
Handcuffed to history

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IF BEING part of the world system the soaring oil prices and the global food shortage is eroding the Pakistani people's purchasing power, the unstable domestic power scene too is contributing to Pakistan's precarious socio-economic scene.

Like all contemporary states and societies Pakistan's state and society too must function within the parameters of the best available accountability and participatory system for governance that the human intellect has been able to craft. Hence the return of democracy has been a necessary requirement for Pakistan's progress and stability.

Yet how this democratic system will function is what will determine the degree to which democracy will lead the reform and reconstruction process of Pakistan, the Pakistani intellect, society and State.

The 'how' of Pakistan's democratic functioning depends on the principals who call the shots in setting up the democratic system and indeed also influence the allied institutions including the judiciary, the bureaucracy and the armed forces. Interestingly, Pakistan's 'principals', who also are the factors that will decide the outcome of Pakistan's post-electoral struggle, are three men President Pervez Musharraf, the PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari and Nawaz Sharif, the PML-N leader.

Significantly, how these men are politically positioning themselves also depends on two crucial factors — the spirit of 2007 and the Washington factor. What was the spirit of 2007? Pakistan's urban-educated demanded justice and rule of law as provided in the Constitution of Pakistan. The spirit behind the movement seeks above all a genuinely functioning democracy in which all exercise of power is held accountable.

And the spirit of 2007 asserts that without an independent judiciary, democracy cannot serve the average citizen because an independent judiciary alone can hold the democratic leaders and State institutions accountable if they fail in their Constitutional duty to serve the citizens.

The spirit of 2007 is not an exclusive party-pusher but indeed pushes democratic principles. It has therefore emerged as another potent power centre in society emitting political energy that represents public interest and prevents manipulation of processes and change tools. Media provides the crucial and necessary underpinning for this new power centre.

The continuous articulation in public space of the necessity

to rule and govern by law and for the people's good has forced political parties, at differing levels, to respond to the demands of the spirit of 2007. It was indeed this palpable spirit of 2007 that forced a reversal of both the rather dubiously planned delay in the bye-elections and of Supreme Court's May 12 short order that the media will not cover the judiciary issue.

Similarly, the Washington factor, by virtue of its sustained engagement with the Musharraf government since 9/11 especially on Washington's 'war on terror' and the PPP's exile politics and also current engagement with Washington, becomes a relevant factor for at least two, the PPP and Musharraf, of the three principals in current Pakistani politics.

While Nawaz Sharif too seeks engagement with Washington but there appears to be no evidence that PML(N) seeks NOC from Washington for its politics or policies and neither does it seek the Washington route back into power. Now to the principals. General Musharraf represents Pakistan's khaki politician who stands discredited because of his failed political experience of 'guided democracy which he referred to as 'genuine democracy.' Based on the election results and multiple opinion polls surveys it is obvious that the ordinary person does not like him, the opinion makers do not support him.

Key players including Zardari now want him out. He has no impact on policy-making and the army is no longer under his wings. His time is up. The army and not many Pakistanis want Musharraf lynched or insulted. The general feeling is that Musharraf should be sent off with a salute and a salaam.

While Zardari and Sharif, representing the electoral forces are genuinely committed to the democratic system, they are pushing different agendas. Numerous factors are influencing Zardari's decision to not pointedly adopt the agenda being pushed by the spirit of 2007 — principally the agenda of restoration of the judiciary.

Some of the key factors include Zardari's own personal encounter with power and politics, his past suffering plus the controversies linked with his past, his engagement with the Musharraf-led Establishment, his experience with the Pakistan judiciary, the paradox of his personal political insecurities combined with his political strengths, the natural political competitiveness vis-a-vis Nawaz Sharif the man he genuinely seeks to continue coalition partnership with, politics within his own party, his relationship with the Americans, the NRO factor and his proclivity for and against two Supreme Court judges — Justice Dogar appointed Chief Justice by General Musharraf and Justice Iftikhar Chaudary the

Chief Justice removed by Musharraf.

Zardari has undeniably pushed the political reconciliation agenda. He is the man who calls the shots on the political alignments and federal level governance. With input from multiple sources he is moving towards becoming the final decision-maker on the federation's policies and federal appointments.

As the co-lead winner of the February elections, Zardari has inherited power. He has been the beneficiary of the centre of power shifting towards the constitutionally legitimate forces and away from the country's controversially and unconstitutionally elected president.

However, unless he soon supports the restoration of the judiciary and through a simpler route rather than the complicated and delayed route, his reconciliation man's image may not translate into genuine widespread support for him.

If the news of Zardari seeking to be the successor of Musharraf is correct, he most likely will not be a welcome candidate without restoration of the judiciary and without removing 58(2)b, the abolition of the NSC and reversal of powers to appoint services chiefs to the PM. The current constitutional package proposed by the PPP will easily take a year plus to get even close to passage by the parliament.

Sharif, the third man in Pakistan's political power pack has fully imbibed the political message of the spirit of 2007. His own agenda and his party's agenda squarely converge on two crucial issues — the removal of Musharraf and the restoration of the judiciary.

Sharif's politics and party has still to extend beyond the Punjab. His brother, now defacto elected Chief Minister of Punjab faces the challenge of improving his own record of governance in a very difficult economic and security situation. No less he will face the challenge of working the coalition in Punjab where the governor has already reportedly announced in a moment of political emotiveness that Punjab will become the fortress of the PPP.

The task for the PML-N is a challenging one. It has to work smoothly with the coalition in the Centre and Punjab and also build the party nation wide. It has to move beyond the two point agenda of go Musharraf go and the return of the judges. Clearly, the road ahead is bumpy. But if the army stays in the barracks and the spirit of 2007 remains intact, there is light at the end of this tunnel.

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