

# Censorship bad under military dictators, worse under democrats

*If Jinnah were alive today, he probably wouldn't be able to write what he thought in the paper he founded*



MOHAMMED HANIF

**D**awn, Pakistan's oldest English-language newspaper, carries on its masthead the image of a man's face and this proud claim: "founded by Quaid-I-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah," who also founded the country itself. For the last eight years, the centerpiece of Dawn's weekend editorial page has been commentary on national politics and national security by the assistant editor Cyril Almeida.

Almeida writes in what some call very good English, though sometimes in ways that are irreverent or annoying to his subjects; he also happens to be one of very few non-Muslims in a media landscape dominated by religious right-wing ideologues. Jinnah, a staunch secular and an Anglophile, would have approved.

Three weeks ago, Almeida's column disappeared. His editor has said that it's a temporary and well-deserved break. But Almeida's column disappeared after the High Court of Lahore issued a non-bailable arrest warrant against him on treason-related charges for an article published in May. In it, he quoted former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif suggesting that the Pakistani authorities had, at a minimum, failed to prevent terrorists from attacking targets in India in 2008. "Should we allow them to cross the border and kill 150 people in Mumbai?" Sharif said, according to Almeida. (Sharif has not contested having said this.)

I don't think Almeida had missed a single column except on public holidays. One of Pakistan's most brilliant voices, after being hounded for two years, is now being si-

lenced, in the name of national security.

Almeida went to a court hearing earlier this month, along with Sharif and another former prime minister, both accused of treason. (The charge against Almeida is called "connivance.") A TV reporter asked him repeatedly: Is the media free in Pakistan? Almeida looked straight ahead, kept quiet and walked into the courtroom. He didn't look like a person on a well-deserved break. The court canceled the warrant, lifted a ban on his travelling abroad and scheduled another hearing for later this month.

What did Dawn do to deserve the collective ire of our establishment and its lackeys? For a long time, it was considered an editorially conservative paper: Its detractors used to call it Daily Yawn. It's the kind of paper that was once read by bureaucrats, diplomats and aspiring young people wanting to improve their English. But over the past decade, Dawn has become a bit more vigorous in its reporting and its commentary.

Two years ago, for example, Almeida reported that Sharif, then the prime minister, had told the army's top brass that if the military didn't act against militants, Pakistan would stand isolated in the world. The generals apparently were so shocked and hurt at the suggestion that they weren't seen abroad as a gaggle of peace-loving Gandhis that they went into a huddle and emerged shouting breach of national security. They demanded an inquiry, and a high-powered commission including senior intelligence officers was set up.

The besieged government fired its information minister for his "lapse" in failing to stop the story from being published. When the commission announced its findings, the army's spokesman tweeted that the military "rejected" them. The spokesman was made



Almeida now faces criminal and possibly trea-

son charges. Almeida was forced to retract the tweet, but the onslaught against Almeida and Dawn continued by other means.

Media competitors have called Almeida an enemy agent and a Sharif lackey. The newspaper stood by him, and he continued to write his column with occasional references to "the muzzle and the leash." Then, during the last election campaign this spring, Sharif — who was removed from office for corruption last year — gave Almeida that in-

# Channelling hopes, energy c

*As avenues towards peace hit a dead end, many Palestinians invest their tim*



NANA ASFOUR

**W**hat does it mean to be a Palestinian? In recent years, more and more individuals have turned to one creative field or another to offer up their own answer to that question, in the hope that a better understanding of it will bring real change.

"With the continued failure of the political process, many of us now believe that culture is where we should channel our resources, energy and hopes," Zina Jardaneh, chair of the board of the Palestinian Museum in Birzeit, in the West Bank, told me recently, echoing the words and sentiments of a number of other Palestinians I have spoken to in the past two decades. Drowned out by other events, their efforts deserve broader acknowledgment and support.

What started out as independent artists wishing to express themselves has grown into a collaborative campaign of sorts, with individuals and cultural organisations banding together to promote Palestinian arts.

The Palestinian Museum, conceived and built by Taawon, a non-profit civil society organisation formed in Europe by a group of Palestinian businessmen and intellectuals, is one example. Since the opening of its sprawling home in 2016, it has become a symbol of the ambitions and determination of those involved in this informal cultural "movement."

So has the Qalandiya International, or Qi, a biennial festival of contemporary arts, the result of seven cultural Palestinian institutions joining forces, which is unfolding this month in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel, and in cities worldwide, including New York. As the organisers note: "Qi aims to place Palestine on the world's cultural map by producing a series of exhibitions, as well as performances, talks, film screenings, workshops and tours, that

open up channels for dialogue and exchange, both locally and internationally."

Among the organisations behind Qi is the Ramallah-based A M Qattan Foundation, which this summer unveiled a multi-million-dollar center to host its projects. Over the years, it has nurtured untold Palestinian artists, musicians, writers, dancers and actors, and it now employs more than 100 people.

A M Qattan is far from alone. According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, there are 625 cultural centers in the Palestinian territories, with 545 cultural centers in the West Bank and 80 in the Gaza Strip. There are also 32 museums — 27 in the West Bank and five in the Gaza Strip.

These organisations have sprouted and have continued to operate despite many challenges, including travel restrictions between Israel and its surrounding areas, which complicates some Palestinians' ability to participate in their own cultural events.

One of the most immediate and wide-reaching art forms, of



Historic Palestinian dresses were on exhibition at the Palestinian Museum in a West Bank village.