

Freedom of Press- a myth or reality

By Shafqat Munir

Freedom of Press has always been in question in almost all societies. In some societies it is a reality while in others it is a myth. In fact in democracies, freedom of expression is considered to be a vital element that ensures and enhances access of the people into the power structures. Every year, May 3rd is celebrated as the World Press Freedom Day to gauge the quantum of the freedom of press and to make rulers realize the importance of the independence of media to address power imbalances.

The World Press Freedom Day reminds media policy makers to focus on the information needs of the citizenry with a view to show how open information creates transparency, accountability and growth of democracy. They also need to focus on building an infrastructure for media that helps regulate, protect and promote freedom of expression.

As professional journalists we need to look into our news contents that show why freedom of information and the independence of press are important in catering to the information needs of our citizenry with more explanatory journalism/investigative reporting on development issues relating to the marginalized segments of the society. We also need to develop skills and thinking of reporting in new ways to protect the right to know of our people. There is also a dire need of professional exchanges among journalists. Asia Media Forum (AMF) initiated by editors from across Asia in Koh Samui, Thailand in October 2004 has provided this space to journalists on the web by launching today (May 03) its website: www.asiamediaforum.org Ghazi Salahuddin from The News represented Pakistan at the AMF. ActionAid International supports and Inter Press Service (IPS) hosts this website on which journalists can exchange their expertise on certain themes.

This year's theme to celebrate the World Press Freedom Day is 'Media and Good Governance'. UNESCO organizes the celebrations across the world on this day and promotes the cause of the freedom of press around different themes every year. This year's three-day international conference on the theme ends in Dakar on May 03 with a focus on media's direct input in promoting good governance that includes people's participation in the process of governance and elections, a watchful eye by media on anti corruption efforts and maintenance of the rule of law. Leading professionals in various sessions viewed that media can play a crucial role in addressing the topics relating to growing poverty and disrespect for human rights. They said freedom of, and access to information, observance of journalistic ethics and training of journalists on investigative reporting are the prerequisites for an extended role of media in development of the informed societies so that they can ensure good governance.

If we look at the freedom of press and democratic governance in Pakistan, we feel that we have a 'freedom of press' and 'democracy' but in appearance only as they hardly seem functional in 'real spirit' of the freedom of press and democracy. A 'functional free press' is ideally considered to be free of corporate and government control. Pakistan's recent history tells that both corporate and government control over media has taken a new shape. The corporate greed and monopolistic trends in the media industry has fast been plunging this industry into indirect and invisible subjugation to the government's control. Both seem protecting each other's interests, be they corporate or political. That is

why there is no need to hound journalists now rather the governments come otherwise through corporate cum political benefit sharing with the industry. This state of affairs heavily costs on the people's space in media.

On this day today, we need to emphasize on creating more space for people in media to cater to their information needs as it is the information that proves to be oxygen for democratic governance. If people do not know what is happening in their society and if their rulers' actions are hidden, their participation in governance and society would be curtailed and they would further be marginalized. Freedom of information is equally essential for the people and the rulers to ensure good governance. Analyses on governance show that only bad governments promote culture of secrecy for their survival. Good governments make democracy functional by ensuring sovereignty of parliament, independence of judiciary and freedom of press.

To end the culture of secrecy and silence, we need to practice freedom of information law exists at the federal level though with many lacunas. This law needs to be replicated with major improvements in provinces also so that we can provide a free access to government information to citizens to create an informed citizenry. That is the true spirit of the freedom of expression.

ENDS.

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