

Pakistan: Lawyers' victory rekindles faith in just struggle

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History is made. It is a true moment of jubilation for Pakistanis. Peoples' faith in just struggle is revived. The two-year peaceful and consistent lawyers' protest movement finally got victory on 16th March 09, when the Zardari-led PPP government bowed down to popular will of the people of Pakistan and agreed to reinstate the deposed chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry who, along with nearly 59 judges, had been sacked by General Pervez Musharraf almost two years ago.

The government decision came amid the massive and historic long march of lawyers and opposition supporters, heading towards Islamabad from Lahore for staging a sit-in outside the parliament. The total failure of law and order and a near revolt situation in Lahore on 15th of March in fact shook up the power corridors. The situation led to hectic and long sessions of high level parleys, which finally culminated on the morning of 16th March when the Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani appeared on state TV and made the much-awaited announcement to reinstate deposed judiciary. The belated but the much-awaited announcement was welcomed and widely termed as a good omen to save the country from further chaos and anarchy.

Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry was suspended by the then president General Musharraf on 9th March 2007 for CJ's alleged role in destabilizing the government by blocking some of the major decisions, particularly the privatization of Pakistan Steel Mills. The dictatorial decision triggered the historic lawyers' movement. All the major political parties, including Benazir Butto's Peoples Party and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League supported the lawyers' movement to reinstate the Chief Justice. The movement not only forced Gen Musharraf to shed uniform but also kicked him out of the presidency.

February 2008 elections results were a perfect reflection of disapproval of sacking of judiciary. As a result of these elections PPP emerged as single largest party in the Parliament, Zardari managed to wield power by cleverly forging parliamentary alliances and signing political agreements with Nawaz Party (PML-N). After successfully removing Gen Musharraf from presidency, Zardari secured the prime post for himself to become next president of the country. Majority of the people believed that Zardari would reinstate deposed judiciary and withdraw some presidential powers as promised to restore parliamentary democracy.

But soon he started showing skills of a clever politician by evading fulfilling the promises and agreement made with the people and his allies. His core team of advisors, mainly comprising non-constituency-based politicians told the masses to forget Chief Justice's restoration. They used to say CJ has politicized himself, so no question of his restoration now. But at the same time they did not stop appointing the PPP affiliated persons in top judiciary.

The situation led to enhanced frustration among lawyers community. The disqualification of the two top PML-N leaders by the controversial judiciary added fuel to the fury of masses that turned against Zardari. PPP popularity was a nose dive. But, unaware of these developments at the ground, Zardari was bent upon running the state affairs in old-fashioned feudal style.

It was irony of the situation that all this was happening when a popularly elected party, and not a

military regime, was in power. In fact, many PPP activists, workers and supporters were disappointed and not expecting this from their party whose slain leader Benazir Bhutto herself made repeated assertions on record to restore the deposed judiciary.

By taking such positions Zardari had put himself on the dangerous path of Musharraf. Power made him blind to such extent that he conveyed to Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani and other influential players, including probably the Army that he would single handedly cope with the lawyers and opposition parties. He saw no law and order problem posed by the present protest. He thought the long march, which will not be allowed to take place, was transitory and a one-time affair and the PPP would form its government in the Punjab.

In meetings with powerful visitors to the Presidency, reportedly Zardari asserted that: "I alone can handle this crisis. I will set everything right", he was quoted as telling his callers, disagreeing with them that a severe crisis had gripped the country because of the ongoing protest. Zardari was totally inflexible on the issues of Iftikhar Chaudhry's restoration and the disqualification of Nawaz Sharif and Shahbaz Sharif.

He was of the view that there would be no end to such demands if he succumbed to the pressure being exerted by the lawyers and the PML-N. As a result, the government would become a laughing stock, he believed. But, alas! It happened exactly the same. He has to succumb the pressure, making himself a laughing stock with extremely diminished popularity. The successful long March coupled with US pressure along side Gillani' and Army's disapproval of his formula rendered Zardari isolated, feeling a besieged leader counting his broken promises.

The prevailing situation has not only put the PPP government in severe moral deficit, which will take time to recover but also clipped Zardari's wishes to remain autocrat having maximum powers like Musharraf. For example to keep on using executive powers without taking PM and ministers on board and Zardari plans to incorporate PPP sympathizers in state structures gradually within next five years, may never be materialized now. Hard days are now awaiting him. There is little currency in the theory that he is trapped. It will not be untrue if he is called author of all his future troubles.

The dilemma is that Zardari is not ready to realize the ground realities. He is not going to feel the dynamics and degree of socio-political changes, brought about as result of lawyers' movement in the last two years. Political parameters of popularity are dramatically changed and media has broken the decaying myths about state crafts. Unfortunately Zardari is living in a total different paradigm of thought where a strong hand methodology is must to level political scores with rivals. He is doing the real power politics of 1980s fashions.

Huge amount of water has passed through bridges of time. Power politics may be true at district level but totally impractical at national level. The concepts of imperialist-driven "Good Governance is pillar of today's functional democracy. He has to relearn the ToRs of his job, assigned by the top masters. Perhaps he has to reconcile with this fact and be a good guy.

No doubt, PPP leadership including Zardari and Benazir Butto suffered most at the hands of Pro-establishment judiciary, but this does not mean to use the state powers and legal mandate as a tool of suppression. Zardari and his PPP can only repair the damage by recognizing the ground realities and doing away with power politics paranoia. The only thing they have to realize is that even US will not approve their power politics paradigm. International political realities have different requirement, which are not compatible with PPP prevailing style. Clear Positions and stances on principles/issues are real deterrents of todays national politics.

They must understand the new culture of politics of resistance and standing- besides-barricades has

been set in. It is a new Pakistan. They have to deal with an aware media, a new layer of motivated lawyer leaders, revolutionary civil society activists and radicalized masses much aware of their rights. Besides political parties these are potential future political stake holders and no party can afford to underestimate them. There is no room now to run Pakistan in the style called power politics.