

"Checking" the freedom of the Press

"The Press restrained! nefarious thought!
In vain our sires have nobly fought:
While free from force the Press remains,
Virtue: 'freedom cheer our plains'.
Matthe Green. "The Spleen."

Press-Journals

In order to be impartial, unbiased, fair and accurate, the Press must be free, says AHSON SAEED HASAN

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Freedom of speech, opinion, Press and publication are the most fundamental rights of modern life. They form an integral part of the basic characteristics of a democracy. They are essential to the individual's liberty, social, moral and political. Without freedom of speech, expression of opinion, by word of mouth or by printed word, the very idea of democracy is reduced to a nullity. Freedom of expression implies that a citizen is free to express his views and opinions regarding public matters, without any undue restriction or control. Freedom of speech and expression play a vital role in the practical working of democracy since the notion of democracy is, in the final analysis, based upon public opinion. It is through the medium of the spoken and written word that people can air their grievances and criticise the actions of government. A good govern-

ment always welcomes free discussion and criticism.

The Press, said to be the fourth estate of the realm, fourth pillar of the state, is perhaps the most effective channel of "getting through" information and presenting the ideas and viewpoints of different sections of society. The Press not only informs but educates as well. Hence the functions of the Press are manifold. For this reason the adoption of an honest, sincere and careful approach towards the publication of news and views is a must. The Press should not endeavour to incite the baser elements and pander to the baser instincts of human nature by sensational news and comment.

In order to be impartial, unbiased, fair and accurate, the Press must be free; it must not be a monopoly of vested interests, or of government. If the Press works under pressure it

cannot be expected to deliver the goods. It is impossible for the Press to mobilise and generate a sound and healthy public opinion if it has to perform its functions under the "watchful eye" of government. If such is the case, then opinion is inevitably misled.

The Press in Pakistan has always been in trouble, to say the least. Right from the early days of our history each successive government whether democratic (so-called) or military has tried to impose more and more restrictions and checks to hinder and restrain the Press from presenting the truth and reality. Journalists, mediemen and the newspapers for which they work have always been on the hit-list of the government agencies. Every effort is made to make sure that the Press does not transgress its "limits".

Recently, a statement given by Mr N.D. Khan appeared in the newspapers according

to which the government was planning to pass an ordinance aimed at "checking" the freedom of the Press. Strangely NDK belongs to that political party which claims to be the torch-bearer of democracy and a champion of human rights. Even more strange is the fact that when on September 28, 1992 the Nawaz Sharif government charged Maleeha Lodhi—now our Ambassador in the USA—with sedition, Benazir Bhutto and her colleagues were at the forefront of protests launched against the government and which ultimately made the government take back and withdraw the case. What's the problem now? Why this change of attitude? If the government is dissatisfied with the role of the Press and thinks that it is not performing its functions in a responsible manner it must call the representatives of the Press to the negotiating table and sort out its differences with

them. After all this is not Benazir-Nawaz Sharif confrontation that cannot be resolved. Members of the media are sane enough to realise that it is nothing but essential that Press-government relationship has to be smooth and cordial and at the same time are capable of safeguarding their own rights and interests. So at the moment there doesn't seem to be any urgency in "taming" the Press and putting further restrictions on whatever freedom it enjoys.

The government need not be too apprehensive about the power of the pen. If it is interested in inculcating awareness amongst the people and producing an enlightened citizenship it must toe the middle line leave the Press alone and let it carry on its work. Democracy cannot flourish under the evil shadows of draconian laws. Democracy and its institutions need a breathing space and a chance to prosper. Only then can democracy make any headway in this country. Show us that you are true democrats. Let's not curtail our independence and liberty, let's stop thinking about cutting the Press down to size.