

## **PAKISTANI MEDIA COMMISSION SETS ROADMAP FOR MEDIA FREEDOM**

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LAHORE: President Media Commission of Pakistan (MCP) I A Rehman has called upon media and civil society organizations to start a countrywide campaign to defend press freedom and oppose government measures to muzzle the press.

In consultation with various media and civil society organizations, Rehman asked the PFUJ, the APNS, the CPNE, the Pakistan Broadcasting Association (PBA) and SAFMA to get endorsement of the Islamabad Declaration by their executive bodies in the next few days so that a joint meeting could be convened in Lahore in the second week of July for joint action.

Rehman appealed to all press clubs to hold seminars to disseminate the Islamabad Declaration and get support of bar associations, political parties and elected representatives. Emphasizing the role of journalists for press freedom, the MCP appealed to the journalist community to get active to frustrate the designs of the establishment to muzzle the press.

In the national consultation held in Islamabad Tuesday, the media organizations jointly issued the following Islamabad Declaration: Media Commission, Pakistan Islamabad Declaration: Media Freedom, Media Laws June 26th 2007 We, the members of Pakistan's large media community belonging to both the print and the electronic media, including representatives of various media stakeholders and media organizations, such as CPNE, PBA, APNS, PFUJ, TUJ, SAFMA, members of parliament, political parties, bar associations and civil society organizations, having met at Islamabad on 26th June, 2007 at the invitation of Media Commission, Pakistan;

Affirming the right to freedom of expression, right to know and freedom of the media as recognized by the constitution of Pakistan and as well as the UN, being a "fundamental human right and the touchstone of all freedoms", Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as a basis for an informed and dynamic civil society and a pluralist democracy, and which have been won after decades of struggle and sacrifice;

Recognizing the fact that media freedom is an essential prerequisite to the establishment and sustenance of a democratic and just dispensation, transparent, accountable and responsible governance, responsive to the needs, aspirations, and the will of the people;

Reiterating the right of the media as well as its duty to report, project and disseminate, honestly, objectively and fearlessly all events, on all subjects, developments, information, ideas and opinions, so as to enable the people not only to make appropriate choices and steer the ship of state through the current crises and storms visible on the horizon, but also to help them realize themselves in peace and freedom and regain their place of dignity in the comity of just and peaceful nations of the world;

Acknowledging the struggles of a large number of mediapersons to honour the demands of their calling and their commitment to the ideals of an unbiased projection of the whole truth, often at great risk to themselves and their kith and kin, specially in conflict zones and in areas where the writ of the state has either ceased to operate or has been shorn of whatever benevolent features it ever had;

Condemning the recent incidents of wanton and criminal violence against media centres and mediapersons by state agencies as well as trigger happy gangs of criminals who were allowed to go scot-free by the law-enforcement agencies, and attempts to create legal justification or use of various other leverages for encroachment on media freedom, and interference with lawful functioning of media units and mediapersons;

Rejecting the use of and incitement to violence by state and non-state parties to suppress freedom of expression and dissent and dictate the hegemony of one excluding-ideology or the other and defending pluralism while upholding tolerance;

Conscious of media's responsibility in respecting privacy and fundamental rights of the people, in general, and women and minorities, in particular, upholding public interests and reporting nothing but the truth;

Putting on record the debt of gratitude the media owe to many political parties, parliamentarians, civil society organisations, quite a few elements in government ranks, conscientious citizens, and above all the valiant lawyers, for solidarity and support during the recent attacks on the media establishments and their personnel;

Have agreed to adopt and subscribe to the following Islamabad Declaration: ĩ The multi-dimensional crisis Pakistan faces today offers possibilities of re-structuring the state on the principles of undiluted democracy, rule of law, trichotomy of power and social justice. Circumstances have generated a wide-ranging discourse on the requisites of a genuine federal republic, the division of power amongst the organs of the state, the reassertion of the majesty of the law, and a fair deal to all citizens, especially the women, the poor and the marginalised. What makes this search for a new social contract specially promising is that it revolves around the creation of democratic values and establishment of republican institutions that guarantee fundamental rights, supremacy of the constitution, rule of law, separation of power, sovereignty of parliament, independence of judiciary, freedom of press and exclusion of armed forces from politics. No conscientious Pakistani should wish that this historic moment may be allowed to pass without providing for a long overdue renewal and rejuvenation of the state and society.

ĩ The degree of access and the free flow of information are defining elements of the political system. In autocratic and intolerant regimes, information is restricted on the basis of the “need to know” and confined to a powerful few. Democracies, on the other hand, recognize the right to information and freedom of expression to empower people. National media’s role in the present situation cannot be exaggerated. It has to fulfil the crucial task of sustaining a free debate, facilitating due representation of all possible viewpoints and giving voice to the multitude that has long been denied the right to speak.

ĩ The media cannot perform its foremost duty to the people unless it is guaranteed complete freedom and security of environment. Any restriction on the free flow of information in any medium and interference with its dissemination by state functionaries and non-state actors will not only cripple the media and undermine its growth and flowering, it will also prevent the nation from acquitting itself of the challenges to the best of its ability.

ĩ We are therefore of the considered opinion that:

ĩ The state must relieve the mediapersons of the feelings of insecurity created by attacks on media establishments and individual journalists by ensuring that incidents such as attacks on the Geo and Aaj offices are not repeated and that no journalist is condemned to share the late Hayatullah’s fate.

ĩ The notorious practice of press advice to both the print and electronic media, which has

been revived with an increased display of arrogance, must be abandoned. At the same time abuse of authority by blocking TV broadcasts without any order or cause must be completely forbidden.

ĩ It is time the state broke with the colonial legacy of keeping on the statute book laws specifically designed to gag and control the media by threatening the mediapersons with punitive measures. The spirit of the age demands that the media should be subject to normal laws of the land and all matters related to registration of media establishments, declarations for publishing and printing of newspapers, the working of printing presses and news agencies, registration of electronic media, enforcement of codes of ethics and removal of public complaints and grievances should be left to democratically-constituted voluntary associations of mediapersons themselves.

ĩ The government's attempts to divide and manipulate different media organizations, shall be resisted and the working journalists and all members of civil society stand firmly behind all media organizations in their support. However, if despite this unqualified support, there is an encroachment on the people's right to have unfettered access to information it will not be tolerated by the media community, civil society organizations, members of the bar and political parties.

ĩ In pursuance of the principles stated above, we demand:

1. All legal, financial and administrative restrictions and modes of manipulation, including violent and other intimidating means by both state and non-state actors, must be removed, stopped and avoided to allow media to perform their functions freely and independently.

2. The Pemra ordinance of 2002, as amended by the Act II of 2007 and ordinance of June 4th, 2007, should be replaced or suitably amended to limit Pemra's role to contractual matters involving broadcasters and the state, such as fees and charges for services. PTV and Radio Pakistan should also be brought within the same regulatory law as independent broadcasters to ensure a level playing field for the people's right to information and news. If any broadcaster commits an offence, action may be taken under ordinary law subject to notice and the right to appeal. The executive should have no right to suspend, prohibit or block a broadcast.

3. The Registration of Newspapers, News Agencies, Printing Presses and Books Ordinance

needs to be reviewed especially with a view to purging it of arbitrary powers to the executive to interfere with the right to freedom of information.

4. The Press Council Ordinance of 2002 should be reviewed in the light of experience.

5. The Freedom of Information Ordinance should be drastically revised to increase access to all government records, including all noting on files and defence expenditure, reduce exemptions to barest essentials with clear time-lines, and simplify the appeal procedure. Ways should also be found to guarantee people's access to all records of autonomous corporations, provincial and local governments.

6. If a legislation regarding media or freedom of expression and right to know, or for that matter any other fundamental right, is at all needed, it shall be adopted with bipartisan consensus of both the houses of the parliament in consultation with the representatives of all media stakeholders and representatives of civil society.

7. That the people, civil society organizations, bar associations, political parties and elected representatives of the people support media in its pursuit for independence and freedom and appeal to the heads of parties represented in the parliament to jointly scrutinize all legal and administrative restrictions on media freedom and amend all existing laws that in any way hinder press freedom, right to know and freedom of expression.

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