

# Is there any hope for democracy?

OP-ED



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seeking an agreement with the government on the LFO and on the other, some of its leaders periodically issue strident statements against the government and threaten street agitation if their demands on the LFO

are not accommodated.

The gap between the government and the opposition on the current state of affairs in Pakistan is quite wide. The introduction of civilian political arrangements last year do not seem to have reduced the cleavage between Musharraf and the opposition political leaders. Most of them are of the firm view that Prime Minister Jamali is unable or unwilling to function autonomously of Musharraf. The latter is viewed as being in command of the state authority and Jamali is seen as an adjunct player.

Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) has made a middle of the road evaluation of democracy in Pakistan in its recently issued report. It acknowledges the change from military to civilian and elected rule, but points out the existing weaknesses and deficiencies and underlines that the dominating role of President Musharraf in the political process is a constraint on democracy.

The debate on the nature of Pakistani democracy may not produce a final answer. The perturbing fact is that despite the restoration of the constitution and the establishment of democratic infrastructure the gap between the present military-civil power arrangements and the opposition continues to persist; it has widened during the last one year.

Unable to win over the opposition on the LFO, Prime Minister Jamali is now maintaining that the opposition's non-cooperation would not be allowed to hinder

the parliament's working. It would perform its primary tasks even if the opposition is absent from the house because the ruling coalition enjoys a majority. However, the track record of the national assembly reflects that it is unable to undertake credible legislative and other work after the opposition walks out.

The democratic process can become sustainable if the government and the opposition develop a broad-based consensus on the running of the democratic institutions. In the absence of such a consensus, the present political arrangements may continue to function for some years but will not become viable. Such institutions and processes will need the blessings of the president and the top brass of the army to survive.

The main obstacle to developing consensus on the current democratic process is the LFO controversy. Jamali and the ruling coalition cannot settle this issue without President Musharraf's consent, who feels that compromising on his position and powers would shift the political initiative to the political forces. This conflicts with Musharraf's notion of 'unity of command' and the desire of the top army commanders to retain the veto power on Pakistani democracy.

The official circles focus on the formal and ritualistic aspects of democracy to prove that Pakistan has a functioning democracy. They highlight the constitutional and legal arrangements that have facilitated the transition from military

rule to an elected and civilian government headed by a civilian prime minister. They talk of the federal and provincial elections held last year, the setting up and functioning of the parliament and provincial assemblies as well as the federal and provincial government.

One cannot deny this but democracy is not restricted to certain rituals or installation of civilian governments. The substance and quality of democracy is also important. This involves the actual performance of civilian institutions and processes and the role of the hitherto military rulers. Democracy acquires meaningful substance if constitutional liberalism reflects fully in the political institutions and process and the elected institutions and process become the focal point of the political process.

Pakistan's democratic experience of the past year falters on these scores. The quality of democracy is poor because the current political arrangements provide for power sharing between the army top commanders and the civilian leaders on terms set out by the former. The civilian institutions have given no indication during the last one year that they will be able to break out of this subordinate mould.

Two major factors undermine the prospects for autonomous and viable civilian political institutions. First, President Musharraf and his top army advisors have concluded that they are strategic to internal coherence and stability, and, given the troubled track record of the political leaders, the latter cannot be given a free hand in man-

General Pervez Musharraf completed four years of his rule on October 12. The official circles, especially the federal information minister, highlighted the achievements of his rule. However, most independent political observers and the press expressed varying degrees of reservations on the performance of the Musharraf regime. The sharpest criticism was mounted by the major opposition parties like the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), who have in the past often described Musharraf as the major obstacle to the polity's democratisation. Some leading organisations of lawyers continued opposing Musharraf and the Legal Framework Order (LFO) and launched a march towards Islamabad.

The ARD issued a white paper on October 12, declaring that 'Musharraf has failed on all fronts'. The PML-N described Musharraf's rule as a state of 'anarchy' which had pushed the country into 'a web of multiple crises'. The PPP did not issue a separate statement but it shared the views expressed in the ARD white paper. The PPP and the PPP-Parliamentarians have been critical of government policies and question the genuineness of the civilian order initiated by Musharraf last year.

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) has been pursuing a dual track policy towards the government for the last couple of weeks. On the one hand the MMA is

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aging state policy at the highest level.

Second, the military, especially the army, has expanded its corporate interests to such an extent that it is now present in all major sectors of state and the society. This is manifested through induction of mostly, but not exclusively, retired military personnel in important state and semi-state institutions. The other strategy for enhancing the military's influence is the phenomenal expansion of the undertakings of four charitable foundations established by the three services. Now, some of the paramilitary forces are also planning to set up charitable foundations for generating material resources for their personnel.

The military's business, commercial and industrial interests have expanded so much that they have stakes in all major domestic state policies. These developments have practically overwhelmed large civilian sectors. As a matter of fact, there is hardly any exclusively civilian sector left.

When the military's presence in civilian sectors becomes so overwhelming, autonomous civilian political institutions cannot grow. This undermines the prospects of a sustainable civilian political order and democracy. If democratic institutions and processes do not show signs of improvement in their performance and are unable to command voluntary loyalty of the major political forces, these can run aground completely.

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