

Bill seeking changes to media laws introduced

PPP introduces the Freedom of Information Bill 2006 which will make media access to information a right

Dawn

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Islamabad --- People's Party Parliamentarians (PPP) MNA Sherry Rehman on Tuesday introduced the Freedom of Information Bill 2006 in the National Assembly seeking several changes in the six media ordinances promulgated by the military regime and making freedom of access to information a fundamental human right.

The bill, which was originally submitted by Ms Rehman some two years ago, was referred to the standing committee concerned of the National Assembly by the speaker for its clause-wise examination. The bill, according to Ms Rehman, has been moved to guard against abuses of power and provide citizens the appropriate knowledge of the government's activities and to create essential involvement by civil society in public service issues by giving them access to the records of public bodies. Moreover, she said, the bill had been submitted to empower the public and citizens groups to monitor the operations of the government and public bodies and to create a culture of non-abusive, across-the-board accountability of governments and curb VIP and elitist models of governance.

Explaining the reasons for submitting the bill, Ms Rehman in a statement said there was a widespread consensus in the media community and informed civil society that these principles had by and large been ignored by the framers of the six media ordinances. Not only are these new media laws arbitrary and lacking in legitimate parliamentary sanction, she said, these in fact amounted to curtailment of transparency in many significant ways.

"They also provide, quite alarmingly, for the provision of imprisonment for journalists which is totally unprecedented and unacceptable in civil cases. By deviating from the spirit of freedom and openness, these ordinances also represent a substantial deviation from the 1973 constitution," she said. These laws are the Freedom of Information Ordinance, the Press, Newspapers, News agency and Book Registration Ordinance, the Defamation Ordinance, the Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Ordinance, and the Associated Press of Pakistan Ordinance.

As it stands, there are already laws and regulations in place that severely restrict the freedom and independence of journalists as well as media bodies and corporations. These are the Official Secrets Act, 1952; the Security of Pakistan Act 1952; the Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance 1962; Sections 123-A, 124-A, 153-B, 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code; the Contempt of Court Act; the Anti-Terrorism Act; laws penalising discussion on religion; offences of false news and laws penalising scandalisation of national heroes. She said instead of removing the deficiencies of earlier draft laws, the ordinance introduced in 2002 made access to information extraordinarily difficult. Date Posted: 9/5/2006