

Indian government cracks down on journalists

K. Nesan
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A series of incidents over the last two months involving the harassment of journalists all point to the fact that the Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is attempting to intimidate and muzzle its critics in the media. In themselves, the cases appear to be quite different. Taken together, however, they reveal the determination of the Hindu chauvinists in the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to stamp out criticism and to impose their own views on the press.

One of the most recent cases involves the arrest of Kumar Badal, a reporter for the Indian web site *Tehelka*, on July 3. He has been accused of leopard poaching. Eight days prior to Badal's arrest police ransacked the editorial offices and private homes of the web site's editors. *Tehelka* has explained that its reporters were investigating the involvement of forest officers in illicit poaching operations—but to no avail.

The police action against Badal and *Tehelka* has nothing to do with the poaching of leopards. The web site has been a target of the Vajpayee government ever since it exposed the readiness of top politicians and military officers to accept large bribes as part of arms deals. *Tehelka* journalists spent eight months gaining the confidence of top officials by posing as middlemen for completely fictitious arms deals.

The story immediately threw the government into a crisis when it broke in March last year. The web site presented some of the 100 hours of videotape that its journalists had filmed with hidden cameras. BJP President Bangaru Laxman was forced to resign after a video showed him accepting 100,000 rupees. Defence Minister George Fernandes, Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee and Minister of State for External Affairs Ajit Kumar Panja were compelled to leave cabinet after they were implicated.

The government reacted to the scandal by lashing out at *Tehelka*, declaring that the exposé was “a financially motivated exercise and not a journalistic one.” It accused the web site of operating for foreign intelligence agencies and of being financed by the Middle East—in other words, in the communal language of the Hindu chauvinist BJP, of

working for the Islamic “enemy”.

Vajpayee set up a one-man Commission, consisting of a retired Supreme Court judge, not to investigate the rampant corruption revealed by *Tehelka* but to look into the “motives and means employed in the operation”. No charges have been laid against any politician or general but the web site has been compelled to hire a team of 14 lawyers assisted by seven journalists to counter the government arguments. The purpose is obvious: to drive *Tehelka* out of business so as to ensure that the government never faces a similar political embarrassment. Over the past year, the number of *Tehelka* employees has shrunk from 105 to just 15.

Badal's arrest follows that of Kashmiri journalist Iftikhar Geelani who has been held in remand since June 9 after being accused of possessing classified military documents. He was charged under the Officials Secrets Act introduced under British colonial rule in 1923 as one means of detaining Indians involved in the independence movement.

On July 24, a New Delhi court rejected Geelani's appeal for a second opinion on the classification of documents seized from him and extended his judicial custody until July 31. The “highly sensitive” documents in question are freely available on the Internet. One is a booklet entitled “Denial of Freedom and Human Rights” published in 1996 by a Pakistani thinktank, which has been widely distributed among human rights organisations internationally. Aware that the case was becoming a debacle, the New Delhi police added a second charge, claiming pornographic material had been recovered from Geelani's confiscated computer.

Geelani's detention is part of intensifying political oppression in Kashmir. He was targeted one day after the arrest of his father-in-law Sayed Ali Shah Geelani, former chairman of Hurriyat; a legal party advocating Kashmiri separatism. Sayed Ali Shah Geelani was accused of “indulging in directing the people to boycott elections, and carrying out activities designed to develop hatred and disaffection amongst the masses against the Union of India.” The journalist, who has always disavowed the politics of his father-in-law, believes he has been arrested because of his

family connection.

A third case involves the threatened expulsion of Alex Perry, a journalist with *Time* magazine. Perry was called in to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) for questioning after he wrote a comment entitled “Asleep at the Wheel” in the June 17 issue of the magazine. He was interrogated about his possession of two passports—he holds dual citizenship—and his press accreditation in India was placed in doubt.

The real reasons, however, were obviously political. Perry’s article had questioned Vajpayee’s ability to handle the country’s nuclear arsenal in the present tense standoff with Pakistan. Even though the article began with an unflattering reflection on Vajpayee’s age, health and drinking habits, its central focus was on the prime minister’s more aggressive stance towards Pakistan and the growing influence of Hindu extremists in the Indian cabinet. The article, written just weeks before a cabinet reshuffle and the appointment of Hindu hardliner L.K. Advani as deputy prime minister, dwells on the infighting within the BJP leadership.

The government reacted to Perry’s article with undisguised hostility, saying that a “foreign hand” was promoting stories to discredit the prime minister. The BJP organised a public burning of the issue of *Time* in New Delhi. A local newspaper published Perry’s private address and telephone number leading to a series of death threats. He was forced to leave his home and hire armed bodyguards for security.

Perry has been covering South Asia for 12 years and was recently appointed chief of the New Delhi office of *Time*. Last year he was the first journalist to enter the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif after the fall of the Taliban and to break the news of the massacre of Taliban fighters at the Sultan Raziya school and later at the nearby prison at Qala-i-Jangi.

The Vajpayee government obviously wants Perry out of the country not so much because of the domestic impact of his more critical articles—*Time* magazine’s circulation in India is comparatively small—but because of their impact of its international image. Authorities had already expressed their reservation in extending the accreditation of Perry and his colleague Tessa Loughton in December accusing them of taking an “anti-Indian” stand in the coverage of Kashmir. Perry came under fire again for writing an article entitled “India’s Beirut” in May on the communal violence in Gujarat in which the BJP was deeply implicated. Last week India’s state minister for home affairs Vidyasagar Rao defended the government’s treatment of Perry, saying “the issue is under examination”—an indication that he may still be forced to leave the country.

On July 11, the government virtually deported Nasir Sahdid, a Palestinian-born correspondent for the *Al Jazeera* network, by refusing to extend his press accreditation. The decision was in reaction to the network’s extensive coverage of the Gujarat riots which was beamed to the Middle East and parts of Europe. *Al Jazeera* showed footage of the torching of a mosque, the burning of the Koran and interviewed Muslim women who had been gang-raped by Hindu extremist thugs. Without a great deal of publicity, Indian officials pressured the network to change its correspondent under threat of shutting its operations in India altogether.

The tough line against Sahdid reflected the recent appointment of members of the Rashtrya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu extremist organisation allied to the BJP, to the Central Press Accreditation Committee (CPAC)—the official body which vets international journalists. The new CPAC representatives are demanding that accreditation not be extended to journalists like Perry who “hurt the nation’s sentiment”.

The appointments have drawn sharp criticism from journalists. Praful Bidwai, a New Delhi based writer, compared the government’s actions to the anti-democratic measures used by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to silence opponents during the notorious State of Emergency declared in 1975. “This is pernicious. Even during the Emergency, the government didn’t mess around with accreditation or the CPAC. Today, by packing it, it is undermining its integrity. It seems undeterred by strong protests from the Press Association, Indian Journalists’ Union, Working News Cameramen’s Association and All-India Newspaper Editors’ Conference,” he wrote.

The harassment and arrest of journalists is part of a broader attack on democratic rights in India. In a joint parliamentary session in March, the Vajpayee government pushed through the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which provides for wide powers to detain suspects and ban organisations. Its stacking of the CPAC and the steps taken to intimidate media critics are a warning that it is out to undermine other basic democratic rights, including freedom of press and the right of free speech.



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