

General Musharraf appears to be a fond coup-maker. So far, he has proven himself a master of surprises. His professional instinct for commando-like action remains as strong as ever. The coup on the fateful evening of October 12, 1999, that made him the ruler of 140 million people, was to be only the first of several coups in the months and years ahead.

Agra was the venue of General Musharraf's second significant coup last July. The Summit exposed his statesmanlike aspect when he held his Indian hosts in awe throughout his stay. Through his candid approach towards the issues dividing India and Pakistan, he was able to win the hearts and minds (even though temporarily) of the Indian media leading figures.

It was an extraordinary feat, in that, perhaps no other Pakistani ruler had such a disarming approach as to win acknowledgment even with some of the hardline elements in Indian media and politics.

His third coup came in the Kathmandu SAARC Summit in the form of his extended hand to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. This gesture, which no one on either side had anticipated, left Mr Vajpayee petrified and made the world media flutter in disbelief. Even though Musharraf's critics dismissed it as a PR exercise, it immediately won him the moral high ground over the whining and contemptuous Indian leadership.

# The coup-making maestro

Imran Munir Awan

*Is it possible for anyone to bring true democracy overnight?*

In domestic matters, his handling of religious extremists has been no less than a coup. It would have been unthinkable for a politician to take such a firm and decisive stand against certain militant religious outfits as he has. Mullahs have more or less acted as unelected rulers in Pakistan. Almost all past rulers felt intimidated by the power these mullahs were perceived to wield over the people. Fearing that these mullahs could convince a massive number of people to take to the streets, past rulers submitted time and again to their obscurantist viewpoints and gave them undue freedom.

Despite his impressive record in these areas, all is not rosy about General Musharraf. There has been a serious lack of action when it comes to putting in place a comprehensive political strategy that would lead to the realisation of his much trumpeted 'true' democracy. He has stressed time and again his ultimate objective is to introduce genuine democracy. His promise to hold elections in October notwithstanding, the scope and the pace of political activity remains seriously constrained.

The question that continues to baffle many minds is whether it is possible for

anyone to bring true democracy overnight. Without considerable political activity it is unthinkable that the democratic process could take its course freely.

Democracy is not some fast food item the General might prepare at his convenience. It evolves over a period of time, provided no one is allowed to interfere with its free movement. Democracy cannot be given to the people in a platter. It must grow out of politically and socially cherished norms and values to be truly effective.

It is hardly arguable that the country needs a sound political system to look confidently towards a meaningful future. General Musharraf must be given due credit for his extraordinarily skillful handling of complex foreign policy

issues. But his lacklustre domestic performance is worrisome, given that elections are just a few months away. There is hardly any political activity anywhere, which is alarming for the prospects of free and fair elections.

True, our quest for a truly representative political leader of national calibre has been depressingly futile. This, however, gives no reason to believe the country will be better run by the military administration in the absence of a true leader. It defies logic that because certain politicians have proved inefficient and corrupt, all political activity must stop (or be regulated by the military command).

General Musharraf may have performed very well, but the country cannot remain dependent on one man. We must look beyond individuals. The country has suffered so much because we relied too much on individuals rather than institutions and systems. Individuals come and go but sound systems go on uninterrupted. In short, the king is dead, long live the king.

Also, it is important to remember that too much power can be stupefying and the General must be wary to keep his balance. Napoleon once rightly said

there is only one step from the sublime to the ridiculous. There is an intricate element of guile associated with individual success. Success in one or more spheres easily leads to overconfidence, a form of self-deception that may prove dangerous. Let us not forget that Nawaz Sharif's excessive love for power blinded even his common sense. What happened afterwards is no secret.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that we cannot afford to remain a wayward, undisciplined nation just because we have no leader. To be realistic, there is no great leader to be seen anywhere in the present world. Is George Bush a leader, let alone a great one? Can we call Tony Blair, or for that matter any of the developed world's heads of government, a leader? No one acquainted with the qualities of a true leader would answer affirmatively. Yet these countries are making great strides in all walks of life because they have institutions; sound political systems and because they cherish their values and systems more than any individual, group or organisation.

General Musharraf is likely to be remembered as a hero if he can look beyond self-preservation and act in the country's long-term interest. The country is now being run day-to-day, and it is time General Musharraf took decisive steps to put the country on the path of a bright future. He would do well to focus attention on building and strengthening democratic institutions.

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