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Pravada in contemporary usage has a range of meanings which includes theses, concepts and propositions.

FOR A DEMOCRATIC MEDIA

The freedom of the media, both print and electronic whether state or privately owned, was one of the principal issues raised during the election campaigns of 1994.

The UNP had grossly abused its control of the state-owned media - the Lake House Press, the corporations operating television and radio broadcasting; these became direct mouthpieces of government policy and instruments for building personality cults. It also attempted to control the privately owned media, sometimes through legally proclaimed censorship, but more often through the harassment, intimidation and even murder of media personnel. The killing of Richard De Zoysa was but one incident in this campaign.

Opposition to these crude attempts to muzzle the media manifested itself in the appearance of an alternative press and the later formation of the Free Media Movement.

The SLFP well recognised this position in a Statement of Policy published in the newspapers on 10th July, 1994 entitled "Strengthening the Media":

The UNP's record in this field has been unreservedly dismal. The brutal slaying of Richard de Zoysa shocked the conscience of the world. There has been murder and physical assault of journalists to terrorize the entire media; emergency law and police powers have been abused flagrantly to harass publishers, editors and journalists into breaching the confidentiality of their sources of information; legitimate matters of public interest have been subjected to cosmetic legal process to foreclose public discussion

by invoking a distorted and garbled version of the sub judice principle; state financial institutions have been suborned to deny media owners credit facilities; newsprint supply has been manipulated and state advertising withheld to cow publishers into self-censorship induced by fear.

The PA promised drastic reforms in the handling of the media. Its understanding of the importance of media freedom is reflected in this passage from the election manifesto of 1994:

The PA is firmly convinced that the freedom of the individual cannot be safeguarded without a viable system of checks and balances operating as a restraint on governmental power; and that the checks and balances required for this purpose can be applied with any degree of effectiveness only if there is healthy and vigorous expression of public opinion. The PA, therefore, attaches the greatest importance to strengthening the media and providing a framework within which the media can function independently and without inhibition.

In order to create this framework, the PA promised action on several fronts. These included:

- i. The removal, through amending legislation, of constraints arising from provisions contained in the Constitution, the Public Security Ordinance, the Press Council Law, the Official Secrets Act and the Parliamentary (Powers and Privileges) Act.
- ii. Action to broadbase the ownership of Lake House in keeping with the intentions of Parliament as set out in

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the original legislation with arrangements to ensure that no single person, organization or group will be able to control more than 20% of the shares.

iii. Refraining from using government advertising or other resources to control, influence or threaten any newspapers or media organization.

iv. The establishment of an independent National Media Institute to cater to the professional needs of media persons and to improve their conditions of service.

Soon after coming into power, the government appointed four committees, composed of persons well known for their commitment to media freedom, to report on most of these matters. These Committees have submitted their reports but, unfortunately, there is no indication of the government making these reports public or of implementing their recommendations.

Summaries of these reports were the subject of discussion at a seminar organized recently in Colombo by the Center for Policy Analysis and Research of the University of Co-

lombo. We publish in this issue summaries of two of these reports. The discussions at the seminar concentrated on the measures necessary to persuade the government to act on these recommendations. While such activity is laudable, we wish to raise another issue here.

Lake House was nationalized with the promise of broadbasing its ownership under very specific political circumstances and at a time when the only available means of communication was the print media, among which the Lake House was preeminent in resources and power. The situation has now drastically changed; there are other privately owned newspapers; there are several radio and television channels. Neither print media nor Lake House enjoy preeminence in the communication field.

There is a fundamental assumption behind the demands for broadbasing the ownership of Lake House and of freeing the electronic media from direct governmental control; these sections of the media will then be transformed into vehicles which will reflect within them all sections of opinion. We doubt whether this assumption is correct. Judging from the experience of many so-called autonomous organizations, it would be rather futile to expect that they would develop to the point where they reflect the entire range and plurality of opinion in the country.

Concentration of attention on these issues also may inhibit us from looking at the whole media sector and ensuring the creation of a background, legal and economic, in which all shades of opinion can aspire to organize and operate their own means of communication. People would recognize the state media for what they really are - instruments of the government- and not for what they pretend to be - objective reporting and would look to other media for contending ideas and opinions. It would also be a recognition of the fact that a modern democratic state needs to have at its command instruments of communication with the people.

It is perhaps now time to widen the terms of the debate on media freedom and democracy. Its main limitation is that it

formulates question of media freedom primarily within a dichotomous framework of state and non-state ownership. The problems of state-owned media we have already referred to. The fundamental problem of the non-state or privately owned sector is that it is owned either by individual families with partisan political agendas or by corporate interests with no public accountability. The absence of public accountability in the private media is no less worse than in the state-owned media. A demand for public accountability from both would be a new approach to the question of media freedom.

There is yet another issue that needs to be included in the agenda for media freedom. It relates to the state monopoly in issuing licenses to set up radio and television stations. Two questions are involved here. First, due to the absence of democratic norms in the implementation of the state's monopolistic right to issues licenses, no civil society organization has so far been authorized by the Media Ministry to set up their own centers of electronic media. Only big corporate interests or powerful families have ownership access to this vital means of democratic communication. The state still looks at civil society groups ready to enter the field of electronic media with suspicion and from the archaic point of view of state security.

Second, it has been reported that the Media Ministry is in the process of drafting new legislation relating to the electronic media. In the context of Sri Lanka's administrative culture of keeping proposed legislation a secret until the draft law is presented in Parliament— another grossly archaic practice— no one appears to have even clue as to what the proposed Broadcasting Authority Bill would mean to media freedom and democracy. The point we want to make is that the government has an obligation to consult the media and human rights communities in the preparation of any new media legislation, which will certainly have a bearing on human rights, intellectual property rights, democracy, freedom of association and a host of other concerns. We note with grave concern that this issue has not yet entered the agenda of the media freedom debate in Sri Lanka.

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