

Pakistan: What will change and how?

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THE unprecedented campaign by the lawyers community in defence of the judiciary has spurred hope in the hearts of ordinary women and men across the land and ambition in the hearts of many who wish to be their new masters. Everybody is asking everybody else as to how this struggle will end. Quite a few observers, trying as usual to run ahead of the caravan, cannot hold back their tidings of a new order. What does it mean for the long-suffering majority of the people?

The lawyers have jealously protected, and done so rightly, their struggle against hijacking by outsiders. They have avoided, again rightly, spelling out the relief they are asking for. Ostensibly they are demanding an end to the Establishment's expedition against the Chief Justice, in particular, and the institution of the judiciary, in general. The objective is the establishment of an unexceptionable convention that from now on it would not be possible to coax or coerce the judiciary into upholding all and any acts or edicts of holders of power, regardless of the merits of their claim to legitimacy.

However, many among the blackcoats, especially the young ones who have provided the community with the critically needed spine, have set their sights much higher: they wish to see justice established not only in a narrow legal sense but also in broader political and social meanings of the term. It is possible that they have been led into thus defining their goal by reading the minds of the crowds that have greeted them in city after city and who have waited by the roadside for the Chief Justice's cavalcade for long hours.

There is no doubt that the people no longer have faith in piecemeal justice; they look for deliverance from each and every cause of their suffering. As happens in struggles for national liberation, everybody, the bystander as well as

the activist in the thick of battle, defines justice in terms of his/her own needs and aspirations. A complete presentation of their wish-list is perhaps impossible but some of the items on the agenda can be mentioned here. The change that many have begun to talk about means in the eyes of the masses: government by freely chosen representatives, rule of law, freedom from police (and their fellow travellers') raj, satisfaction of the tenant's (especially bonded hari's) hunger for land, guarantees of gainful employment for everyone and entitlement to decent wages, equal opportunity to women and the poor, provision of facilities for quality education for every child and youth, guarantees of basic rights to life, security and liberty, and the right to provision of water, electricity and gas.

The lawyers' agitation has certainly contributed to the formulation of the people's agenda, but an equally important factor is the unusual nature of the coming general election. It is no ordinary election in which the only issue could be the election of a team, old or new, to manage the state within an already settled framework. The stakes in the 2007 general election are much higher. Not only the people of Pakistan but also the entire body of their well-wishers abroad wish this election to mark the country's transition to democratic governance. In a way this election is comparable to the 1970 polls and the people, including the small and exhausted intelligentsia believe this is the time to decide the fundamental issues, failure to resolve which has pushed Pakistan into one crisis after another.

What this means is that the issue is not merely one of replacing the man at the top or revising the terms of his contract, the essential issue is division of powers among the three organs of the state recognised in the democratic world and guarding the people's sovereign rights against encroachment by any party. And since what has been said above amounts to a systemic change and a restructuring of the state, the people have every right to put forward their views on the direction and substance of the state's agenda.

Quite a few people want the lawyers to take up the people's agenda and put their political and

socio-economic demands up front, otherwise the public support for them will remain unreciprocated. This demand appears to be patently unfair. The question of reciprocity does not arise. The fight for the independence of the judiciary is not a matter of exclusive concern of lawyers, who may appear to be fighting for their group interest but are in reality fighting for the basic rights of the whole population of the country.

Besides, the lawyers have already done more than what was expected of them. They have shown the way to overcoming the fear of a seemingly immovable and invincible authority. They have demonstrated the possibilities of mobilising a sizeable force on the basis of principles of justice without exploiting any community's behalf, and they have foiled attempts to frighten them through police violence and waves of arbitrary arrest and detention. They can rightly say that they have opened the floodgates of change but the floodwaters are not subject to their control.

The sort of change the people have set their hearts on will not come about until the masses in huge numbers, not in thousands but in hundreds of thousands, resolve to pull down the walls the vested interests have raised between them and the seat of power. The lawyers cannot mobilise such a force. That can only be done by political parties. Unfortunately, the political parties, at least most of them, have successfully knocked themselves out of reckoning and any reference to them in a political discussion is sometimes greeted with howls of protest. It is time such cynical dismissal of political parties was given up. For one thing, there is no alternative engine of political change. For another, a discussion on the political parties' past is bound to get bogged down in a barren debate as to who caused greater harm to Pakistan - the so-called civilian political governments or the military-led political regimes. Above all, the people should accept some responsibility for letting the political parties make a mess of their mandate. The moment is quite favourable for any political party that sincerely wants to win the hearts and minds of the masses and is committed to the pursuit of power solely on the strength of public

backing.

Although the time to the general election may not appear sufficient to allow for broad-based parties' rebirth, in situations such as now obtaining in the country, even a small investment in the people's political education and mobilisation will pay high dividends. What is required is that instead of talking only among themselves and basing decisions on each other's ignorance of reality or on their expectations of accommodation with the regime in power, the party leaderships should engage themselves in a sustained and comprehensive dialogue with the people to ascertain their views on what they are prepared to yield to the state and what the state must guarantee them as part of its contract with them.

The factors that prevent political parties from spelling out their goals and policies are known. Pakistan is now a totally fractured society, thanks to successive spells of authoritarian rule, and it is not easy to draw up propositions that are equally acceptable to all parts of the country and to all communities and groups living in different regions, even in different parts of a region. But if the task is difficult today it may be impossible tomorrow. The political parties should grow out of the habit of seeking rewards without sweating for them. They will win half of their battles the moment their programmes and pledges are brought into harmony with the fair demands of the people.

It may be necessary to point out that the political parties' failure to move forward without an understanding with the masses will cost them and the country dear. They will lose whatever bargaining power vis-à-vis the Establishment circumstances have thrown their way. Once again they will be held responsible for missing the moment of change as visualised by the citizens of Pakistan. All those in a position to help the political parties rise to the occasion must also bear in mind the consequences if the people are again cheated out of the reward for their sacrifices. They deserve better than what they have traditionally received at the end of Pakistan's periodical upheavals, and what Faiz had lamented in the troubled March of 1977:

*'Hum keh hain kub say dar-i-ummed kay daryuza-gar
Yeh ghari guzri tau phir dast-i-talab phailain gay
Kucha-o-bazar say phir chun kay raiza raiza khwab
Hum yunhi pehlay ki soorat jornay lug = jaingay'.*

*(In free translation the poet says: 'We are a
horde of beggars that has been held for long at
the gate of hope. Once this moment has passed, we
will again raise our hands in supplication. After
collecting the bits and pieces of our dreams from
streets and boulevards, we will start
reconstructing them as before'.)*

P.S.

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