**[Press and power](https://www.dawn.com/news/1430258/press-and-power)**

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EACH prime minister has his or her own distinctive style of bringing the press to heel. Jawaharlal Nehru amended the Criminal Procedure Code to make it easier to prosecute pressmen for defamation.

His daughter, Indira Gandhi, who was vastly more ruthless, contemplated bringing the newspaper industry under ‘social control’, a euphemism for state control, especially of the business interests of the owners.

Rajiv Gandhi brought his Defamation Bill in 1988 to punish the press, only to withdraw it in the face of universal uproar.

*Modi has hit upon a devious route to curb media freedom.*

All the three tactics failed to achieve results. Prime Minister Narendra Modi hit upon the devious route. It operates in secrecy and aims at the owner of the newspaper or TV channel. There is no gun, smoking or other. But the technique effectively creates a climate of fear and compliance everywhere.

On Aug 2, the Bombay High Court, as it is still called, angrily asked: “We are witnessing a tragic phase in the country today. Citizens already feel that they can’t voice their concerns or opinions fearlessly. Are we going to see a day when everyone will need police protection to move around or to speak freely?”

In newsrooms and editorial conferences, this atmosphere has led reluctantly to self-censorship. A mere six days later, the Editors’ Guild based in New Delhi issued a strong and detailed critique of the Modi regime’s ways. The guild has emerged as a powerful champion of freedom. Meanwhile, the Press Council of India, a statutory body, provides a study in contrast by its compliant role.

The Guild cited specific instances in support of its censure. The month of July saw two senior journalists leave the Hindi television channel ABP News. The journalists who left the channel included the latter’s managing editor Milind Khandekar and a senior anchor Punya Prasun Bajpai. Mr Khandekar did not explain why he left. However, Mr Bajpai, in a piece published online, claimed he was asked to drop certain references to the government from his programmes, and that the pressure had been building up for days.

The Guild was astute enough to discern a combination of tactics; both overt and covert. It condemned “the manner in which the right to practise free and independent journalism is seen to be undermined by a combination of forces — some media owners’ inability to withstand political covert or overt pressures from the political establishment and frequent instances of blocking or interference in the transmission of television content that is seen to be critical of the government”.

Apparently, one TV channel “also shared with the Guild screenshots and details indicating such interference. Such attempts strike at the root of media freedom and indeed the foundations of our democracy. These underline the right to be informed and hold the establishment accountable. There seems a brazen attempt to punish ‘unfriendly’ news channels and inconvenient voices”.

Instances of a channel losing its signal during a telecast critical of the government are more disturbing in their Orwellian character. Earlier last month, the leader of the opposition in the Lok Sabha Mallikarjun Kharge forcefully raised the matter. The Guild has demanded that the government “take note of the disruptions, and investigate and explain how and under what circumstances these egregious violations are taking place”.

It will, of course, do nothing of the sort. But is civil society helpless? The Guild comprises distinguished and busy editors. It can, however, mobilise the resources of think tanks and academics in the country to monitor such cases and publicise them. Its remit should cover all external interference with the independence of the media, print or electronic.

As far back as in 1954, the Press Commission expressed its concern “about the extent to which external influences result in preventing the adequate and accurate presentation of news the fair and adequate presentation of views”.

Press freedom rests on a chain each of whose links is vulnerable to attack — news gathering, editorial decisions, the printing press, and distribution and circulation. In 1987, a strike was instigated in a daily which exposed corruption in the government. Thugs violently attacked men in press rooms. The government of Karnataka, headed by Ramakrishna Hegde, tabled a bill on press freedom to punish such attacks effectively.

The newspaper industry has a dual aspect. It is an industry; a business. But it is also an institution that provides news and comments. It directly touches freedom of speech and expression. Coercive measures against the business directly infringe on its role as a platform for free speech. This is judicially recognised.

Arbitrary denial of state ads or bans on inclusion in state libraries and the like are unconstitutional. Elections to the Lok Sabha are fairly close. It would be unwise to ignore the trends.

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