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Efforts to impose curbs on media to be resisted

ISLAMABAD - Speakers from various walks of life including senior journalists and politicians Saturday called for media unity to resist efforts to impose restrictions on free media. This was gist of the speeches at daylong conference organised by Press Council of Pakistan (PCP) here at a local hotel to mark the World Press Freedom Day.

Chairman PCP Shafqat Abbasi addressing a regional conference on “Investigative Journalism & Citizens Right to Know” in Islamabad insisted that the culture of secrecy in Pakistan must be ended and the people would enjoy the right to know. “Denial of information is the denial of basic democratic right of the people,” Abbasi added.

While showing solidarity with those journalists who lost their lives in the line of professional duty on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, the PCP chairman saluted those journalists who are defying all kinds of pressure to stand by freedom of expression and people’s right to know.

He said RTI laws are meant to strengthen democracy and now media should demonstrate responsibility for the promotion of ethical journalism in the country. He called upon PFUJ, CPNE, APNS and other journalistic bodies to come forward and initiate a dialogue to ensure ethical practices in media. He said, “We need more debate on ethical journalism.” Speaking as chief guest, Shahid Khakaan Abbasi, minister of petroleum and natural resources, said freedom of press and responsible journalism go side by side in democracy and it is the duty of working journalists to create balance in reporting and avoid unethical media practice. He applauded the sacrifices given by journalists in upholding freedom of expression and reiterated the government’s resolve to continue supporting freedom of expression and free functioning of the press.

PPP Senator Farhatullah Babar has warned if some media houses thoughtlessly support banning a media group that day in the name of national security and patriotism, the same forces will come back to haunt them the next day but then there might be no one to defend them. He said that defining national security and patriotism cannot be the monopoly of any individual or a single national institution and called for a national debate on what constituted national security.

He said that a particular channel may be accused of editorial indiscretion but such indiscretion should in no way be equated as an assault on national security or a deliberate unpatriotic act. Babar said that Shaheed Mohtarma Bernazir Bhutto was also once dubbed by a section of the establishment as ‘security risk’ and the PPP knew too well how national security has often been flaunted to advance vested interests and hide uncomfortable truths.

He said that the PPP also protested a section of the media for taking freedom and right to information too far and refusing to adopt code of conduct but it will not favour clamping curbs on media for real or imagined transgressions.

He said that former President Asif Ali Zardari had also stated that while it is important to have a code of conduct it will be wrong to clamp down on it because of real or imagined excesses and deviations.

Later talking to the media, he said that the sudden resurgence of banned militant outfits and the midnight sprouting of posters and billboards supporting agencies against a section of the media in the name of patriotism and national security has raised questions. He said that it is time for a national debate on media freedoms and code of conduct on the one hand and defining national security and who should be authoritatively define the term on the other.

Renowned journalist Mujib-ur-Rehman Shami said right to information and investigative journalism are intrinsically linked to the steady functioning of democracy where people are empowered to decide the fate of their own destiny. He said it shouldn't be the prerogative of one or two state departments to put restrictions on the flow of information. Media experts from regional countries including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Afghanistan briefed the gathering about the state of right to information legislation landscape and implementation challenges in their respective countries. All of them voiced for the implementation of the true vision of RTI laws to ensure participation of the people in all the democratic affairs of the government.

They all criticised culture of secrecy and state interruptions in the free flow of information and demanded quick implementation of right to information laws to institute accountability of the public departments while ensuring element of transparency in the day to day affairs of the government.

Speaking on the occasion Information Secretary Dr Nazir Saeed said the federal government is endeavouring hard to bring comprehensive piece of legislation at the national level to ensure transparency in the public departments. He said, "We are ensuring that independent information commissions will be authorised instead of Ombudsman office to oversee implementation of right to information law."

Speaking on the occasion M Zia-ud-Din said division between present day media is not encouraging the cause of freedom of expression and asked the PCP to take suo moto notice against those newspapers who are accusing each other to further their own personal point of view and agenda of their media empire.

Speaking as chief guest Dr Kozue Kay Nagata, UNESCO country head of Pakistan, said right to information is directly linked to economic uplift of Pakistan. She said free flow of information

and people's access to information is an effective way of economic socialisation of Pakistan as information empowers people and leads to better ideas about future. In the final session, the chairman PCP proposed the formation of South Asia Right to Information forum to clinically examine and assess the state of applicability and implementation of RTI laws in the region to overcome hurdles in the way that leads to empowerment of people in the region.

A declaration to this effect was approved in the regional conference, which will go a long way in establishing sovereignty of the poor of the region and will help free flow of information across border.

After the concluding remarks, the chairman PCP thanked the participants of the conference and gave PCP shields to the guest speakers and chief guest of the event.

Source: <http://www.nation.com.pk/islamabad/04-May-2014/efforts-to-impose-curbs-on-media-to-be-resisted>