

the military the real arbiter of the nation's political destiny. No wonder, leader of the opposition Maulana Fazlur Rahman should have boycotted the NSC's last meeting. The boycott, however, does not serve to blur the fact that the maulana's grouping of parties, the MMA, was instrumental in the passage of the 17th Amendment. The MMA claimed that the amendment had turned the NSC into a statutory body instead of a constitutional one as originally intended. But that did not in any way serve to dilute the NSC's powers or to make it a civilian-controlled council. On the contrary, the passage of the 17th Amendment allowed the Legal Framework Order to become part of the Constitution in its entirety without being voted upon by parliament.

Will the government try to work even the lame and controlled democracy we have? An indication of the ruling party's regard for parliamentary norms came in April when the Senate passed the NSC bill within three and a half minutes. One more extraordinary bill concerned an amendment in the Political Parties' Act. Laws are made for the collective good, but this piece of legislation was enacted for the benefit of an individual. On July 21, the Senate amended the act to allow a politician to hold both government and party offices. The law was made for the benefit of Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, president of the Muslim League (Q), who became prime minister after Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali resigned from that office on June 26. After 57 days in office, Chaudhry Shujaat vacated the prime ministerial office in favour of Mr Shaukat Aziz, who won by-elections in Tharparkar and Attock to become the nation's 23rd prime minister. The new prime minister, who won a vote of confidence from the National Assembly on Aug 28, has no experience of politics. An able economic manager who restored some health to the economy as finance minister, Mr Aziz has

called off. The very next day, the government contradicted itself. All that the announcement and the denial did was to highlight the chaos and confusion in government circles with regard to Wana. The opposition and the press claimed — perhaps not without justification — that the operation was being conducted at America's behest. The charge may have been politically motivated, but the truth is that it is in Pakistan's own interest to fight terrorism. Our people need security from terror, and the economy needs foreign investment, which is not possible unless foreign investors feel safe. The murder of four Chinese — three in Gwadar and one in South Waziristan — last year served to underline the need for Pakistan to root out terrorism.

From the point of view of developing a national consensus, the outgoing year saw no progress. The provinces and the centre failed to agree on a national finance award, nor was any headway made with regard to the Kalabagh dam. The prime minister's task now is to prove to the nation that he can carry the opposition along and develop a consensus on major national issues. The most unfortunate aspect of the political scene was the government's persecution of the two mainstream parties, the PPP and the PML-N. The latter's leader Javed Hashmi was sentenced to 23 years in jail in April last, and the release on bail of Mr Asif Ali Zardari was not followed by any developments that could indicate a change of heart on the government's part. The opposition, too, remained divided throughout 2004, until the fag-end of the year when the president's decision on uniform brought the ARD and the MMA together.

The year that has just begun will see local body elections on a non-party basis. As experience has shown, this is a futile exercise, since voters know which party is backing which candidate. Why not abandon this farce, and declare the municipal polls to be held on a party basis?

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