
Black is white, white is black?

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FRIDAY, March 21, the Spring Equinox of Anno Domini 2008, was a truly secular day.

The Zoroastrians, followers of Zoroaster, the first monotheistic prophet known to man, and the Iranians celebrated Nauroz, the advent of spring (bahaar aamed, bahaar aamed) and started a fortnight's festivities; the Hindus celebrated Holi by spreading colour around; the Christians remembered the crucifixion of Christ and prayed on Good Friday; and the Muslim world celebrated the birth of the prophet of Islam.

What else is there to remember with joy or with sorrow? Our honourable National Assembly met on March 19 and for the first time in its sporadic and vainglorious history elected a woman as its speaker, a young, attractive member of the gentler sex.

This was a pleasant change after having seen that august and worthy chair filled to its capacity by a sour and dour male member of the House.

Fehmida Mirza carries herself and the colours she wears well and is effortlessly audible. Following the ancient tradition, she was berobed in black. Can our assembly not break with tradition and the unwritten rule? Can our 'Madam Speaker' not have designed for her a whole range of colourful robes to match her outfits?

This would fit in with the 'new look' now projected by the two leaders of the main coalition parties.

What else is new? Apart from the prime minister, the name held so secretively for so long, there is a lengthy essay being circulated on the internet titled 'Pakistan: How liberals trashed the country', written by a South Indian scholar (PhD Cambridge), Sachithanandamsathananthan. (The long pronounceable name — S25 — reminds me of my dear departed friend Vityanandashivaramakrishna — V26.)

S25, after doing a little bit of lambasting of our 'liberals' ('born-again democrats') which comprise the newly born 'civil society' and the legal fraternity, and relating how Nawaz Sharif had hijacked not only an aeroplane but nine years ago was planning to hijack the Constitution and declare himself Amirul Momineen, and how Benazir had donned a placatory headscarf and 13 years ago funded and backed the Taliban, comments:

"Having screamed for genuine elections, the liberals have to live with the results: namely, the return of PPP's Asif Zardari and PML-N's Nawaz Sharif, both of whom have controversial antecedents in Pakistani politics." And then he makes reference to a column printed in this newspaper on April 20, 2001:

"Almost seven years ago, Ayaz Amir had posed the following rhetorical questions: 'Does any newspaper-reading man in Pakistan doubt Benazir's and Asif's guilt? Does anyone think they got no commission from the Swiss firm, SGS-Cotecna? Does anyone doubt the financial acumen of the then ruling couple who turned Islamabad into an open auction mart where every deal, no matter how outrageous, was on offer provided the right palms were greased?' The Sharifs' notions of government were intensely private: which is to say, have your own man at every key post ..."

In the person of Justice Qayyum at the Lahore High Court they had the closest thing they could get to a personal judge. Division of family assets, balancing of huge bank loans against dummy collateral, tightening the noose around Asif Zardari and Benazir ...'

"And Amir concluded: 'The common factor between both parties is gangsterism and corruption. Shahbaz Sharif resembled nothing so much as a Mafioso don. What does Asif Zardari look like? In any Godfather sequel he can easily get a part. As for moneymaking it is hard to figure out who beat whom: the PPP leadership or the Muslim League? My own guess is the Sharifs were professionals: subtle about their money. Zardari left a trail, which goes all the way to Rockwood, French submarines ...'"

None of this was or is news to us. We knew and know it all. Justice Qayyum, of course, teamed up with the last government of the Chaudhries of Gujrat and Shaukat Aziz, was part of General Pervez Musharraf's legal team before he became our attorney general, and is responsible for much of the legal mire in which Musharraf now finds himself.

Ayaz is a seasoned journalist and columnist who for some 20 years, after writing elsewhere for a decade or so, sold his soul to Dawn in which he faithfully recorded his comments and views each Friday. He is now sadly departed but can still be read in our national press. A man of many parts — army officer, civil servant, diplomat, journalist — he entered politics as an MPA in Mian Sahib's second government in 1997, didn't last too long, and resigned his seat when he realised that he was helpless and could do nothing for his constituents to whom he had promised much. Now, in these 'historic' free and fair elections (truly they were, and held by a military man who proved himself to be an incapable dictator), Ayaz has offered himself up once again, this time as an MNA, once again of the party of the Mian.

We must wish him luck and hope that with the dawning of this new dawn of democracy during which miracles are to be performed and Pakistan is to bask in the sunlight of success and prosperity, Ayaz will not find that he is unable to keep the promises he has this time round made to the citizens of Chakwal.

To return to the “deracinated liberals” of Pakistan, as S25 terms them in his essay, and to quote his final summation:

“... he warriors of democracy are faltering. Liberals are losing enthusiasm for reinstating that pillar of democracy — the judiciary — since the Bush administration has signalled its opposition.

The PPP too is waffling on the issue. Speaking to the press, ‘Zardari parried several questions on issues like reinstatement of deposed judges ... the PPP leader said that the matter would be decided by parliament’ (Dawn, Feb 20). For the same reason, the liberals’ hysterical cries for the President’s resignation have subsided ...

So, in their March 9 Murree Summit Declaration they skilfully passed the buck on reinstating the judiciary to the National Assembly: ‘the restoration of deposed judges as on Nov 2, 2007, shall be brought about through a parliamentary resolution to be passed in the National Assembly within 30 days of the formation of the federal government’ (Dawn, March 10).

Even a cursory knowledge of fratricidal Pakistani politics will show that the resolution will not see the light of day. In other words, reinstatement has been shelved as per instructions from the US embassy ...

“The backsliding continues. While addressing the Sindh High Court Bar Association, Aitzaz Ahsan glibly abandoned the demand for justice for victims of the Karachi bloodbath: ‘I have forgotten the May 12 mayhem,’ he advised the lawyers, ‘and would like to request that it is better for all of us to forget that tragic incident.’ (Dawn, March 6). Is that pragmatic accommodation? If so, with whom? And, for what rewards?

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