

Pakistan: Clampdown on free speech

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A growing crackdown against social media activists in the country ought to be a matter of deep concern to all right-thinking, law-abiding and democratic citizens.

The latest disappearances have been alleged by the PML-N itself, with no less a figure than former prime minister Nawaz Sharif denouncing what he termed as an “attack on freedom of speech” and a violation of the right of all citizens to “express his/her opinion and to disagree with others”.

It is not the first time the PML-N has claimed activists of the party have been disappeared — members of the party were alleged to have been abducted on the eve of the NA-120 by-election in September — and, given Mr Sharif’s ongoing tussle with state institutions, it may not be the last.

Politics has entered a dangerous new phase with the apparent normalisation of unlawful abductions of political activists.

While the PML-N has rightfully condemned the unlawful actions against activists of the party, it is the PML-N itself that helped open the floodgates with the controversial passage of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016.

At the time, free speech advocates, human rights activists and several opposition figures had warned that Peca was a law virtually designed to usher in an era of abuse of power by state officials and a crackdown against free speech.

Clearly, with the growing use of the internet and online propaganda by militant groups, there is a need to regulate the online space — but Peca was not the law to do so.

The PML-N had also earlier allowed the Karachi operation to expand into a political crackdown against the MQM, with many of the party’s officials accusing the federal government and state authorities of unlawful detentions and the excessive use of force.

Then, too, human rights and free speech advocates had warned of a slippery slope towards greater curbs on political speech and lawful politics in the country.

Certainly, the war against social media activists has extended beyond the mainstream political domain to rights advocates, civil society and independent voices championing causes and politics that are deemed unacceptable by sections of the state.

With the mainstream media itself under various forms of pressure from a wide spectrum of entities, the overall climate for free and independent speech is poor and deteriorating.

The government now has a chance to help correct matters by involving parliament and inviting social and political activists to critique the existing framework of rights-related laws in the country and suggesting changes.

The rule of law is the bedrock of a constitutional, democratic society; it needs urgent repair and shoring up.

Dawn, Editorial

P.S.

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