

Crisis of democracy

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Democrats have always believed that the worst kind of democracy is better than the best form of military rule. Military interventions in Pakistan have provided ample certification of this dictum. But in this process, considerable confusion has been injected into the idea of what democracy means and how it works. The real threat now is that Pakistan may lose its way in the wilderness that straddles the two dispensations. And that is where we seem to be wandering at this time when, in a technical sense, the constitution has been revived with the formation of the Senate and the Chief of the Army Staff is our president.

When we say that the constitution has been revived, there is still great mystification about what it really is. According to the Supreme Court judgment this revival had to take place before the deadline of October 12, 2002. However, members of the Senate took oath on Wednesday, March 12, 2003. Irrespective of such digressions, the real dispute rests on whether the Legal Framework Order that was issued by President General Pervez Musharraf is a part of the revived constitution or not. The entire opposition in the Parliament, numerically not insignificant in spite of all the machinations of the ruling establishment, has rejected the LFO and that has created a major political

crisis. It is the serious damage that a military intervention can cause to the very spirit of democracy. Ideally, this controversy should be easy to resolve — with recourse to the Supreme Court. In addition, politicians are expected to understand the implications of such proclamations and take sides on the basis of democratic principles and their own conscience. Alas, it is in these two areas that our debacle is almost beyond belief. Our judiciary has lost its credibility, having approved all military interventions. As for the politicians, we are witness to the sorry spectacle of how easily they can change their sides for the sake of power and expediency.

We know that politics everywhere is, to varying degrees, a dirty game and its practitioners are apt to resort to expedient devices to gain power. At the same time, some fundamental principles of democracy and rule of law must always prevail. For instance, elections have to be fair and credible and public opinion is to be taken into account. Checks and balances is what they are always talking about, though in our case this precept is largely interpreted in an autocratic sense. Look at how most military interventions seek to flush out the filth of corruption from politics and end up with a different set of tainted politicians. That is how a person who was on the Exit Control List was chosen, by the same establishment that had put him on that list, to head the ministry that controls this domain.

Incidentally, these contradictions no longer surprise people because they are so numerous. In fact, they

tend to protect their feelings from such affronts with total indifference towards politics. This apathy further contributes to the de-politicisation process that a military government is compelled to foster by the very logic of its intervention. This popular apathy obviously plays havoc with the potential for any democratic development and also undermines the overall advancement of the country in intellectual as well as economic fields. Come to think of it, it is an act of subversion to deny people any meaningful involvement with the affairs of the state.

Coming back to the LFO logjam, the deadlock is likely to threaten the entire process of what they describe as the revival of democracy. In the first place, it is a major stumbling block in the smooth functioning of the Parliament. We have witnessed the scenes that were enacted in the National Assembly. In the Senate, on Wednesday, the opposition members added some words on their own to claim that they were taking oath on the pre-LFO 1973 Constitution. After that, they boycotted the elections of the Senate's chairman and deputy chairman. In this situation, the elected representatives are not likely to focus their attention on problems that confront Pakistan. Apart from America's impending war against Iraq, we have to contend with grave domestic issues.

It seems necessary for the government to settle the LFO controversy with the opposition to avoid a dangerous confrontation. However, the

official approach to this issue was indicated by Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali's address to the nation on Tuesday. It took him a long time in making his first address to the nation — more than 100 days after assuming the office of the chief executive. He spoke for a long time, about 80 minutes, and covered a vast ground. But he did not talk about LFO. What does this mean? Did he try to promote the impression that the combined opposition in the Parliament is not relevant to the policies and plans of his government? Or is he averse to any serious contemplation of constitutional issues?

Irrespective of how this government deals with the dilemma that LFO has posed, there are genuine doubts about the democratic and constitutional validity of the present return to civilian rule. In fact, the package of amendments fashioned by General Pervez Musharraf is only a part of the burden that Pakistan has to carry into its uncertain future. The LFO, no doubt, gives sweeping powers to the present. The opposition seems mainly concerned with the uniform that President Musharraf is wearing, with his right to dismiss the Parliament and with the move to establish a National Security Council to oversee the working of the government. But there is a lot more in the character and the conduct of the present dispensation that has effectively sabotaged the prospect of democracy in the near future.

There has been some comment in the print media about how the ISI has "come in from the cold". In addition

to holding press briefings, it is reported to have invited Senators belonging to the ruling coalition to dinner at its Islamabad headquarters on Tuesday. There were reports in the recent past of how the agency was involved in the formation of ruling coalitions at the centre and in the provinces. Perhaps the government would look at ISI's incursions into domestic politics as a patriotic endeavour for the purpose of protecting its national security policies. But the collateral damage it does to our politics could itself undermine our national security.

This collateral damage is the gradual extinction of politics of principles and integrity. The options for those who wish to participate in public life are being made very clear. That is how there are no protests or intimations of defiance from the vast ranks of the King's party when such constitutional contraptions as the LFO are put on the table. Otherwise, we can be sure that there are many in the ruling coalition who recognise the derelictions of the present arrangement and they do not speak up because they want to be in power. Some may have rationalised their collaboration with the argument that there is no other way to make whatever contribution they can make for a national cause. In any case, we have to live with intellectual dishonesty and moral degradation. And this is not the way to promote democracy or rule of law.

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