as an integrated whole, and recommends an interdisciplinary or "holistic" approach as a basic pedagogical principle. Rather than making students capable only of doing some particular job or producing mere professionals or technical hands, the university, according to Newman, produces "liberally educated gentlemen"

(and gentlewomen) who are endowed with "[a] cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life." The university trains humans to think, "to reason well in all matters," and aims at a general, comprehensive, holistic development—that is, formation of character—of a person, the value of which is often undermined in the prevailing social and market parameters. Newman treats it as a danger when people become synonymous with their professions. A practical end that he assigns to university courses is training good members of society/humanity; their goodness, according to him, would bring with it a power and grace to every work and occupation which they undertake, enabling them to be far more "useful" than what the utilitarian capitalist market can conceive of them.

When we relate Newmanian insights to the present state of our university campuses, and the education and research climate there, we encounter things that are remarkably inconsistent or incompatible with the idea of a university. The entire arrangement appears to be plagued by limited vision, greed for immediate material profits, and an unholy nexus of local political elements and academic opportunists, resulting in a steep decline in intellectual and research standards as well as an increasingly shrinking space for academic freedom.

Since there are sustained attempts at valorising and legitimising bureaucratic invasions and reproduction of corporate values in our universities, we need to remain alert to diverse hegemonies hatched and launched by different establishments. But perhaps the most serious threat comes from within—from the formidable presence of people in our universities who are not academically inclined and almost clueless about Newman's "liberal education", "philosophical habit of mind" or "inner eyes"... who are not in search of knowledge and ideas, and whose eyes are rather fixed on immediate material rewards and lucrative positions.

Let us not indulge in the illusion that joining a university automatically

makes us academicians or intellectuals. No doubt, we become "technically" intellectual by dint of our university positions, but it is really that easy to acquire a "philosophical temper" and move beyond the status of an academic clerk? The responsibility of professors should ultimately transcend the boundary of their respective disciplines in order to engage with the larger issues, but a good number of our university teachers fail to understand the enormity of their roles and feel no qualms about being flatterers of people in positions of power; tragically, gratification of

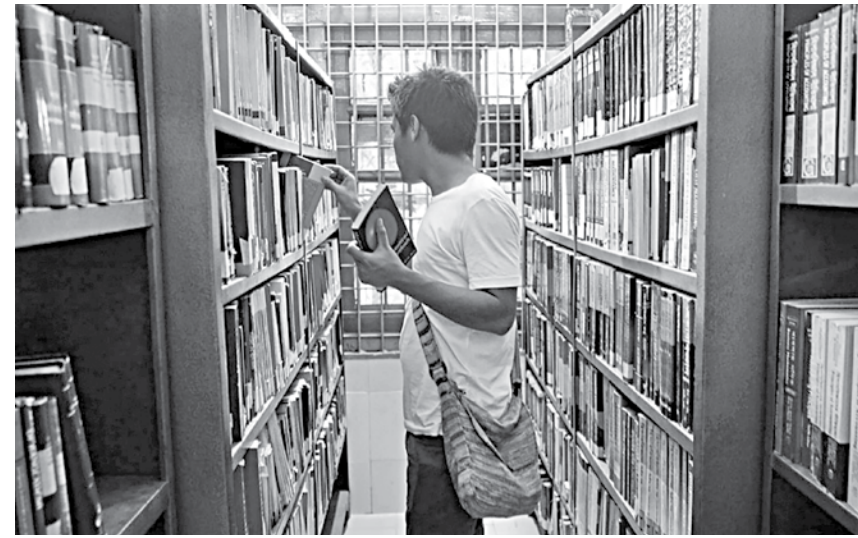


PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

their personal greed comes at a huge cost, the cost being the university itself. This unspeakable servility also helps to perpetuate oppressive mechanisms and unjust structures in our socio-political arrangement.

A university must retain its autonomous character so that students and professors with diverse ideas and affiliations can operate naturally; so that they can teach, learn and research freely; so that meaningful interactions of diverse strands become possible; so that new ideas may be born, and higher ideas and ideals may be pursued; so that its residents know that there is life, there is reality, and there is meaning beyond material affluence and mindless consumerism.

Autonomy is a fundamental requisite of a university. You cannot run a university like a business house or corporate farm, or a military or civil bureaucracy. If you do so, it will diminish the culture of criticality and individuality, rendering a university intellectually inert and dysfunctional. Amid the frenzied dance of intolerant everywhere, a big hope of humanity lies in the universities—the importance of retaining the legacy of debates and critical thinking, the tradition of asking questions, and the passion for examining ideas, ideals and systems

and exercising rational choices should, therefore, be understood and encouraged with more urgency than ever before.

We also need to understand the university's essential connection with, and disconnection from, the lived life (or the reality around); it has the responsibility to contribute to the material developments and needs of the present, but at the same time it should function as an "alternative social space" that creates and circulates new ideas and knowledge, and sets a higher ethical and intellectual tone for the community to aspire for. The university thus walks along with the society, and it also shows the society a way forward.

To what extent we would allow


corporate, bureaucracy and other outside forces or neo-colonial institutions to intervene in deciding the curricula and character of the university is a real question we need to address. The fundamentals of a centre of learning like a university include critical pedagogy with deep politico-ethical sensibilities, its epistemological pluralism, and of course a wise and enabling administration nurturing an objective and democratic ambience for students, researchers and teachers to flourish as active participants in the cultivation and dissemination of diverse knowledge traditions. Academic engagement is a deeply political issue; it thus requires a critical consciousness so that you can apprehend power relations in the society, state and beyond, and determine your own role necessary to break the pattern of domination. Regrettably, some of our teachers are not "political" in the above-mentioned sense; instead, a significant number of them function as some sort of agents of mainstream political parties for their selfish gains, and their political bias is often reflected in their treatment of students and colleagues—a situation which is not only shameful but also dangerous.

Our universities are still alive because of the sincere and sustained efforts of some committed teachers and researchers in the campuses, among other things. We shall, however, be witnessing a tragic demise of our universities unless we come forward passionately for a genuine healing. It is not that what I am saying here is something new; you are, in fact, well aware of the miserable reality, but it is very important to remind ourselves frequently of these issues, and it is important not to become helpless witnesses of the slow, tragic death of our universities.

Let us remain academically focused and simultaneously build up a collective consensus so that our universities do not turn into desperate playgrounds for state and corporate fantasies, so that various hegemonic forces from outside academia may not ravage our universities irrevocably.

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QUOTABLE Quote



JULIUS ERVING
(1950-)
American former basketball player

"I firmly believe that respect is a lot more important, and a lot greater, than popularity."

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Watch over
- 5 Pouchlike parts
- 9 Philly cager
- 10 Dagger parts
- 12 Biscotti flavor
- 13 "Cats" poet
- 14 Electrical measure
- 16 "The Simpsons" bartender
- 17 Before, to bards
- 18 Movie technique
- 20 Scorching
- 22 Plow pullers
- 23 Like bar beer
- 25 Relaxing places
- 28 Soak up
- 32 Kidnap victim
- 34 Sturgeon eggs

DOWN

- 1 Cassiterite, for one
- 2 Driven out
- 3 Comfy spot
- 4 "You wish!"
- 5 "The West Wing" star
- 6 Feel poorly
- 7 High point

8 Fall guy

9 Thrifty one

11 Painter Jan

15 "I'm outta here!"

19 The best

21 Party leader

24 Helped in a heist

25 Closet pairs

26 Came down in buckets

27 Crafty

29 Held forth

30 Ginger in movies

31 Like some frat parties

33 Part player

37 Writer Janowitz

39 Sch. support group

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

S	E	C	T	S	L	O	T		
A	X	L	E	S	T	I	P	I	N
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT