

Democracy in limbo

The imposition of military rule and the forced suspension of the democratic process has always been a child's play in this country

ever since the first Pakistani Commander-in-Chief, the late Field Marshal Ayub Khan tried his hands at this game with remarkable success, thus showing the way to his successors. Far more difficult than imposing martial law has been the wresting of power from the hands of the armed forces and their civilian collaborators. Unfortunately, the restoration of democracy after long periods of military rule brings back with it all the evils and unhealthy practices that the country's basically self-centred political cadres have since institutionalised. The irony of fate is that it is these very evils that serve as the standard excuse for the armed forces to intervene in the political process. Thus, every time a professedly improved democratic system is permitted to become operative in the country through the kind courtesy of the armed forces, it carries with it the seeds of the next military intervention. The time required by these seeds to germinate has been varying, but sooner or later, germinate they must.

When democracy had not yet become the fashion of the day, and the international community did not bother whether a certain country was ruled by the elected representatives of its people or by some military dictator, the field was wide open for the latter to go on playing their own game for as long as they wished. No wonder military dictators like Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, and Zia ul Haq ruled this country till they were dethroned by their own bad luck enshrined in calamitous circumstances. Unluckily for General Musharraf, by the time he seized power from Nawaz Sharif, the international community had become so intimately wedded to Madam Democracy that almost the whole world targeted its guns against him for having violated the sanctity of democratic rule in Pakistan. He was forced through intensive international political and economic pressure to come out quickly with a road map for the transfer of power to the duly elected representatives of the people of Pakistan. If we keep in view the fact that his previous comrades-in-arms had had a much longer time to play with the nation's destiny, the international community's pressure against Musharraf was unfairly discriminatory. As if that was not bad enough, the General's field of manoeuvrability was further circumscribed by the Supreme Court that laid down a period of three years within which he was required to transfer power to the people's representatives. However, the apex court was considerate enough to provide a safe escape route to the military regime by empowering the General to effect any amendments in the constitution that may be considered necessary in connection with the transfer of power.

One must take one's hat off to the ingenuity of the gentleman and the fertile brains of his legal and constitutional advisors, for having evolved a foolproof multi-dimensional strategy for the restoration of democracy within the short time available at their disposal. The General had no problem in confidently declaring with a lot of fanfare the road map that the international community had been dying to see. Voices of acclaim were heard from all directions. Here was a sincere military dictator getting ready to surrender power to those to whom power legitimately belongs. While the kingpins of the pyramid of power knew the type of democracy that was being planned to be graciously conferred on the people of Pakistan, neither the politicians nor the masses in general had any clue about the many surprises that were lying in store for them. The main planks of the strategy evolved by General Musharraf and his think tanks were:

* Continuation of the policies that the military regime had



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adopted in the various spheres of governance during its three years of rule.

* Retention of the incumbent President as the head of the state, with his hands reinforced by powers not wielded by any previous civilian president in the country's history.

* Induction of the incumbent President's most trusted ministers into the new government under any garb - as ministers, advisors, or members of the parliament.

It was soon realised by the military regime that their planned strategy was doomed to failure in case the scheduled general elections produced a hostile parliament that could elect an equally hostile executive headed by an ambitious and aggressive leader for the future prime minister's slot. Such a situation could prove really disastrous, the enhanced powers of the president and the newly created National Security Council notwithstanding. Naturally, the president would not like to be confronted with a political crisis every now and then, nor would he like to earn the wrath of the international community by dissolving the newly elected parliament and ordering the elected prime minister to pack up and go home so soon after the restoration of democracy in the country. The only sensible way open to the military regime was to prevent such an unpalatable situation from arising in the first instance. That could only be done through political manoeuvring which was started with the speed of a blitzkrieg. The covert, and not so covert, struggle for the creation of a king's party, officially legitimising horse-trading for a limited period, throwing lucrative baits in the form of ministries and other high offices to win over members of unfriendly political parties to the fold of the king's party to boost the latter's strength, and desperate attempts to cause a split in the ranks of various anti-military political parties - all these previously tried out tactics were a part of the well thought out campaign for political manoeuvring that continues right up to this day.

The net result of the above-mentioned antics has been the emergence of two equally powerful contestants, the government and the opposition, both in grips with each other ever since the results of the general elections were consolidated about eight months ago. Consequently, democracy has been thrown into the dungeon of suspended animation for all practical purposes, although in theory it has been duly restored, at least to a degree adequate enough to hoodwink the international community that seems quite contented with the state of Pakistan's present day political affairs. As far as the nation in general and the common man in particular is concerned, the change from a military regime to a civil government has not made even an iota of difference. The elected parliament has hardly transacted any legislative business during the last eight months. The government has been interested more in the consolidation of its political base than in legislative affairs. With its main thrust against the opposition, the government is determined to remove its sharp edges. As for the opposition, it seems to be quite satisfied with its performance that has remained confined to the sole object of forcing General Musharraf to shed his military uniform and to make him agree to have the controversial Legal Framework Order approved by the parliament. Both sides are obstinately adhering to their respective stands. The tussle is likely to continue ad infinitum, providing adequate insurance to General Musharraf's natural instinct of self-preservation.

It seems this time around democracy is going to remain in suspended animation till such time as the armed forces reach the conclusion that it is once again their turn to rule the country under the cover of martial law, as per the established tradition. God save our beloved country!