

# We, the people

The collective strength of the masses lies in more people knowing more about the sufferings of the less fortunate, and launching their protest loudly. The secret lies in fostering unity, not accepting wrong, and expressing dissent in the safety of groups at any and all levels

BY S.A. ABIDI

elect, wait and see, irrespective of who and how many cast their vote, whom they voted for, and what the winners do thereafter.

The people must know that elections are not the end of the democratic process

but its beginning. Unqualified democracy is not accepted as panacea anywhere in the world. Eric Fromm (1977), a great contemporary thinker, questions the validity of democracy as it is practised even in the educated West. According to him, the electorate lacks adequate information and the awareness of how his decision is likely to affect the affairs of the State. Hence, "the opinions formed by the powerless onlooker do not express his conviction, but a game analogous to expressing the preference of one brand of cigarettes over another." (Even though both may be equally atrocious).

The quality of leadership that we throw up in Pakistan has repeatedly proved the observation correct, more in our case than anywhere else. Yet, they continue to get elected using their authority to strengthen their hold on power, without delivering what they were elected for — that is beyond their competence anyway. Fromm adds: "Democracy can resist the authoritarian threat if it can be transformed from a passive 'spectator democracy' into a 'participatory democracy' — in which the affairs of the community are as close and as important to individual citizens as their private affairs or, better, in which the well-being of the community becomes each citizen's private concern."

He suggests various ways of

building citizen's institutions to make their participation possible, but foremost is the thought:

**W**E, the people of Pakistan, have yearned for democracy ever since the country came into being. We fell into despair every time democracy failed, and celebrated whenever elections were held, mistaking them for democracy.

From the very beginning, we found feudal lords dominating the political scene, as they still do albeit with changing colours. At a later stage, the servants, whom we had employed to look after the affairs of the state, found it necessary to take over in order to demonstrate the art of government to the inept feudals. Then came the soldiers, whom we had hired to defend us, who decided that they can do their job best by conquering the feudals, the servants and the rest of us, "setting everything and everybody right."

As the soldiers and the feudals alternated, they ousted the servants from the power game and recruited the preachers, whom we had been feeding to study and teach us religion. And so, the game of Musical Chairs plays on, punctuated now and then with what passes for elections.

The game continues to be played in the name of democracy, that literally means rule by the people (from the Greek *demos* meaning people, and *kratos* meaning rule). But the people are nowhere to be found near the seat of power, or even benefiting from it. It is

the rulers who fill their pockets, their patrons abroad who make geopolitical gains with their compromises, the foreign creditors who earn profits letting them embezzle money and the enemy who has his way due to their ineptitude, all at the cost of the people.

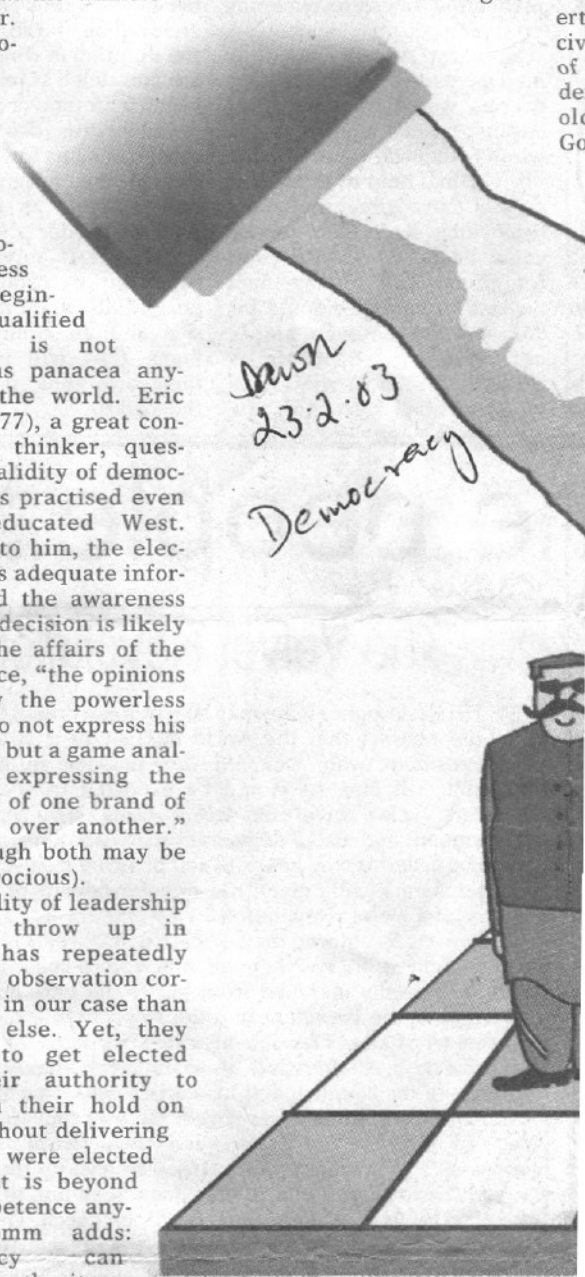
Remember the corruption and plunder of the highest order, the trauma of fighting the Russians on behalf of the Americans and the havoc played by the Afghan refugees, the miseries caused by the national debt trap and the breakup of the country? The current fall-out of Afghanistan and the on-going Kashmir disaster needs no reminder as well.

Will we, the people, ever be relevant to our so-called 'democracy'? Some of us sneer cynically at the flawed structures of the new order and forecast another disaster, but do nothing about it. Others doubt if the same ruling clique, returning to power over and again, will ever allow people to raise their heads and risk their own elimination, but do not dare challenge them. Ideologists believe that, however defective, democracy must be allowed to make its own blunders and self-correct itself, without realizing that if blunders persist, the country may not survive long enough to correct the system.

The question arises that if nothing has changed so far, is there any particular reason why it will change this time? Perhaps not if we, the people, continue to believe that democracy means only to

"Government functions must not be delegated to states (provinces), but to small districts where people can still know and judge each other, and hence can actively participate in the administration of their own community affairs."

It is fortuitous that we have the system of Local Government already in place. Maybe it is hurriedly designed and needs fine tuning.



# People...

ing, but we can deal with it on its own merits, rather than be distracted by its authors. The concept of self-governing cities and village *panchayat* is a universal phenomenon and nobody's property. It is as old as human civilization and the bedrock of the nation state. Even democracy is a 2,000-year-old offshoot of City Governments in Greece. The modern, developed state owes its success to decentralization of authority that

ic process has invariably found it convenient to clip the wings of such 'local bodies' by putting them under District bureaucracy, or snuffing them out altogether. In keeping with the tradition, moves are afoot once again to take away their development budgets and distribute them for the use of the elected legislators at their 'discretion'. Demands are being raised to reverse the process of empowerment of people at the local level, ostensibly on the strength of the cliché of the Parliament's supremacy. This minimum empowerment at local level is the only hope for seeding and developing a culture of democracy in Pakistan. We can see through this game of Musical Chairs, stop its old music and play a new tune with the help of District governments — three meals a day instead of three cars per minister, educated and productive workers to replace

they not acted so far and how could they act now? They are none other than 'you' and 'me' and everybody else, who see and feel the pain of deprived humanity, and know that we are heading towards disaster as a nation. We do not act because we are the product of an illicit political culture, engineered by punishing dissent, tolerating silence and rewarding obedience for a long time.

Frequent martial-law regimes, elected autocrats, corrupt democrats and pervert dictators have succeeded in instilling in us a fear of landing in jail on trumped-up charges, being lashed in public for attending a rally, harassed by the income tax department without any legal grounds, picked up without warrants by the agencies and given a beating, and even being killed in fake encounters with no recourse to justice. They succeeded in stunting political awareness in the educated youth by banning student unions and posting Rangers on university premises on the pretext of bringing discipline and improving education, but ended up destroying it.

Thanks to the unsung

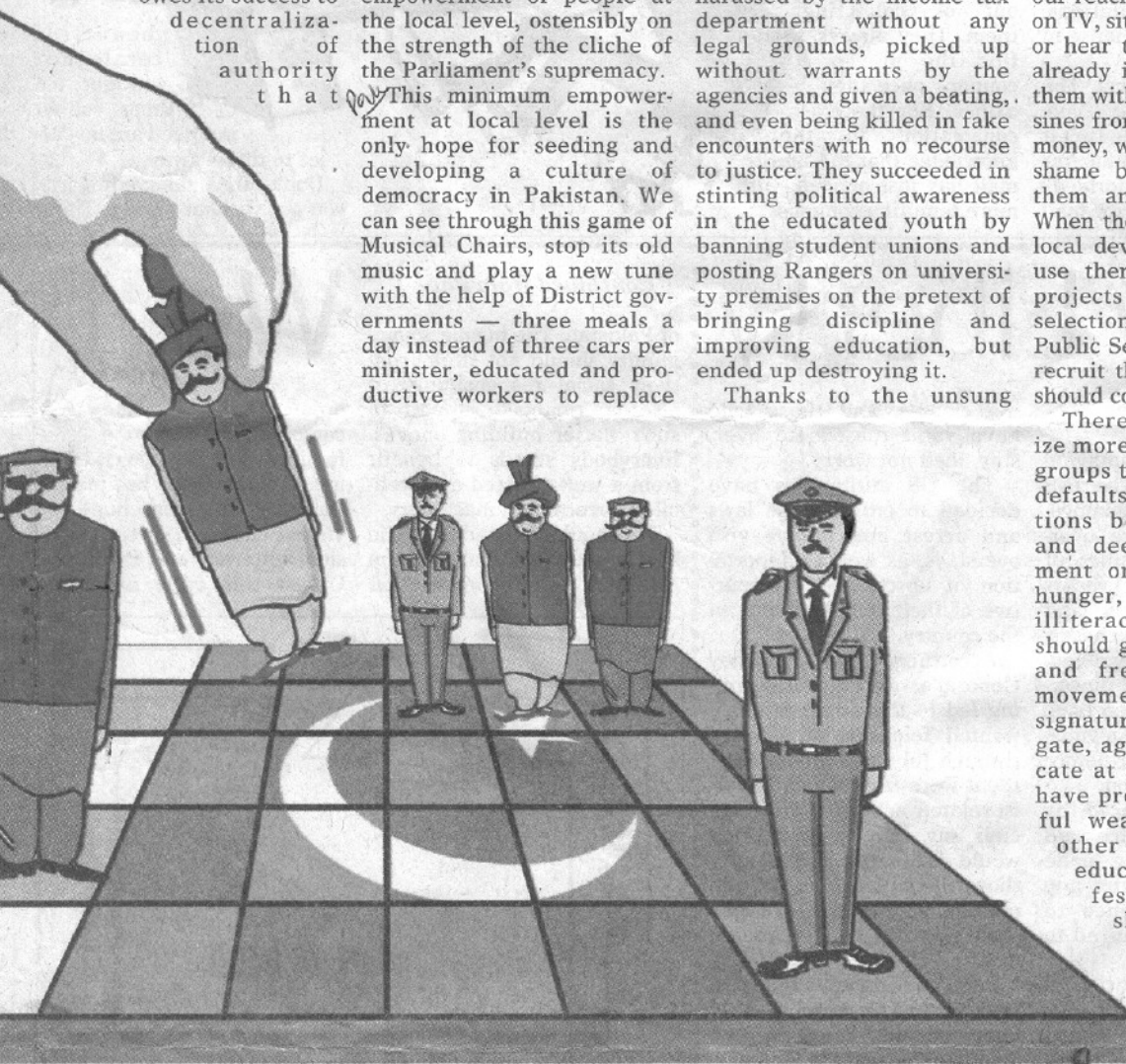
can contribute in our own way, to a growing multitude of protesters and resistance workers against injustices that cannot be ignored easily. Equally important is to recognize when a corrective step, such as the Local Government, is taken and to applaud it with positive reinforcement. The secret lies in fostering unity, not accepting the wrong, and expressing dissent in the safety of groups at any and all levels within our reach.

There is a need to relearn and polish the methods of staging civil and peaceful protests in order to communicate with our representatives who, once elected, go beyond our reach. When we see them on TV, sitting on golden chairs or hear them discarding cars already in use and replacing them with new fleets of limousines from the poor man's tax money, we should put them to shame by writing letters to them and the newspapers. When they try to expropriate local development funds and use them on 'discretionary' projects or take back the selection process from the Public Service Commission to recruit their own cronies, we should confront them.

There is a need to organize more proactive pressure groups to point out defects, defaults and the contradictions between the words and deeds of the government on issues of health, hunger, unemployment and illiteracy. The media should give wider coverage and free space to such movements. Nation-wide signature campaigns propagate, agitate and communicate at the same time, and have proved to be a powerful weapon of dissent in other democracies. The

educated class and professional forums should organize think-tanks and workshops and come forward more aggressively, not only with prob-

lems but also with analyses and solutions. Universities that are the nurseries for future leadership and reservoirs of knowledge, as well as the students, must be liberated to play their part in democracy, as they did before the creation



transferred necessary power to the people for their own wellbeing, while giving them an opportunity of training, to participate at the national level of governance. Only the fascist and Nazi dictators are known to have treated the local government as an impediment in their way.

In our case, the authoritarian leadership returning to power through the democrat-

the subjugated human bodies, more houses and less palaces. Unless we dig our heels and resist annihilation of the institution of Local Government with all our might, the game will again be lost and the polity pushed back to square one.

The questions arise as to who are those 'we' amongst us that can participate and change things, and why have

heroes of the past who offered sacrifices, and appearance of a younger generation, winds of change now seem to be blowing. The collective strength of the masses lies in more people knowing more about the sufferings of the less-fortunate, and launching their protest loudly. There is more information reaching more people now. Each one of us