

# is the right of the people”

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rearse that they  
built up means  
interacting with the  
media, and opening  
up avenues of  
information that were  
previously closed.

**Amber Rahim** meets  
members of the media  
liaison cell of the  
Punjab monitoring  
team

The military regime is trying hard to establish itself as different from the other army takeovers in Pakistan. Having come to power post-Cold War when the international community is no longer tolerant of authoritarian/non-elected governments, and with Pakistan's image tarnished as a breeding ground for terrorists and other violence-prone fundamentalists, the added 'sin' of the removal of democracy has certainly not helped its international image. Therefore, Musharaff's government is waving the flag of a free press as a sign of its commitment to democracy.

Which is all well and good. True that there have been no floggings a la Zia, ban on publications, pre-censorship, or the insidious and dreaded press advices that have traditionally marked previous uniformed dictators. The press has been given free reign to criticise policies and lead public debates on sensitive issues like the Kalabagh dam or the

Chashma nuclear power plant.

In the absence of checks in a democracy where theoretically, elected representatives can be held accountable by the electorate, this government believes that it is the press which has to question and criticise. But the point is, that is all the press can do. Unlike an electorate which can vote a politician out of power. With the ban on protest processions, it is unlikely that the public can air their grievances effectively and affect a policy change or even a change in government. Thus, this government is here to stay, within the Supreme Court stipulated three years, or

more, only time will tell.

However, it is with these intentions that the Provincial Army Monitoring Cell (Punjab) has set up a team of 'media managers', consisting of a Lieutenant Colonel, a Brigadier and a civilian media consultant (all of whom expressly said that they did not want to be named) to establish links with the press and ensure transparency in their monitoring.

"Media access was felt to be important because freedom of information is the right of the people and monitoring was meant to be transparent. Therefore the media cell provides a mechanism where if

people want to find out more about our work, we can provide the technical facilitation", said one of the media personnel.

He added, "The media is doing good work and we keep clippings on issues where action can be taken. For example, we took note of a news report about the carcinogenic contents of plasticware used in domestic containers, and action was taken on the producers of such items".

"We are not interested in personal projection", is the constant refrain of the officers in the media cell. This is in keeping with the army tradition

of working as a monolithic body where teams rather than individuals are given primacy. However, it also means that it is difficult to pinpoint individuals who are going wrong in the discharge of their duties as monitors. It is also a deliberate distancing from past policies where the actions of the information minister was more important than his ministry, popularly called the Misinformation Ministry.

At the same time, as one officer put it, "In this kind of hostile atmosphere, we want recognition for the good work we are doing".

"We have our own internal

mechanism of 'monitoring the monitors'. Field officers are responsible to their senior officers, who select the officers on the basis of their reputation. The senior officers keep a check on the monitors, as well as make spontaneous visits to ensure that the work is being done properly. Also, the monitors are rotated to keep them from temptation. Furthermore, the senior officers are accountable to their senior officers in the chain of command", an officer told TNS.

Attempts to develop links with press resulted in a meeting between a large number of prominent writers and journalists with 11 district monitors where most of the writers were critical of the concept of monitoring.

Says Dr. Mehdi Hassan, a columnist and professor of journalism at the Punjab University who was at the meeting, "The checking is there but there are certain departments such as Defense, which the press cannot comment upon or inquire into its working. The best accountability can be done by the people in the form of political institutions. Besides, haphazard actions cannot result in permanent change".

It appears that since the press is suspicious of military governments, Musharaff's regime is trying to gain some sort of acceptance by portraying itself as benign and pro-democracy. And this is the reason that it is liaising with press, by leaking stories or inviting journalists to visit the monitors, a very political move by a supposedly non-political institution. ♦