

Pakistan: The people again done in?

Sunday 7 October 2007, by [REHMAN I. A.](#) (Date first published: 6 October 2007).

During its brief history Pakistan has been used as a stage for many a charade, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes in the name of democracy but always in national interest and for the people! The latest farce is a deal between Gen Pervez Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto. As usual on such occasions the people do not know whether to laugh or curse their stars.

Quite a few people believe that on the fourth of October, in the year 2007, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's party was stabbed in the back by none other than his daughter and that the injury may prove fatal. Did the 40-year-old party that had begun by holding up the promise of people's empowerment deserve to spend its adult years as the bonded maid of a praetorian consul?

While the country was going through a convulsion on whose outcome depended the future of its young ones, the PPP had three concerns on the top of its agenda: the people's right to democracy, the party's prospects in the coming general election, and the possibility of its chairperson's rehabilitation in active politics — in that order.

The chairperson seems to have chosen to read the priorities upside down. As she bargained for reprieve for herself, she rendered the party more vulnerable than before and the prospect for democratic revival bleaker.

Many in the party had hoped that the chairperson would give the organisation a new lease of life and democracy a chance by stepping out of the power race and letting the Young Turks lead what is left of the great party. Frustrated, they do not know how to defend an indefensible deal.

There were also many, inside the party and outside, who had, at the very first reports of the deal, warned of a kiss of death. During the weeks that the deal took to materialise this warning was justified many times over.

Those who have persuaded themselves to believe that the deal will benefit Pakistan or the PPP may be in for early shocks. The ordinance that is being hailed for reconciliation between Gen Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto is most likely to further alienate the people from both. Besides, the General's team will ensure that his promises to BB — removal of bar to a third bid for premiership, etc. — are put on hold till after the electoral contest, which the PPP will enter with a thin force of bedraggled soldiers. If it does not do well enough at

the polls, the General is likely to renege on his pledges to BB as comfortably as he had abandoned MMA after the pact leading to the 17th amendment. The party faithful will then be left to ponder what Ghalib had said over a century ago:

Kia woh Namrud ki khudai thi/Bandagi mein mera bhala na huwa.

Benazir Bhutto was right when she identified quasi-religious militancy as the most serious threat to Pakistan and argued that the country could be saved only by the people, backed by civilian democratic government. But the regime with which she has pawned her soul is capable neither of preventing Pakistan's Talibanisation nor of establishing a popular democracy. The threat to the state has increased.

The other party to the deal is unlikely to fare any better than the PPP. The General's victory is as pyrrhic as pyrrhic can be. He will not be as strong and as free a ruler as he has so far been. Attempts to run the country as before will make the going much tougher.

At the same time the events of the past few weeks will give rise to new political forces and the next round between democrats and autocrats may take place sooner than expected and may not end the way the last one has.

However, the fate of the deal-makers will matter to the people less than their own ordeal. The people's disappointments over the past few weeks will severely affect their activism that the lawyers' agitation had engendered. Between March 9 and September 29

Pakistan politics went through a cycle that has certain basic lessons for the hardy democrats.

The lawyers' courage out in the open helped them win people's support and by July 20 the regime seemed to have been routed. But then the streets were emptied of the democrats and the gendarmes moved in. They had a dry run on September 10 when Nawaz Sharif was cheated out of his birthright, contrary to everything contained in the Constitution, laws and rules of decency, and the people watched passively while their half-baked leaders sulked under detention.

Assured that the people were not returning to the streets, the regime showed its hideous face on September 29, one of the blackest days in the history of Pakistani people. The opposition fell back on the rhetoric of its leaders and a strategy of blocking General Musharraf's election by resigning from legislatures. This manoeuvre was a non-starter to begin with and the delay in carrying it out made its defeat certain.

In the process the experts found the Constitution silent on the effect on the presidential election if a provincial assembly stood dissolved. The Indians had been alive to this eventuality and

therefore they made it clear in the constitution that the dissolution of a state (provincial) assembly would not affect the election of the president. But this provision offers little help to Sher Afgan.

A state in India represents only 1/17th of the provincial part of the electoral college whereas a province in Pakistan represents 1/4th of the provincial component of the electoral college.

All this constitutional and legal quibble apart, the essential fact is that the battle for the people's right to self-rule will be won neither in courts nor in assemblies of doubtful origins; this battle will be won by people's mobilisation alone.

The democrats are on the verge of another defeat because they have been looking for short-cuts to democracy where none are available.

It's time to return to the basics of mass mobilisation through serious political work.

P.S.

* From Dawn: <http://www.dawn.com/2007/10/06/top9.htm>