

Triumph of democracy?

The News

Democracy

Mian Saifur Rehman 6/4/04

The term National Security Council (NSC), in a broader perspective, gives birth to many questions, for instance, security of the nation or national security against threat? And if there is no such imminent or immediate threat, should security always be threat-specific or threat-relevant? Don't the modern nation-states need security apparatus for defending their distinct identity and territorial sovereignty? These are the usual questions that can be raised as a first response to the term security, although in Pakistan when we talk about National Security Council, it is presented as a permanent and failsafe bulwark against future military takeovers, as claimed time and again by Musharraf Establishment.

The somewhat natural expectation of the general categories of people, including a large number of politicians is that this proposition might be involving some cost to be paid by the institutions and democratic dispensations. These people perceive the cost as the demand for military's permanent role (also called constitutional role in political jargon) in the national scheme of things, obviously in the realm of politics. For some countable reasons, the armed services, in keeping with the past history and now in the light of some changed realities, claim to be making the right demand that is further justified in view of Pakistan's military exigencies that would remain challenging for many years to come. The tragedy is that democratic institutions, as such, could not evolve or were not allowed a smooth path to evolve, let alone grow or organise into a strong political force capable of coping with all the responsibilities without triggering any inter-sector clashes.

Had the political will matured, through evolution or revolution, with the consistent efforts of the political institutions capable of meeting all types of challenges, the ambiguity about the roles might have been removed much earlier. The resultant clarity would have set the country on a course that might not have led to controversies that surround the entities like National Security Council these days. Well, with the country having already undergone many odd situations on the political scene, more and more experiments won't be advisable but if trying the NSC option can remove the doubts and apprehensions that we have galore with reference to the *de facto* and *de jure* role of some national institutions, then the option is worth trying. It might also provide ample opportunity (wish it is the final one) to those at the helm to give a fair display of their good intentions that we usually come across in the shape of claims made quite emphatically for the restoration of true and stable democracy, the one that would never collapse at least for the reason of unresolved conflicts.

And then there is the talk of a civilian elected government completing its tenure either with the help of this mechanism or with whatever method. The one giving this assurance is none other than Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali. Whatever his party's political compromises or whatever the degree of his humility misconstrued by his critics for weakness, the facade of democracy has improved in form and somewhat in essence under the present dispensation that must be permitted to complete its mandatory term of five years not for the sake of perpetuating Jamali's rule or for that matter President Pervez Musharraf's stay in power but for putting in place a democratic polity that can subsequently take care of the irritants and impediments that have kept our politics in captivity in a variety of forms viz personality cult, religious and irreligious divide, military and civil split, sectarian strife and then regional biases such as those discernible in the case of Kalabagh Dam. The controversies revolving around these issues are more than mere controversies and seem to have been floated and then fomented by certain people who exploit such conflicts to make their own gains.

*The political game, courtesy such machinations, has indeed muddled up to a considerable degree allowing many new factors to creep in and make things more complicated. But these

complications can be tackled very well, provided a mutually acceptable conflict-resolving arrangement is put together with the sole objective of minimizing inter-sector conflicts and developing synthesis out of it. Can NSC work in the direction of synthesis, is the question normally asked by many a seasoned politician in whose eyes nothing can be a better substitute for the Parliament and a number of bodies working under the Parliament's supervision. They also raise the question as to how many high-powered bodies have ever been able to achieve the declared goals (although they did achieve "desired" results to suit certain people)? Can we then expect of NSC to perform well, particularly with our institutions' track record of lethargy and ill intentions? Finding an answer to this question may not prove to be a pleasant exercise in our peculiar background explained in the aforementioned lines. Attention must therefore be given to those underlying factors that constitute the main irritants.

The number one irritant and impediment in the establishment of true democracy is the same as identified so often in the past and that is the stubborn sticking to respective standpoints without any regard for the need to show flexibility, even the affordable flexibility. This is true in the case of all the parties that have a role to play either in the forefront or in the back seat of national politics. Unfortunately, the spoilsports abound in our part of the world. They will continue scuttling things whenever they come close to a finale. The matter is certainly that of intentions but no such system can be enforced that can transform the ill-intentioned people overnight or on a permanent footing. The solution to the mess, therefore, lies in prioritising the things in the right order. First things first! At this juncture, we need to give some weight to the government claim that it would complete its term in office. This slogan — and claim — looks quite odd in the backdrop of sudden dismissals of elected, and even popular regimes, in the midst of their tenures on one pretext or the other. It can't even be expected of a civilian, elected regime to make such a claim with that much confidence as demonstrated by Prime Minister Jamali.

Given our peculiar political history of governmental dismissals, such a claim can't even be conveniently expected of governments enjoying the support of quarters equipped with the factual authority to take and enforce decisions. But now the rigidity of the past has started to subside. That is the outcome of that realization that has at last dawned on the key players, who could not but escape the powerful influence of the times although greater amount of credit goes to the steady prevalence of certain conditions, at the internal as well as external levels, for bringing about that realization. One can even guess now, in the light of these healthy developments, that the incumbent government might complete its term in office.

We should rather work in dead earnest to achieve the goal of elected government's completion of mandatory term. It is indeed very unfortunate for the Pakistani nation to wish for an elected regime's completion of tenure but realistically speaking, this ought to be the main mission of our political and institutional forces in the first instance, or as the top priority of the contemporary times. The underlying principle is the sustained victory of democratic forces over the undemocratic forces irrespective of the fact, whether the democracy-representing people are Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali and his associates or some other people. Today, it is PM Jamali, tomorrow, it can be any other politician, even one from the opposite camp. This is how democracy works but certainly that would be possible if no chances are taken, and if every opportunity is seized even though the opportunity for the time being is attached with some strings. The strings will go, if democracy takes root, and indeed the completion of tenure of an elected government will mean triumph of democratic forces that had been facing the ignominy of total reversal every now and then for obvious reasons.

The writer is a staff member
saifee2001@hotmail.com