

The drama

By Tasneem Siddiqui

rule and its pernicious effects on Pakistani society do not dissuade them from yearning for a 'messianic' dictatorship. When probed further, they yearn for strong leaders like Ataturk or Nasser to lead Pakistan, irrespective of the fact that Nasser's Egypt still remains a poor and mismanaged country, and Ataturk's superimposed secularism could neither find deep roots in Turkish society nor his legacy could provide a stable political system for over half a century. This laid back approach provides them an alibi for doing nothing in the matter.

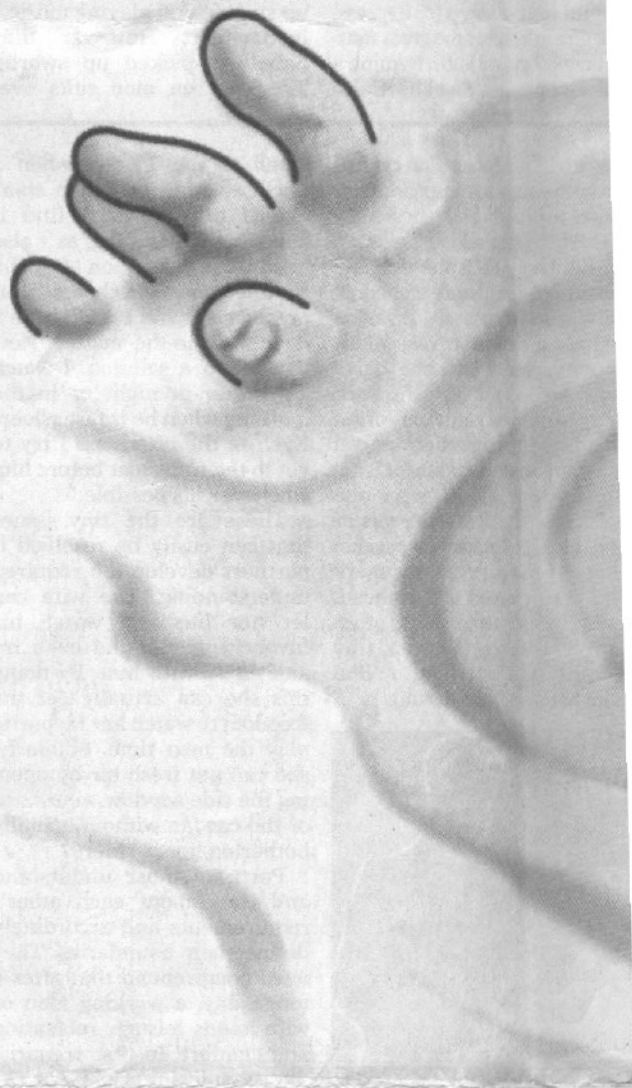
Let us see the perceptions of these groups, one by one, and try to understand what they stand for.

We could begin with feudals, tribal chiefs and political pirs who are generally accused of being responsible for our political underdevelopment. They have always been the natural allies of military governments. Therefore, the less said about their preferences, the better. It is not only a question of preference, but also the question of survival for them. They owe their continued existence and power to exploit the poor masses, to the protection and support they have been receiving from the civil and military bureaucracy. There is no doubt that in a truly democratic dispensation they would have been eliminated or reduced in size by now.

But, for a change, let us see whether the industrialists, traders and businessmen who are educated, urban middle class, prefer democracy to dictatorship. If you carry out a survey to ascertain their preferences, in nine cases out of 10 they will have utter contempt for the politicians and would condemn the type of elected governments we have had. Their main argument is that for business and trade to flourish, what we need is stability and continuity. Weak political governments cannot provide these. Only powerful dictators can do that. For them, it is difficult to deal with the politicians

and enjoying pelf and power at the cost of the teeming millions.

Howsoever they may decry Bonapartism, or dislike abrasiveness of military officers, the fact of the matter is that the erstwhile CSPs (now DMGs) have always found it comfortable to work with the men on the horseback including such variety as Yahya Khan and Ziaul Haq. Both groups belong to disciplined officer corps, both go to the same colleges, universities and



If democracy has any constituency in Pakistan, it is the poor and disempowered majority which at the moment is not organized, and therefore, not in a position to challenge the powerful oligarchy. But things cannot remain static forever

DEMOCRACY is one of the most discussed and much abused subjects. There is hardly anything one could add to it. But in Pakistani context one important thing is either overlooked or misunderstood. It is generally believed that Pakistanis are dying to have a democratic dispensation, and it is the men on the horseback who obstruct the way. We ignore the fact that it is not them

My notion of democracy is that under it the weakest shall have the same opportunities as the strongest

of democracy



Illustration by Huzaifa Younus



ry has shown that in some European and Latin American countries, they have launched movements against dictatorial regimes and succeeded in changing them.

What has been their role in Pakistan? In their cozy drawing rooms they do lament the absence of democracy in the country but at best it is thin veneer of superficiality. Unlike their counterparts in others countries, here they are not ready to take a stand or make sacrifices for democratic ideals. Their priority is minting money — rightly

leaders of mainstream political parties showed little faith in democratic principles. They simply used the slogan of democracy to have access to power, and have seldom felt ashamed in accepting the military's terms for short-term gains. We are not touching the questions of internal democracy in these parties or problems of heredity leadership, because that is a separate subject, but it only goes to show their very weak commitment to democratic ideals.

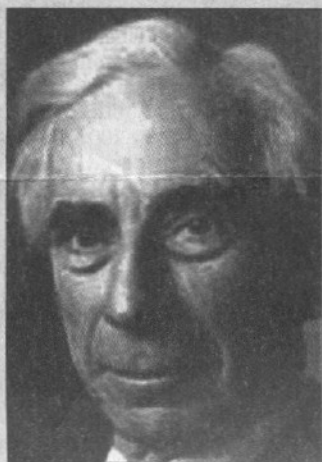
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ation. But they have not lost hope. They keep on striving to improve their lives. They, however, realize that their country is being run by an oligarchy of feudals, industrialists, traders, mullahs and the civil-military bureaucracy, in which their interests are not taken into account. They can't expect anything better from this unholy alliance. Therefore, there is no option for them but to support the political process. Call it their commitment to democratic ideals, or give it whatever name, but the fact of the matter is that for them it is

the fact that it is not them to deal with the politicians

A democrat need not believe that the majority will always reach a wise decision. He should, however, believe in the necessity of accepting the decision of the majority, be it wise or unwise, until such a time that the majority reaches another decision.'

Bertrand Russell



alone, but all the elite (those who really matter), and a majority of middle classes that have little faith in democracy. Individually they may eulogize democratic values, but in practice or collectively there seems to be a consensus among them that a 'dictatorship' is what we need to improve things in Pakistan, and that democracy is not going to take us anywhere. To make it acceptable they want a benevolent dictator.

They argue that democracy is messy, slow and directionless, and politicians to the last man are undisciplined, incompetent and corrupt. The oft-quoted adage that democracy may have its faults, but is the best system so far evolved, or to cure the ills of democracy what you need is more democracy, does not impress them. Even the experience of about 30 years' intermittent military

because of their incompetence, lack of understanding of the problems, and corrupt practices.

What about the bureaucrats? They occasionally crib about the emergence of the military as the dominant force in the country. This is not because of their love for democracy, but because of the military encroaching upon their turf. Everyone knows that in the initial years of Pakistan's history, it was the civil bureaucracy which was calling the shots and the military was giving support from outside, but then it became the other way round. In Gen Ayub's martial law, some 'selected' top bureaucrats were screened out in a very unjust and arbitrary manner and bureaucracy sulked for a while, but soon both the groups reconciled, as there was a very strong commonality of interests, that is, maintaining the status quo,

colleges, universities, and training institutes, and both have similar social habits. And most importantly, both share utter contempt for the politicians who, according to them, are rabble-rousers, inept and corrupt. If they have any disagreement, it is about the piece of the pie, not about democracy or dictatorship.

Now let us discuss the preferences of the ulema, mashaikh, mullas and pirs. It is true that most of them opposed the very creation of Pakistan, but soon after realigned themselves, and started putting pressure for an Islamic constitution. During Ayub Khan's regime they remained on the margins, but surprisingly a person like Gen Yahya, who can be accused of everything on earth but not love for Islam, co-opted them through his Minister for Information, Gen Sher Ali Khan. It was for the first time in 1970 that we heard the slogan 'Ideology of Pakistan'. Politico-religious parties like the Jamaat-i-Islami were given huge funds and provided official protection (the main aim was to have a fragmented vote) but in spite of all government support, the juggernaut of the Awami League and the PPP swept every the other party away.

Since then military-Mulla alliance continues unhindered. They were used in ousting Bhutto in 1977 and were amply rewarded. Then Russian invasion in Afghanistan came as a god-send. With American weapons, Saudi money and Pakistan army's patronage and training, they became the champions of Islamic revival. Jihad in Kashmir was next. Their last act was to bail out Gen Musharraf from a difficult constitutional cul de sac. Do we need

the strongest.'

Gandhi

any further proof of their preference for the military rule? In spite of their million marches and Gen Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation', it is unlikely that this alliance would face any major problem in the foreseeable future.

Ideologically speaking, the clergy in Pakistan does not believe in democracy. They call it a western concept and hence un-Islamic. They are not alone in holding this belief. A large number of their middle class followers also subscribe to this notion. If you have any doubt about this, please go to the congregations addressed by Dr Israr Ahmad and see who are the audience. Most of them believe that only revival of *Khilafat-i-Rashida* can solve our problems. They do participate in parliamentary elections as the possible source of power, but a military dictator is closer to their model as long as he promises to promulgate 'Islamic' laws.

What about intellectuals: writers, poets, critics, and artists? With few noble exceptions, a majority of them are least bothered whether we live under democratic order or are ruled by a man in uniform. They are basically an opportunistic lot and would dance to the tune of anyone if some crumbs were promised. Their role in Ayub Khan's 'Decade Of Development' and during Gen Ziaul Haq's more than 11 repressive years provides empirical evidence of their lack of commitment to democratic ideals. When Ziaul Haq organized a writers conference, almost everyone sold



ready to take a stand or make sacrifices for democratic ideals. Their priority is minting money — rightly or wrongly — and become a part of upward moving consumerist society. To them it does not matter whether the country is suffering the rigours of martial law or is enjoying the benefits of democracy. Of course, exceptions are there, but they simply prove the rule.

The NGOs are a new phenomenon in Pakistan. Some of their protagonists present themselves as a replacement for the failing government system. This claim is debatable. But the question is: how many of them are committed to democratic ideals and how many have challenged the legitimacy of military regimes?

Some NGOs working on issues like human rights, transparency and legal reforms, no doubt do sometimes take a stand against repressive policies and discriminatory laws against women and minorities, but recent experience has shown that quite a few of them are ready to be co-opted by military regimes. They, however, make a distinction between good and bad dictators.

What about the political leaders themselves? Generally speaking, they should stand firmly for democratic ideals and be ready to sacrifice everything for them. There should not be any meeting point between the politicians and military power. But what do we see in Pakistan? Is it not strange that at any given time a large number of political activists and their leaders remain ready to ride the bandwagon of dictatorship?

Things may have changed recently, but the history of Pakistan is replete with examples where even the

commitment to democratic ideals.

All this discussion may give the impression that in Pakistan nobody has faith in democracy, which is a concept alien to the genius of Pakistani nation. No, certainly not. So far, our discussion has remained restricted to the role of elite groups and their perceptions. There is no doubt that there is an 'elite consensus' in Pakistan for maintaining the status quo and keeping the people disempowered. But the fact of the matter is that these elite groups do not represent the whole nation.

The real Pakistan is its poor people who form the bulk of its population. Crushed by poverty, unemployment, inflation, injustice and poor civic services they find survival very difficult. They suffer frustration, disenchantment and alien-

mitment to democratic ideals, or give it whatever name, but the fact of the matter is that for them it is the only alternative, which can help them solve their problems. It also gives them hope for a better future. It is true that the current structure and leadership of most political parties do not reflect their aspirations either, but at least the process provides them some space.

If democracy has any constituency in Pakistan, it is the poor and disempowered majority who at the moment are not organized, and therefore, not in a position to challenge the powerful ruling oligarchy. But things cannot remain static forever. They are bound to change. We need a broad vision to survive in this fast changing world. We will be lucky if the transition is smooth. ■

Our democracy is but a name. We vote? What does that mean? It means that we choose between two bodies of real, though not avowed, autocrats. We choose between tweedledum and tweedledee.'



Helen Keller