

Democracy — a fa

By Mushtaq Ahmad

ADDRESSING the members of the fourth estate in Lahore recently, the Prime Minister observed that in recorded history the twentieth century will be known for the universal triumph of democracy over all other systems or modes of government mankind has experienced and rejected as unsuited to its genius.

Soon after the end of the first world war, Woodrow Wilson had declared at the Peace Conference that the world must be made safe for democracy, only to discover on his return that the world's largest democracy of which he was the President, had renounced the Peace Treaty on which he had put his signature on his country's behalf. On seeing his dream shattered, one of America's greatest statesmen died a broken-hearted man. Within two decades another world war, more destructive and devastating than the first, had to be fought to save Western democracies, including the one of the United States, from what appeared to be an imminent collapse until the Soviet Union whose socialist system Benazir decried, had thrown in its weight against the onslaught of the fascist powers first for the conquest of Europe, and later of the annexation of its empires.

The second world war like the first, ideologically speaking had a European context, no matter how far-flung were the theatres of its operations. In the mortal contest between democracy and dictatorship, the people of the colonial world were disinterested spectators. If there was any expression of sympathy, it was conditional and qualified. It was by no means a war for their liberation by the champions of democracy, who were themselves holding them in bondage.

The Prime Minister's observation must be examined in the light of developments in the latter half of the century to which it has a direct relevance, and here, too, not without serious reservations. Democracy was a corollary, not necessarily inevitable though logical, of the freedom movements that swept across the Thrid World in this period. To their triumph the presence and pressure of the Soviet socialist state made a significant contribution. To equate its fall with the rise of democracy is to misread the lessons of history. Such a conclusion is premature to draw before events have time to take their shape. An overnight transplantation of the American pattern of capitalist democracy is unthinkable in a society accustomed to live in the state ownership of property.

The present generation of the Russians know what the drawbacks and defects of the communist system practised by their rulers were, but they are not yet conversant with the inequities and inequalities of the capitalist system on which their new rulers have pinned the hopes of reconstruction of a millennium of material prosperity. Russia was not a land of prosperity nor was it land of poverty. It was nevertheless a land of equality. The restoration of private property might well bring in its wake disparity, disillusionment and despair. Even in eastern Europe where the transition was expected to be relatively smooth, it is an uphill task, not easy to accomplish by waving the magic wand of democracy. In America itself the future of democracy does not seem as bright to its salesmen who market it abroad with a missionary zeal without realising the paying capacity of the customer.

Looking at the vast expanse of the Third World democracy is still a hot house plant whose seeds have been imported from abroad, and the sapling nourished from the same source. The freedom movements were apparently fought for the realisation of self-government, but it soon became clear that the assertion of the right of self-determination was their prime objective. Achievement of one and non-fulfilment of the other, is a universal experience and success where achieved has been partial and by no means permanent. Dictatorship has not been banished from their lands, nor are the prospects of democracy sound and secure enough to act as an impassable barrier even in a country like our own.

The overwhelming challenges the countries of the Third World encounter are an ever present threat to the collapse of the system still in an experimental phase. Creeping corruption and chronic inefficiency have continually eroded the soil. If the trees which have stood the test of time could be uprooted by the storms of social change, the recent breeds which have yet to strike deeper roots, are too shaky and fragile to survive. Pakistan, though only one among the multitude of states, provides a supreme example of the slippery path democracy has to tread.

Most of our politicians believe that the rich are destined to rule and the poor condemned to be ruled in blissful ignorance of history that when history repeats itself, it repeats with a vengeance.

Democracy cannot flourish under conditions of glaring inequalities where the people living at the bottom of the social scale, have only the freedom to starve. The sharp contrast between the living standards of the masses and the lavish lifestyle of the classes generates a climate of hatred and envy which disturbs the social order and disrupts the political system. The leaders of the Third World in waxing eloquent on the virtues of democracy, maintain a studied silence on the vices in which it abounds. By the ad nauseam repetition of the promise of a better tomorrow that never comes, they try to sustain an unsustainable hope that elected governments are the ultimate answer to their problems. We cannot say that any of them have so far genuinely effected a solution or have shown the intention or capacity to solve them. What we have witnessed is an ever-worsening situation in which the prospects of democracy hang perilously in the balance.

We do not have to go far beyond our frontiers in the distant lands of Asia, Africa and Latin America, to discover that their countries are a perennial prey to dictatorships punctuated by brief interlude of so-called democracies. Adjacent to our borders we have what its leaders proudly declare is the largest

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democracy in the world. The real rise of fundamentalism and fascism make mockery of the claim. Even behind its present facade of democracy we have a transparent dictatorship of a permanent majority over permanent minority. No democracy inside and no freedom outside is the clarion call of the forces that have raised their ugly heads above its subcontinental domain. Only a thin line of demarcation divides the elements in and out of power. Both share a common objective of expanding the frontiers of India to the countries which had once formed parts of the British empire in South Asia.

India's extraterritorial designs make the future of democracy in its own land bleak, more bleak than in any other country of the region, or for that matter, of the world. The colossal expenditure on its armament industry has a further depressing effect on the already depressed living standards of its people. And with its existing growth rate, the population bomb is certain to explode sooner or later, from which there can be no escape. The fabulously expensive nuclear and missiles programme will only add to its head of the massive debts it carries on its mad rush for power. The Soviet Union has a population problem to face, signs of internal upheaval after its power. If India decides to go against the neighbouring countries on its wistful glances, are more likely to be a liability than an asset whose teeth cannot be contained within its borders. All the evidence points to India embarking on such an imperialist road. All the evidence points to India democracy to its own people and freedom to its neighbours. The brutal suppression of the liberation struggle in Kashmir has no parallel even in its own history of the freedom movement.

India's dismal record falsifies its claim to be the largest democracy in the world. Next door to India and Pakistan is the world's most populous country which has no pretensions to democracy, but has a firm commitment to improve the lot of its population, which is also the declared aim of democracies without any intention to achieve it. The government of the People's Republic of China is a government for the people. Experience has proved that a government of the people in the Third World democracies, is not necessarily a government for the people. The masses have only the illusion of governing themselves, by an exercise of their fundamental right to vote.

The twentieth century will, therefore, go down in history as a century in which the unfree world broke the shackles of imperialism to enter the free world and not of dictatorships to join the ranks of the democracies, since democracy is not an antithesis of imperialism. The social and economic environment was not congenial for it to flower and flourish. To its triumph, poverty, ignorance, destitution and disease were big question marks. The Cabinets, the Parliaments and the Judiciary, are meaningless platitudes unless they impart a meaning to the lives of the multitude. The entire institutional framework rests on slender foundations that can be swept away by the tidal wave of a social revolution. Unless that revolution is accomplished, we will be living in an age of demagoguery and not in an era of democracy. Most of our politicians believe that the rich are destined to rule and the poor condemned to be ruled in blissful ignorance of history that when history repeats itself, it repeats with a vengeance.