



Prime minister without power: A scene from the official theatre of Pakistan.

The myth of guided democracy

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Democracy News 7.7.02

The crux of the constitutional package lies in the proposed power equation between the office of the prime minister and the president. And if one clears the fog around this mass of subordinate proposals, no less important though, it boils down to basically a new deal that the military is offering the civilians.

But this whole package has been woven around some faulty assumptions. Such is the impact of these myths, fabricated over the years through constant propaganda, that they are by and large accepted as real. One such myth is about the office of the prime minister.

It is generally alleged that successive prime ministers since 1985 have failed to govern adequately. They were corrupt and primarily responsible for what ails this country. They did not

something remotely linked to military. It was never allowed to discuss defence budget, let alone the much-needed reforms for better security. Even the cabinets were formed on the recommendations of the military, particularly in 1985 and 1988.

On top of everything, there was this constant fear, sometimes deliberately created to keep the prime ministers and parliamentarians on their toes. Intelligence agencies played a blatant role in pitting presidents against prime ministers, using bureaucrats, journalists and sometimes members of the judiciary, as pawns in the murky game of politics.

The prime ministers in many ways were the most pitiful creatures, constantly hounded and harassed, their phones recorded. Tax-payers' money was used to dislodge them through no-confidence motions.

Minister and the Parliament. It is so lopsided in favour of the president backed by the military and the proposed National Security Council that it may not work at all. The three-year average tenure of assemblies since 1985 may come down to three months, almost like the pre-1958 era.

The package reduces the prime minister to a puppet caught in a tangle of strings originating from the president and the NSC on the one hand and the Parliament on the other. The prime minister will have no leverage over provinces as the chief ministers will look up to governors, again the nominees of the president, for their survival. He or she will be pressurised by the Parliament, held accountable for things that he or she may not know about. While the major decisions will be made

prime minister.

It is generally alleged that successive prime ministers since 1985 have failed to govern adequately. They were corrupt and primarily responsible for what ails this country. They did not have the ability to grasp its internal dynamics, nor had the vision to steer its foreign policy in the right direction. This may not be entirely true.

Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto cannot be condoned for their responsibility in cases of corruption, though yet to be proved by courts. The two leaders also fell short of public expectations on the issue of governance and economic management.

And yet they delivered reasonably under circumstances where any military dictator, despite absolute power at his disposal, would not have matched even a fraction of their performance.

The whole argument on which the constitutional package is based, that the prime minister needs to have more checks, is flawed. The office of the prime minister never had enough powers in the first place. In the last phase of democracy, if it ever was one, the prime ministers were never allowed more than a tiny portion of the power enshrined in the Constitution. They just had on average 10 per cent of the budget resources from which, among other things, they were expected to provide healthcare, education and food to a multitude of 140 million people (with the rest going to defence, debt servicing, again largely caused by defence, and the cost of running the government machinery).

Their contribution in foreign policy was even less. Kashmir and Afghanistan were no-go areas for the foreign office as confirmed recently by former foreign minister Sartaj Aziz. They were required to bear the brunt when something went wrong.

Most top civilian appointments, including that of ambassadors, were cleared by the military. Military personnel had to be accommodated much more than their quotas in district management, police and most civilian departments. The Parliament too was hamstringed when it came to

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With all this happening against the supposedly most powerful person, one can't blame Nawaz Sharif's paranoia for trying to silence the opposition. The officially-orchestrated insecurity absolves even Benazir for overly relying on her intelligence goons.

The two did many wrong things. But the turmoil of the last 17 years was not just about corruption and bad governance. Otherwise, why throw out Mohammad Khan Junejo who did pretty well on both these counts. The issue is that the military is not willing to give up power that it has enjoyed all these 50 years.

And yet the successive prime ministers carried along an imbalanced system, where the military was not just unwilling to introduce reforms and accountability in its own ranks but intelligence agencies were allowed to operate against sitting governments.

The proposed package will further weaken the Prime

minister or their survival. He or she will be pressurised by the Parliament, held accountable for things that he or she may not know about. While the major decisions will be made by the President and the NSC, the prime minister will bear the brunt. The president will nominate the prime minister, who will not have to be the leader of the majority of assembly members and who will be required to gather a two-thirds majority, by hook or by crook, to indemnify the Presidential powers. The irony is that there'll be many among political stooges willing to offer themselves for the job.

But the question is, will such a prime minister be able to satisfy the insatiable demands of the rulers to keep the lopsided system alive and maintain the perks and privileges of one class of people?

Many feel that if there is some desire for saving the system, only a prime minister with more powers can deliver. The thrust of the much-needed reforms should be to give power to the prime minister and the Parliament. The prime minister needs to be freed from the shackles that it has always worked under. Musharraf's mere presence in that high office, even if his powers are as restricted as that of Pazi Bhai Chaudhary, will be a sufficient deterrent. The military does not need iron clad guarantees, if at all it develops inclination to boot out the prime minister at some stage.

What really hurts in the package is the underlying contempt for collective wisdom. The rationale for a guided democracy rests, again, on myths and assumptions: that democracy is not suited to this country; that the threat of the enemy demands an overwhelming role of the military; that politicians are not capable of understanding the dynamics of national security; that the military is the only institution capable of guiding the dim-witted masses. Unfortunately, these contentions are not backed by substance. After 55 years of direct and indirect rule by the military, the country still struggles to emerge out of the disaster zone. Let's give the civvies more than a label, for once.