

# Fresh election to save democracy

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*Democracy*

GENERAL Musharraf is the founder of a new democratic order, Chaudhry Shujaat is its ideologue, Tariq Aziz its strategist and Sheikh Rashid the spokesman. Hedged around by them all is Zafarullah Jamali who is expected to keep the government going.

Without a mandate or conviction and as if unware of the consequences they are dragging the country into the jaws of theocracy. Not the national interest but General Musharraf's army command and personal ego may spare the country this terrifying prospect in his last-ditch stand against an overbearing religious alliance.

The practitioners of the new-fangled order, whether in the government or opposed to it, have splintered every party and undermined alliances. Some have joined Musharraf, others are bargaining with him for a share or just to coexist, still others are daring him to quit. All of them claim to be the standard-bearers of a mission. Indifferent and wary is the common man. To him the argument and agitation, eerily reminiscent of the dying days of Ayub and Bhutto, are not for his well being but for their own power. Only the characters have changed, values have nose-dived, scepticism has spread wider.

Why the people are disillusioned while their leaders haggle can be better understood by looking at the events of the past 45 months, what was promised, or expected, and what has actually happened.

Broadly speaking, the politics was to be cleansed; concentration of authority in one hand, or office, was to be prevented by checks at the federal and provincial levels and devolving it to the districts; violence, especially of religious and sectarian variety was to be eradicated; civil services were to be reformed to perform better; integrity and independence of the judiciary was to be restored; the press was to be freed and the economy rehabilitated.

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(which a nazim inevitably will be) against whom they seek redress.

The remedy to this intolerable situation is simple and can be instant without scuppering (as the military slang goes) the devolution plan on which Musharraf, like his uniform, has staked all his prestige. The district administration under the nazim should manage civic services and coordinate all development projects but the regulatory subjects, especially law and order and revenue should revert to the provincial government. Thus the ongoing "warfare" will end and the local councils will get down to serve the people rather than govern them, that the people are more than enough already by a host of agencies. Between a political nazim, and police, both committed to their own charters, an administrator must interpose who is under the influence of neither, nor beholden to them and thus could provide relief to those aggrieved. Even if he doesn't get relief, a citizen must have an avenue to ventilate his grievance, to unload the burden of his worry short of going to a court of law.

High on Musharraf's priorities and in the hopes of the people at the beginning of his government was a farewell to sectarian violence and advent of a liberal, tolerant society. But his priority fell an early prey to political expediency. The attacks on the Christian churches, Shia mosques and Ahmadiyya homes were never more frequent and murderous than in his time and yet show no sign of abating despite the ascendancy of religious groups after the elections. The rise in religious violence when Musharraf had vowed to put an end to it must count as his greatest failure flowing from the pernicious politics in which he got involved. It is an occasion for soul searching for Musharraf, the leaders, the theologians and the people alike.

The stark reality is that Musharraf could not but cease to be neutral once he decided to cast Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, and those who stuck to them, out of the electoral field. The maladministration, corruption or loan default were all viewed through the prism of loyalty or defiance. The legality and

ter of any other government on entering office. In the circumstances in which General Musharraf assumed power, the only criterion to judge his government should be whether it has been fair and just in conducting public affairs, rising above factional politics or pressures. To that, the short answer must be a resounding No. The justification for his extra-constitutional intervention is thus lost. The argument can be only about the success or failure of his plans or schemes as it would be for any conventional government. Only a freedom fighter and not a coup maker can be the harbinger of a new order.

One credit which must not however be denied to him even by a biased mind is for keeping himself and the top layer of his administration free of financial corruption even if they could not escape cronyism or conquer other prejudices. But that is not enough to vindicate him.

His detached and professional approach to economy has rehabilitated it. His partisan and naive approach to politics and administration has subverted both. The public peace and economic growth will now be long held hostage to constitutional controversies at the top and political wrangles caused by of the devolution plan in the provinces, in the districts and even below. Party politics is inevitable, and acceptable, in the federal and provincial governments but the town and village administrations should not be subjected to it.

A reality that must not be glossed over is that the nazims are political beings. Irrespective of the party to which a nazim might belong, his thinking and actions are bound to be coloured by his political affiliation or ambition and for that reason alone he must come into conflict with the other nazims, above or below, and also with the provincial and federal legislators and ministers. The officials who are appointed by the provincial governments but work for the nazims are tending to become pawns in this political game losing whatever little objectivity was left in them. In Pakistan's traditions and culture it would be a tragedy for the common folks, the rural peasants and urban poor in particular, if the revenue, police, irrigation and other officials to whom they must go seeking relief or help were to come under the control of the same landlord

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morality of it took a nosedive. Victory at the polls and mustering majority after that through blandishment or immunity from prosecution or lure of office became the sole concern. Nominations to the Senate and to the seats reserved for women and minorities were also used to that end. The nominees thus made beholden to their sponsors have become oblivious to the cause of the gender or special interest they were expected to represent. The whole system stands so perverted that it must give way to new elections sooner or later, sooner the better.

Mr J.M. Lyngeloh, India's chief election commissioner has won Ramon Magsaysay award (often described as Asia's Nobel Prize) for conducting free and fair elections in Gujarat and occupied Kashmir, both riven by revolt and communal strife and administered by partisan governments. Mind you, Lyngeloh is no judge, just a plane administrator yet he was able to protect the weak Muslims from the Hindu chauvinists and from the government's lackeys of their own faith.

Here the national elections conducted by Pakistan's former chief justice in an atmosphere which was peaceful and under a government which professed to be non-partisan have been neither fair nor free, and a retired general administers our free part of Kashmir and yet we expect the people of occupied Kashmir to die and vote for accession to Pakistan.

Democracy in Pakistan and freedom movement in Kashmir could be salvaged only by fresh and free elections from which no one but convicted criminals may be barred. The neo-religious order likely to emerge out of the current bargaining, if it succeeds, will sound the death-knell of both.