

# Charter of democracy

BY SHAHID SHAFI

February 10, 2005 was an eventful day in the current political history of Pakistan when Mr Nawaz Sharif and Ms Benazir Bhutto, the two former Prime Ministers of Pakistan, met in Jeddah. It took both leaders 18 long years to engage each other in political negotiations aimed at bringing about an amiable culture of tolerance and mutual accommodation. Though, as of today, no agreement has been signed yet the symbolism involved in the process is pervasive. The very fact that the meeting took place and the process has been set in motion deserves commendation. Given the circumstances, this is, undoubtedly, a gust of fresh air in a clogged political milieu.

Detractors and the pessimists wasted no time in belittling the said meeting. General Musharraf was no exception either. Their analysis is based on the premise that the understanding between the two leaders is bound to be short-lived and that the history lends enough credence to such an assessment. They further argue that both leaders are still poles apart and it is very difficult to bring about convergence of interests in the immediate future.

The said meeting concluded with the announcement to jointly work out a charter for democracy. There can be no two opinions vis-à-vis the dire need for a workable and mutually agreed code of conduct. The proposed charter, if at all it is worked out, will be a very welcome development for the country's political system. It is long awaited and could lead to usher in an era of true representative government.

Great wisdom and statesmanship is required to work out diverse characteristics of the proposed charter. The task will have to be completed before the announcement of next general elections. The new charter must ensure a mechanism whereby malaises of the past are not allowed to plague the harmonious relationship among different political parties.

The need of the hour is to first identify a common minimum programme the pursuit of which should be the top priority of every political party. The best proposition is that the proposed social contract enjoys the backing of all cross-sections of the society that includes, but is not

of the proposed charter, each party is expected to say a prompt 'no' to the establishment's bait strategy. They will have to prove to the nation that their services could no longer be 'bartered' in a shady deal. This however should be without prejudice to the constructive and result-oriented dialogue with the establishment for introducing a genuine democracy.

The proposed charter should stand for clear rules of the game, sobriety, accommodation for each others' viewpoints and non-acceptance of any party's turn-coats. Currently, various political parties have got themselves entangled in paying enormous attention to non-issues. Given the country's ideological leanings, the inclusion of religion column in the new MRP may be an important issue but this should, in no way, become an obstacle in the way of a sustained political dialogue. Likewise, pressing a certain political alliance to publicly apologise for her past dubious conduct may have a valid point but if seen in the larger context, it seems a serious diversionary tactic aimed at spoiling congenial political environment.

All contentious issues concerning the federation should become a part of the proposed charter. Present troubled state of affairs in the province of Balochistan and FATA stresses the need for careful evaluation of the whole situation and requires appeasing the recalcitrant and discontented youths.

As of now, each party is waiting in the wings to strike a deal of her choice with the establishment. Confusions are galore over the news of an imminent deal between Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's party and the establishment led by General Musharraf. Almost similar is the rumour with regard to Mr Shahbaz Sharif. It is really ironic to know that leaders are seeking individual relief. The popular perception is that if a suitable deal is offered to any particular leader, he/she will have no reservations in accepting the deal in the 'wider national interest' and renounce his/her so-called cherished ideals vis-à-vis the sanctity of the Constitution, rule of law and the supremacy of the parliament.

Establishment's bait strategy re-

groups, workers of the trade unions etc.

Pakistan's greatest misfortune is the masses' indifference towards repeated violation of the sanctity of the Constitution on the part of military dictators. The political parties, signatory to the proposed charter, should pledge to accord top priority to the sanctity of the Constitution and the rule of law. Article 6 of the Constitution failed to prevent subversion of the Constitution in the past. An effective and innovative mechanism needs to be evolved to prevent the recurrence of this heinous and despicable act.

The track record of Pakistan's judiciary has not been commendable. It always provided crutches of legitimacy to the usurpers of political power on the basis of much maligned doctrine of state necessity. No document can qualify to be called a true charter if it excludes reforms in the superior judiciary. Political leadership will have to make an earnest effort to revamp the functionality of the institution of judiciary.

The Constitution of an independent election commission having all necessary powers should be an indispensable part of any proposed scheme. The charter must provide for the outline of this commission so that elections, whenever these are held, have a wide-ranging acceptability.

Successful implementation of the proposed charter must envisage a greater quantum of broadening of its scope. Playing ostriches at this very critical inception phase would minimise the chances of its across-the-board acceptability. Political wisdom necessitates the complete incorporation of all ground realities. It goes without saying that smooth implementation of the charter will need a spirit of sacrifice and mutual accommodation. No party in Pakistan has an unblemished record or is without any skeletons in its cupboards. Regrettably, almost every political party has remained darling of the establishment at some point of time in the past and as such all parties signatory to the new charter will have to bury their dubious past. Past record of any political party should not become a hindrance for singling it out to deny an entry into the new charter. All political forces whether represented in parliament or not should be invited to give input for the new charter.

What is needed is to ingeniously devise a mechanism that helps to make the delinquent political party a pariah in the eyes of the public. Only the masses' disgust for this breed of unprincipled renegades can help prevent further growth of betrayals and desertions for material gains. The absence of true political culture and successive military interventions have produced a breed of sycophants and toadies who are always docile to the establishment's underhand politicking and in the process have contributed to further deterioration of political order in the country.

In the aftermath of the introduction



stances and movements. Ditching colleagues in the opposition at the behest of the establishment is the order of the day. Non-adherence to any principle further deepens the distrust already present among various political groupings. The political bickering so initiated goes on unabated. The proposed

charter must pay enough heed to rectify these anomalies.

It goes without saying that Pakistan is currently passing through a critical phase of its history. The international political scenario, in the backdrop of the west's continuing war on terror, warrants Pakistan's peaceful transition towards constitutional rule. The present government set-up is half partridge and half quail. It has no firm foundations to stand on and as such is more susceptible to USA's arm-twisting. Dialogue among political parties in the first phase, followed by a dialogue between the establishment and the political forces is the best available option for transition toward constitutional rule and removing unilateral changes made in the Constitution by the dictators. Politicians will have to show wisdom and political acumen par excellence for showing door to the army and to prevent the past practice of culmination of any protest movement towards a naked martial law.

If the broad principles of the proposed charter are adhered to in their true letter and spirit, it can become a solid beginning point for saying goodbye to the dictatorial and unrepresentative governments. This charter will have enormous potential to not only help ease tensions between the country's most popular and mainstream political forces but it is also expected to bring the disgruntled nationalist forces back to the mainstream politics.

The proposed charter will put the military bosses under tremendous pressure to give space to the parliament and genuine political forces. This may lead to the start of a meaningful political dialogue between the military establishment and the country's genuine political forces.

The masses are presently disillusioned, disappointed and highly skeptical with regard to national affairs. They have left hope for a better future and any turnaround in their lives. Our political leadership will have to make a fresh start and inject hope in the masses.

Pakistan's history bears testimony to the fact that its establishment has blindly followed the British Raj's policy of divide and rule. The same divisive forces are still very active and sensitive about dilution of their powers. The political leadership will have to exhibit maturity and sagacity in their actions. It is going to be a test of wills and a long drawn-out battle of nerves. The wary common man in the street should not expect any extraordinary outcome from the proposed charter.

E-mail address for comments: shahid.shafi@gmail.com