

2004: a bad year for democracy

Democracy
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BY ANY standards, it was a bad year for democracy. A day before 2004 bowed out, President Pervez Musharraf let the nation know he would remain army chief till 2007. In a televised address to the nation, the president came up with no new arguments for his decision and repeated the old ones — that he would retain the two offices of president and army chief to ensure continuity in domestic and foreign policies. We have had occasion before to say in these columns — and would say it again — that the best and only guarantee of continuity in state policies is democracy. It is democratic institutions and not individuals — howsoever well-meaning — that can translate the people's demands and aspirations into state policies and move the nation towards the ultimate goal of creating a welfare society based on the rule of law and sovereignty of the people. The president's decision flies in the face of the pledge he had made a year ago after parliament passed the 17th Amendment bill on Dec 28, 2003. The reversal of his public stance is not surprising, since assemblies already in his pocket — those of Punjab and Sindh — had passed resolutions asking the president to continue to wear the two hats. And on Nov 30 — while the president was abroad — acting president Mohammad Mian Soomro signed the bill authorizing the general to be both head of state and army chief.

The decision gives the lie to whatever hope one had of the New Year seeing the government and the opposition developing a *modus vivendi*. Instead, within hours of the presidential speech, the MMA and the ARD joined hands to launch a movement against the existing military-dominated system. The general also heads the National Security Council, which is now the supreme body to determine the fate of governments and assemblies. Taken together, the president's decision and the NSC make

enormous tasks before him, not the least of which is terrorism. Not yet prime minister then, he had a taste of it when the Islambouli brigade, linked to Al Qaeda, attempted to assassinate him while he was campaigning during the by-election.

Throughout the year, the monster of terrorism stalked the country. The targets of terrorism included soldiers, politicians, the innocent, including those at prayer, and foreigners. Among the military targets were the Karachi corps commander and his convoy, two politicians, PPP MPA Abdullah Murad and PPP information secretary Munawwar Suhrawardy, and a cleric, Maulana Ibrahim Salfi. Other acts of terror included the bloody attack on the Ashura procession in Quetta — leaving 45 dead — besides bomb blasts in Multan, Sialkot and Lahore. In May, Karachi lived through a nightmare when terrorists bombed two mosques and murdered Maulana Shamzai, leading to widespread public protests and acts of violence. On the whole, 10 bomb blasts in Karachi left 55 killed and 184 injured. All this testified to the menacing rise of religious militancy on the one hand, and to the failure of the security agencies to smash terrorist networks on the other.

Regrettably, by the end of the year, the government had not been able to get out of its Wana trap. The large-scale deployment of security forces — estimated at 70,000 — stunned the nation. The idea was to flush out foreign militants believed to be hiding in Wana, South Waziristan. The government claimed successes which turned out to be not even half as impressive as claimed. In November, the NWFP government thoroughly bungled what, as it later transpired, was meant to be a public relations exercise. On the 26th, it announced that troops were being pulled out of the Wana area and that the operation had been