

If democracy is to work

Dawn
4/10/09

By S.M. Naseem

Democracy

PAKISTAN's road to democracy has been paved less with good intentions and more with hidden landmines, along with civilian roadblocks and military checkpoints that have prevented its people from choosing their own destiny. In recent months, particularly since the removal of Mr Jamali's government last June, an intense debate has been going on in the media on whether the military or the political parties are responsible for "destroying democracy" in Pakistan and whether democracy as practised in Pakistan in recent decades deserves being given another chance.

That there are a lot of people out there showing their discontent with democracy a la Benazir and Nawaz Sharif is hardly in doubt, but to construe this as an endorsement of the present military regime and its "facade of democracy" would be a considerable stretch of the imagination. The debate is getting increasingly polarized as the promised date for the giving up of the military uniform by General Musharraf approaches and the speculation on whether the promise will be kept continues amid conflicting signals from the president and his overzealous supporters.

Until recently, there existed two distinct schools of thought on the subject. The first consisted of those

period between Ziaul Haq and Musharraf, the military is known to have constantly interfered in the election process, both openly and covertly, and in ensuring that "right-minded" people get elected. That the results have not always been as scripted is a measure of the inherent strength of the democratic process.

One can agree with these new discontents of democracy and admirers of the present regime that many of those clamouring for its return harbour a romantic view of democracy and are not fully mindful of either its limitations or of its obligations. The sad and incontrovertible fact, however, is that democracy has not been given a fair and uninterrupted chance to develop in this country. It is true that the civilian democratic regimes, especially in the post-Ziaul Haq period, have also not distinguished themselves either in the political or economic sphere, and have earned notoriety for corruption and mismanagement which has made them anathema to the general public.

The sad and incontrovertible fact is that democracy has not been given a fair and uninterrupted chance to develop in this country. It is true that civilian democratic regimes, especially in the post-Ziaul Haq period, have also not distinguished themselves either in the political or the economic sphere. Yet military regimes cannot be said to have had a discernibly more favourable effect on the welfare of the people as empirical evidence has shown.

paradise. The present debate on democratic versus military rule should try to abstract from, to the extent possible, the long and sometimes ambiguous history surrounding it. After all, if we are prepared to make a new beginning on Kashmir and Indo-Pakistan relations, on which the military has always dragged its feet, why shouldn't democracy be given a new chance?

It can even be argued that unless democracy is fully restored and the military goes back to the barracks, the Indian leadership will continue to distrust Pakistani intentions, notwithstanding the optimism exuding from New York's Roosevelt Hotel after the Musharraf-Manmohan Singh meeting.

The real question to be debated in the current context is the relative space the military and civilian administration should be allowed to occupy in the political and economic spheres. In a democratic dispensation, it is axiomatic that the military should be subject to overall civilian

authority. Although the Pakistani Constitution recognizes it, the axiom has been repeatedly violated with impunity.

The military is constantly enlarging the scope of its operations, redefining its role and broadening its spheres of influence. On the pretext of forestalling the future possibility of a coup, it has vied for a permanent niche for itself in the governance of the country, through the forced establishment of the National Security Council, which even admirers of the regime consider as being "highly undemocratic".

The new discontents of

existed two distinct schools of thought on the subject.

The first consisted of those who considered that democracy was unsuited for developing countries which needed a strong leader to set things right and steer the country on the road to development. Though that view is still extant and probably shared by the bulk of those supporting President Musharraf, its influence is declining even among the less informed. The other school has long held the view that democracy has never been given a fair chance in Pakistan and that repeated interventions by the military, lasting on an average a decade or so each time, were giving democracy an extended "holiday" from which it returns more emaciated having unlearned all past lessons.

According to the second school of thought, to which the writer unabashedly subscribes, democracy needs a long and continuous period to take root, and its constant uprooting and replanting by gardeners who have no clue as to the principles of political botany, end up in yielding nothing but bitter fruits. Most observers of the Indian political scene, especially of the recent elections, are impressed by the high returns that country has received as a result of patience and perseverance with its political process and meticulous exclusion of the military from political affairs.

More recently, however, a third view seems to be emerging which sees General Musharraf's regime as an alternative to the preceding two perceptions. It defends the current military regime and upholds it as the best chance of ensuring a stable democracy in Pakistan in the long run. Articulating this view, among others, are some former members of the civil service of Pakistan, who have unfairly suffered at the hands of some civilian regimes after 1970. The view also seems to be shared by some "progressive" or "liberal" intellectuals who see the general as a check on religious fundamentalism and as a harbinger of a secular and modern state, although they are a bit sceptical about the general's tall claim of being a "renaissance" man. They also believe that eventually democracy will be restored, without saying how.

The central thesis of this group is that the present military regime is wrongly blamed for destroying democracy in Pakistan and that the real culprits are "the elected prime ministers starting with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and ending with Nawaz Sharif in 1999". The protagonists of this view portray the present regime as qualitatively different from previous military set-ups. However, this product differentiation is hard to sell and is confined, at best, to its pious intentions.

Objective analysis, however, shows that both political and military regimes are at least equally to blame for the tragic plight of democracy in Pakistan. Even in the

But halting the democratic process is (to rephrase a proverb) like throwing the baby out with the bath water. If at all, the brief military interludes should have been used as short surgical operations to remove the impediments to democracy and to enable people to overthrow those who are corrupt or dishonest through an election.

On the other hand, military rule has been practised not only more frequently, but also, not surprisingly, with greater diligence and fewer impediments, because of the military's organized structure and considerable resources. In addition, it has also enjoyed the unstinting support of the bureaucracy in general and the CSP in particular, which always collaborated (and has been more in sync) with the military regimes in Pakistan and contributed to the elitist ethos of Pakistani society.

Yet, past military regimes cannot be said to have had discernibly more favourable effects on the welfare of the people, especially the poor, as empirical evidence has amply shown. The only credit that periods of military rule can justly claim is that there has been somewhat higher growth though accompanied by greater inequality and a greater tilt towards elitist development policies. None of the four military regimes have succeeded in bringing such structural reforms as land redistribution and other social reforms, an independent administrative machinery to hold elections, electoral reforms ensuring inner-party democracy, the creation of an electoral fund to enable low-income individuals to take part in the electoral process and accountability commissions for major financial scandals involving both civil and military personnel.

Critics of democracy are also correct in pointing out the unfortunate chain of events which occurred during the formative years of Pakistan and that adversely affected the evolution of a democratic polity. These events deprived a solid foundation for the development of democratic institutions and traditions, providing our eastern neighbour (with whom we continue to have a fluctuating love-hate relationship) an unbeatable edge in these matters.

Our historical legacy of a rather rushed process of political liberation and the lack of a plan to deal with the problems of post-partition statecraft and development of our leaders were also to blame. The vacuum created by the early demise of the founding leaders allowed the civil service and the military to step into shoes that were several sizes too big for them.

That said, we cannot put all the blame of our present and the future on our past. Neither should democracy be made a forbidden fruit which would banish us from

ratio."

The new discontents of democracy admit that the long night of the present military rule is likely to continue in the foreseeable future (estimated at up to two decades) "in the shape of the National Security Council, with some sort of civilian facade." The hope for institutional stability, however, seems to be based on the unwarranted and unrealistic assumption that General Musharraf's dual role as COAS and president will not be challenged either by the army or by the public over such a long period.

The general's initial ambitions of becoming a Kemal Ataturk have lately been replaced by those of emulating Charles de Gaulle. However, the greatness of those hallowed names was earned through their involvement in long national liberation struggles, not thrust on them by accidental circumstances or by external powers. One cannot forget either that, notwithstanding the high personal esteem the general is held by his admirers, power corrupts and excessive power corrupts immeasurably.

There is also no guarantee that a military president will not become a victim of megalomaniac dysfunction as civilian prime ministers Z.A. Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif palpably did. Neither is General Musharraf completely his own man and must adjust to the compulsions of changes in US politics and the composition of the collegial body he represents.

The dissatisfaction with the Benazir-Nawaz era is genuine and widespread, and hardly anyone, including the two former prime ministers and their followers, would wish that ignominious era to return to the country. The discontents of democracy as well as the present regime are tilting at nonexistent windmills. To pre-empt the possibility of the recurrence of that period, a series of checks and balances and safeguards, as well as structural reforms noted earlier would be needed to end this game of hide-and-seek between the military and civilian rule, played with decadal regularity, which has plagued our polity.

The military's overarching presence in public life is depriving oxygen to all segments of civil society, including the academia, lawyers, social activists, journalists and other independent-minded people. It is surprising that while the debate on the merits and demerits of political democracy goes unabated, there is no debate in the country on the role of the military and how to restructure it to make it more relevant to changing societal needs and compatible with other major players in society.

Neither does the military seem to be conscious of or prepared for such changes. That the military is both a problem in, as well as a solution to, the issues of governance needs to be the focus of a national debate.