

Authoritarianism & the third force

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TODAY, we live in a world where it is not unusual to see power arbitrarily assumed even in countries traditionally regarded as standard-bearers of democracy. Four years ago the presidential crown was not given voluntarily by the US electorate to George W. Bush. As we know, on the strength of a split verdict of the US Supreme Court and a tacit consensus on the part of much of corporate America, he simply took it.

Similarly, in our own country, just before the dawn of the new millennium with its promise of a new day, Gen. Musharraf staged a takeover, taking his cue from military strongmen of the past. Despite a democratic facade since and with the somewhat contentious issue of his uniform still pending, that takeover still remains with us.

What does this mean? Clearly, that government by force or a kind of delegated coercion rather than popular consent prevails in Pakistan. However, the facts — the matter of the good general's uniform, for example, with its four per cent margin of doubt — also point to something else. This one means an implicit apprehension in him as to the essential flimsiness of his position or the probability of the collapse of his carefully crafted governmental construct in the event of even a single move towards genuine democratization. What we are talking about is consequently a sort of contradiction in terms at the very heart of Pakistan's authoritarian order: the will to rule with a clear knowledge at the same time of the utter fallacy of any claim to do so.

This, though, is an authoritarian order with a difference. It does not quite fit the military-authoritarian stereotype afforded by the political dispensations of Ayub and even, for that matter, Zia. The reason is that Gen. Musharraf has proven, politically, a little more astute than either of his two interventionist predecessors. For a start, he deftly sidestepped the somewhat questionable option of martial law when first seizing executive authority in the country.

Accordingly, whereas Ayub and Zia would initially seem to have been conventional military

ace of religious militancy, are we not combating a generic mindset rather than a specific network as such? If so, as a noted Canadian journalist has sagely pointed out, perhaps we ought to be letting it keep a low profile rather than rounding it up with great panache and helping it get its act together. But, then, are these not, at least in the context of Pakistan, the wages of authoritarianism? After all, we do not really need to look too far back in our history to perceive a direct link between authoritarianism and radicalism. If today we observe this cycle somehow being reversed under the banner of "enlightened moderation", it is up to us not to get taken in. Let us see the phenomenon of the current rollback of jihad in Pakistan for what it is: evidence not so much of a sincere pledge to sanitize society and promote the values of a decent modernity as a desire to retain power at all costs. At any rate, the image of Pakistanis as primarily seekers of head-money is not a particularly edifying one. There are surely other, better ways of proving our national identity and also possibly of addressing the problem of security in the country.

The socioeconomic option — of using social and economic rehabilitation to contain Islamic militancy — is certainly not one that should be ruled out in relation to security merely on account of its being feasible only in the long term. This is not to say that the despair of the deprived in this and other parts of the Muslim world should be replaced with the mirage of the American dream. It is, however, to suggest that the humanity of the masses in these parts should be respected and that, socially and economically, they should be given their due. Clearly, in the case of Pakistan, this has not happened.

Our poor exist merely on sufferance with a vast gulf between them and the powerful and the affluent. This is because they are, in line with John Kerry's paradigm for the US, part of a Pakistan which is at best a sort of societal wasteland to which nothing trickles down other than more and more apathy.

Needless to say, this cannot be remedied unless we have a truly representative and socially committed order. To decide unilaterally in the corridors of power who should or should not represent the people of Pakistan will merely undermine this goal. To persist in obstructing the return