

# Playing 'democracy-d

BY HUMAYUN GAUHAR

**A**t the end of a TV talk show the other day, the audience was asked to raise their hands if they thought there was democracy in Pakistan. Not a single hand was raised. Next they were asked whether the present system could dispense democracy. Not a single hand was raised. Then they were asked whether they wished to live under a democratic dispensation. Every single hand was raised. Don't fool yourself or clutch at self-serving straws: people don't regard the present dispensation as democratic not because the President wears a uniform or that they will get democracy if the President were a civilian or if he wasn't armed with the power to dissolve parliament.

They think that the present system is not democratic because it doesn't throw up good governance and solve their problems. The talk show panel comprised one columnist and three politicians from different parties, each of whom had given their woolly discourse on democracy. The critical reaction of the audience shows up the failure of the Musharraf government to come up with a workable political system under which the people think that they have democracy because it solves their problems and dispenses good governance.

Whereas the Musharraf government has scored great successes in the economic field by bringing a dead economy back to life and in international diplomacy by dropping our misguided policy of supporting the odious Taliban and now by breaking out of the intellectual-diplomatic deep freeze in which Kashmir was stuck, on the domestic political front it has failed woefully. If it had not thought out of the box on the economic front, we would not be where we are today.

If we had remained mired in paralysis on the diplomatic front by continuing our support of the Taliban we could have been back in the Stone Age and unable to make any contribution to the peace process or untangle Kashmir. But, sadly, on the political front it chose to remain with the same unworkable system, with a bit of tinkering. Thus you see the increase in the number of parliamentary seats, local bodies elections, sixty free seats for women and the ending of separate electorates. Gloss cannot hide the rot inside, even essential gloss. President Musharraf did nothing out of the box on the political front not because he is incapable of doing so.

Neither is he incapable of taking risks. It is because the army, being part of the establishment, and a very important part at that, intervenes in order to save the status quo of which it is a beneficiary by ironing out what it thinks are its wrinkles. The status quo is like a cake of which the army too gets a big slice. It is that slice that they intervene to protect, as well as the slices of others in the establishment so that they can get their support.

If the cake is chocolate, then to expect them to change it to vanilla may be expecting a leopard to change its spots. The extraneous factor that was missing here was that we were under no external threat regarding the political system, as we were

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with the economy and diplomacy. Default and they would pull the plug. Go with the Taliban and the terrorists and the Stone Age would have beckoned. Don't solve your problems with India and you will always be treated like a dangerous nuclear state. There was no such threat if we did not change the political system. All that the West wanted was for us to hold elections, regardless of the consequences, and the Devil take the hindmost.

They are not concerned with what is good for Pakistan. All that matters to them is the window dressing of democracy, which means elections, a ballot box exercise in futility that leads to the kind of ignominy that we witnessed in the Senate the other day and which we have been seeing the National Assembly ad nauseam since the elections. And Musharraf, like every ruler before him, tried to become a democrat instead of being a dictator, which was his prime utility, just as our political rulers have tried to become dictators instead of being democrats, wherein lies their utility.

And so it came to pass that many a corrupt politician failed to be held to account despite tons of evidence against them and many more corrupt found their way back into parliament and the cabinet. Thus the political mess that we are in today, with parliament turned from circus to zoo to a wrestling pit and total uncertainty as to its future. We have a minister who knows neither Urdu nor English but who cannot stop talking. We have another who is on record as saying that he had made corrupt money and stashed it away abroad because politics is an expensive business. And there is a third cabinet luminary who specially sought me out when I was visiting London just after the fall of Nawaz Sharif to tell me that Musharraf was Altaf Hussain's agent whose purpose was to implement the MQM agenda and make 'Jinnahpur'.

Then last Monday, Arif Nizami, who is prone to making the often-memorable statement, said to me: "Sometimes I feel that they are trying to prove you right." Coming from my editor it was quite a compliment, and not even backhanded. He was referring to

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my unending articles since 1991 (which I call my Jihad) against the Westminster parliamentary system and in favour of the presidential system with the separation of legislature and executive accompanied by the creation of more provinces. But 'they' who are trying to prove me right are not the government or the politicians in opposition or otherwise. 'They' is the system. Sure we have many an odious politician in our parliament, but that is not what makes the system bad. It is the bad system that throws up odious politicians.

We can live with such politicians if they are confined to parliament, but when they barge into the executive as ministers the rot really begins to tell because their mediocrity starts having a direct impact on our lives. The government or the politicians don't have to do anything to prove me right. Left to its own devices, this system will demonstrate its uselessness amply. It already has. I, for one, am very happy at the way things are going. I want this system to collapse under the weight of its own irrelevance and contradictions no matter how long it takes. Then we might, just might, be able to get to a relevant system that could work for us.

It is much like children playing 'doctor-doctor'. It's a harmless game, but if you give them real knives and scalpels, blood will flow and the pretend game will end in death. Similarly, when political juveniles start playing 'democracy-democracy' with the real thing, they play with the lives of millions of people and the future of the country and it, too, can only end in death. Its about time that at least the executive was spared the talents of such people and they are confined to parliament to do their real job, which is legislation and keeping a close check on the executive.

In a presidential system the executive will be answerable and accountable to parliament much more than it is in a parliamentary system because it will not be its child. And if a change of system and the creation of more provinces were accompanied by land reforms, the vice-like hold of primitive tribal chieftains and feudal robber barons will weaken on the state's levers of power and its institutions. Then rural folk will be able to vote according to their conscience rather than the self-aggrandising whims of their tribal-feudal overlords.

One of the qualities President Musharraf has demonstrated, surprising for a commando, is immense patience. Perhaps he too, like me, is waiting for this system to collapse and demonstrate to the whole wide world how ridiculous and unworkable it is. Perhaps it is then that he will move to change it to a presidential system because then few will oppose him, either in Pakistan or abroad, except of course the self-serving tribal-feudal politicians who will lose out of the loot, plunder and patronage that being in the executive affords ministers. Perhaps, when the collapse comes, Musharraf will have no other choice. He could have done it within six months of assuming power. He still can.

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