

What political reconciliation must deliver if it is to succeed

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The rules of initial engagement were that PPP would initially not ask for the 'big two' — the return of Benazir Bhutto or withdrawal of the cases against her. PPP agreed and after two rounds of dialogue, Asif Zardari was released. And then more dialogue. Essentially a candid exchange of views took place. Political positions meanwhile remained unchanged. PPP did not give up its demands that BB not be arrested upon return, that fair and free elections be held in 2005, that cases against BB be withdrawn, that Musharraf give step down from his COAS post and that the 1973 Constitution be restored. The Establishment too wants BB out and the cases intact.

Still the initial dialogue generated some goodwill. From BB there has been a selective political ceasefire. Attacks on the President have stopped. Benazir publicly maintains she wants to give this dialogue a chance. PPP has accommodated the Establishment's requests for no political rallies. While not pushing on the 'big two,' PPP complains of continued political victimisation. This includes breaking up a few Sindh districts automatically leading to redrawing of pro-PPP constituencies, dismissing PPP Nazims who should have continued despite the break-ups, continuous efforts by the Establishment to further break-up PPP parliamentarians, the arrest, handcuffing and producing in court a PPP politician who announced his intention to contest against the Sindh CM in the next elections, a police raid on the house of Punjab PPP MPA Asad Muazzam, no movement on release of PPP political prisoners including Yusuf Raza Gillani, former MPA Peer Mukarram. In the Senate, the PPP complains of the ruling party using procedural mechanisms to prevent debate on any Bill they move for discussion.

Consequently most PPP politicians ask, "Will the Establishment really give us our rightful political space to function politically or are we being used to merely checkmate the aggressive poli-

tics of the MMA?" They wonder whether dialogue will lead to confidence building and finally to an Establishment-politicians' agreement on the 'rules of the game' under which institutions can oversee the functioning of democracy after fair and free elections.

Releasing Asif Zardari, against whom no charges could be proven, is acknowledged as a goodwill sign but the PPP still waits for concrete signals indicating that Musharraf, as head of State, is opting for political national reconciliation by bringing the political opposition onboard. In case the Establishment continues its stronghold over the political scenario and refuses to give a 'way out' to the main political parties, they will have to patiently wait to "let something ignite either in Wana or in Balochistan."

The Establishment seeks 'good behaviour' from the Opposition. It appears to have 'divorced' itself politically from the MMA. However, the Establishment has been communicating through interlocutors with the PML-N President Shahbaz Sharif. While Shahbaz seeks honourable return to Pakistan, he understands that reconciliation not confrontation is the way forward. He knows the current 'power realities,' his own political constraints and the limitations of his party. With around 20 seats in Parliament, the party is also weighed down by political infighting. Some members would have joined the official party but for the floor-crossing Act.

Late last year, it withdrew pressure on the Shahbaz family, which it was exerting ever since Shahbaz's May 2004 attempted return to Pakistan. After letting his wife return to Pakistan to wed their daughters, he was allowed to travel to the US after he submitted an application to the Crown Prince Abdullah, the underwriter of the Establishment-Sharif agreement of November 2000. Subsequently, Shahbaz's son Hamza was allowed to travel abroad.

The PML-N not reciprocated to this easing of pressure. Mian Nawaz Sharif, who calls the shots, is in no mood for reconciliation. This easing off has only benefited the Shahbaz clan. Nawaz's

inability to travel to Pakistan for his father's burial, followed by General Musharraf's statement that because of what he did to him personally, he would have never have telephoned him to condole his father's death had it not been for Shahbaz's insistence, and finally Islamabad's refusal to let Nawaz travel outside of Saudi Arabia, are a reflection of this. But Nawaz maintains that under the November 2000 agreement, except Pakistan, the Sharifs could travel anywhere in the world.

While Shahbaz has repeatedly called for "burying the past" and seeking national reconciliation and setting up an independent Election Commission and judiciary, other PML-N politicians have continued to criticise Musharraf and the present set-up. Experienced politicians like Senator Ishaq Dar do, however, advise Nawaz Sharif that in order to avoid complete political marginalisation, he should opt for reconciliation instead of confrontation with the Establishment. Meanwhile, the Establishment seeks from PML-N a verbal ceasefire regarding Musharraf, unification with the official PML, accepting Chaudhry Shujaat as its leader and a later, not immediate, return of Shahbaz Sharif with Nawaz Sharif's blessings.

There remains an air of uncertainty about where the government's engagement with the politicians is likely to end up. The question of which party will get what from this engagement also lurks just beneath the surface as PPP and PML-N leadership engage bilaterally. The latest round of the first-ever Benazir-Shahbaz meeting in 13 years demonstrated this.

While Benazir's spokesman issued a 10-point charter for democracy in a telephone conversation, Shahbaz Sharif denied that there was agreement on all these points. He said they had not agreed on any statement either on 2005 elections or on party defectors. They did agree on the need for an independent judiciary and Election Commission, holding of fair and free elections, no pre- and during-poll rigging, no looking to the GHQ for support, completion of the elected parliament's term

and accountability through the parliament. The statement reflected the PPP position. A joint PPP-PML-N statement could have been interpreted by the PPP as strengthening their negotiating position with the Establishment. While such point scoring is understandable it is unlikely to effect anyone's bargaining position. And it certainly builds no trust between the PPP-PML-N.

But the larger issue is that the Opposition parties are conducting themselves as they must in an Establishment-controlled power context and one in which a united political opposition against the Establishment is like a 'pie in the sky.' Equally a people's movement to back politicians against the Establishment is a near impossibility.

Engaging with the Establishment is therefore a valid option. MMA, and specifically Qazi Hussain Sahib, with whom the Establishment is unwilling to engage, believes otherwise. He and Imran Khan believe that it is possible to take on the Establishment from an anti-American platform through the use of street power.

On the political front, therefore, tension and turbulence remains. And it will for as long as politics is not provided an institutionalised structure of independent judiciary and independent Election Commission and the legal framework of a Constitution within which it can evolve. The onus for this rests on the Establishment, indeed on General Musharraf himself. The Establishment engaged the politicians because of two reasons: to stop the opposition from uniting over the uniform issue, and to bring in the mainstream political forces to counter the religious parties.

As the dialogue with the opposition proceeds, some contours of what the outcome could be will emerge. For now the Establishment is mulling over exploring seat adjustments in the Local Bodies polls, even in the 2007 polls or bringing in some opposition figures in the current cabinet with the objective of ensuring collective overseeing of the 2007 elections. The Establishment only knows that it wants the present set-up to survive till 2007, the defeat of MMA

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in the next elections and another assured presidential term for Musharraf as president in 2007. Historically, the PML has always been an Establishment supported party. Musharraf too views it as his main support base. But what is the state of this 'base'?

The Establishment's political engineering project has largely not succeeded. The political wisdom of Chaudhry Shujaat, the competence of men like Mushahid Hussain and efficient management of the Punjab by Parvez Elahi notwithstanding, PML remains a paper party, surviving only because of General Musharraf's backing. There is also no indication that a sound management of the economy led by the Prime Minister has translated into political capital for the official party. *Four years after engineering its creation through fair and foul means* this party is no political force. The infighting, corruption and incompetence of some individuals have further undermined the official party.

Clearly General Musharraf understands that the end objective of moving on the political track is not to enhance an individual or institution's unlimited power or accord it a status of permanent political primacy in the power structure. That will neither work nor will it last. The final objective for reaching out to the political forces should be a consensus on new 'rules of the game' that are vital for political stability. Without this, the much-needed 'genuine democracy' in Pakistan will remain an illusion.

History has shouldered Musharraf with the responsibility to turn this illusion into a reality. The President has willing partners in Pakistan's mainstream political forces to move forward on this path. He has the power, authority and the goodwill too to lead Pakistan away from chronic political instability towards lasting democratic stability. Remaining above the political fray, Musharraf must ensure that the Establishment and the State of Pakistan undertakes to stand by a consensus-based 'Charter of Democracy'. Otherwise this 'reconciliation' may lead nowhere.