

Pakistan: No return to the 1980s

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ON the whole, the lawyers-sponsored long march on Islamabad was a wholesome experience, as all activities that can reassure the people of their potential to effect a change always are.

Regardless of the motivation, the suspension of the bureaucratic canon that all non-religious political gatherings in Islamabad must be forcibly prevented should be welcomed. In a capital where even small groups of protesters have often been hounded and beaten up by truncheon-wielding goons in uniform, authorities' wooing of a large congregation was an unintended benefit of the long march. One should like to hope that this break from an ugly practice marks the beginning of a new tradition of tolerance of dissent.

The debate on what was actually achieved by the lawyers and what they could not achieve is unlikely to end soon. But there is little room for controversy on some harsh messages the event has sent to the federal authority, specifically to the People's Party high command.

First, it has become abundantly clear that no diversionary manoeuvre or subterfuge can help the government in bypassing the issue of the judges' restoration. Any further delay in resolving this matter will not only affect the authorities' ability to address issues on the people's list of priorities, it will also accelerate the politicisation of the judges' role and thus do serious harm to the cause of the judiciary's independence.

Secondly, the protest rallies provided ample proof, if any were needed, that the People's Party is losing its standing with the people because of a growing perception that it is dragging its feet on the judges issue not only because of its own reservations on the independence of the judiciary but also because of its subjective appreciation of the post-election

power structure. Unless the party can arrest the alienation of the common citizens with something better than the game of bluff and bluster started by some of its trouble-shooters, it will become dangerously vulnerable. The party has already created problems for itself by pandering to cronyism and it should know better than taking all its supporters for granted.

Thirdly, and more important than anything else, the rush among fortune-seekers of many different hues to play godfather to the lawyers' movement has exposed a game plan to revive the pattern of governance devised by Gen Ziaul Haq. In that design the scope for democratic politics will be minimal.

While the mainstay of Gen Zia's rule was his command over the armed forces, he did craft civilian support columns. He strengthened the conservative religious lobby with economic incentives, employment opportunities, and by helping it to fill its coffers and build up arsenals of modern weapons. He also allowed the business a free rein and pacified landlords by ensuring deletion of land reforms from political discourse. After initial jolts, he allowed the civilian bureaucracy the illusion of partnership with their more privileged counterparts from the military. Through purges under the Provisional Constitution Order (PCO) of 1981 he created a docile judiciary that became a willing tool for creating a theocracy. Finally, he laid claims to immortality by acquiring nuclear weapons. It was this formidable coalition of vested interests that sustained Gen Zia's anti-democratic rule.

This state model easily survived some infirm tinkering by two PPP governments and the second PML-N government deemed it prudent to make it even stronger. Gen Musharraf stumbled into a manner of governance that led to the collapse of the edifice Gen Zia had so laboriously raised. While following Gen Zia's example in demonising and demolishing the predecessors in power (PML-N in Gen Musharraf's case and PPP in Gen Zia's case) he alienated the big business and then squeezed the civil bureaucracy out of decision-making.

He had no problem with the conservative clerics to begin with but after 9/11 it became impossible

for him to pamper them. His ham-handed drive against terrorism did not allow the public to realise that this war was being fought in Pakistan's interest and an overwhelming majority, especially in areas bordering Afghanistan, came to believe that Islamabad was fighting America's war. By ostracising the architect of the bomb he alienated the nuclear hawks. Thus by the end of 2006 the general had knocked down all the props of his power except for the judiciary.

His 2007 decision to break with the judiciary is likely to be written down as one of the most intriguing acts of hara-kiri in the annals of totalitarian rule. Finding himself isolated and under a multi-dimensional pressure to hold a general election, and to allow some fairplay, Gen Musharraf had no option but to fish for support in political parties other than the one he had dethroned in 1999. His failure in keeping the latter out was inevitable in the crude manoeuvre.

The lawyers' movement and the apparent lack of intra-coalition cohesion seem to have reactivated the lovers of the Zia model. Quite obviously they believe the present coalition, disliked by the religious parties, big businesses and even by the permanent establishment, should give way to an IJI-like alliance backed by the interest groups mentioned above. The sudden emergence of some of the veteran coup-makers as champions of democracy can only be explained in this context.

It is no secret that quite a few powerful elements have already started suggesting a fresh election within a few months and the traditional power-brokers, who should never be considered as having retired, are busy painting scenarios that can tempt any politician.

No elaborate argument is needed to prove that Pakistan cannot afford a return to the 1980s. The Zia model envisages an anti-democratic and obscurantist regime that can never appreciate the demands of a federal state, nor can it do justice to the teeming millions - women, peasants, workers and the minority communities. All those working for a revival of the Zia legacy are thus, consciously or unwittingly, paving the way to an ultimate disaster.

This increases the responsibility of the

coalition leaders for completing the transition to democracy. A total break with the authoritarian tradition, everybody knows what that means, will only be the first step towards the establishment of democratic government. The need for speed is manifest. Nobody should entertain the illusion that the window of opportunity opened to the politicians bearing civilian badges will remain open for ever.

This should be taken not as a call for blind support to the wobbly coalition because it must learn to earn people's goodwill but it is necessary to urge the coalition partners to look beyond their narrow party interests (easier said than done) at least over the period required to put a democratic apparatus in place.

All coalitions are temporary arrangements and must sooner or later break down. In Pakistan's present situation, any effort aimed at hastening the inevitable will impose on the people costs they cannot bear. Thus, the tendency visible in each major coalition partner's camp that the other side is under some unavoidable compulsion to stay in tandem needs to be resisted. Successful management of a coalition is an art that can only be acquired through diligent striving towards agreed goals. It is time the learning process was earnestly begun.

P.S.

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