

# A people's army

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By the way

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A recent letter to the editor makes a strong case for what can be loosely termed a people's army in Pakistan. Since the letter-writer's thoughts correspond with my own on the subject, I thought I too should have my say. But before that, a digression to vent my spleen against those who belittle sacred institutions. We have a penchant to scorn great ideas, noble concepts and inspiring events.

We give the sacred name of 'jihad' to any worldly campaign. Politicians travelling in buses from Lahore to Islamabad to protest something are described as being on a 'long march'. In the dictionary of our politics, going without food and drink for three hours in front of the National Assembly is called a 'hunger strike'. Three truly great concepts reduced to ashes by our small minds. I do not count the idea of a people's army as sacred but it certainly is important, and six years ago, it was mentioned for five minutes as casually as if one was talking about the weather.

My scrapbook tells me that PM Nawaz Sharif's parliamentary secretary for education told the National Assembly, out of the blue, that to strengthen the country's defence, the government would encourage military training in schools and colleges and create a people's army. I am sure he didn't know what a people's army was. I say this because there was no elaboration, nothing to indicate that the cabinet had been considering the matter after Kargil, or some introduction. No opposition member asked him if he knew what he was talking about.

For all we know, the parliamentary secretary, Ch. Arshad, may have been an ex-army man and may have studied the two contemporary models of people's army — in Israel and China — and was really qualified to speak on the subject. On the other hand, he may not have been able to tell an army soldier from a naval *jawan* because our politicians are not keen on acquiring general knowledge, except to know everything about a senior General's family and background, which is their version of general knowledge.

Since the parliamentary secretary also talked about imparting military training in schools and colleges and about hiring retired army officers for the purpose, one is

justified in asking why the excellent scheme of National Cadet Corps in force in boys and girls colleges around the country, is being wound up, as reported in the press some time ago. The report was not contradicted, but I hope it is not true.

I have always been a strong votary of universal military training for young men of a particular age group. Of course, it will not be really universal, and your sons and my sons will be drafted while people with influence and clout will send their offspring to London on medical grounds to escape the imposition. Paradoxically, most of these fond fathers will be senior military officers. But even after making allowance for rich malingerers and VIPs' sons with 'weak constitutions,' the scheme would help build up an effective back-up force which could be called upon to supplement the defence forces in times of emergency. That would really be a people's army.

## What these young men sorely need is a drill parade at dawn in winter in shorts and singlets to teach them at least some hard facts of life

We are at pains to remind the world (and especially India) of our great martial traditions, but I would like to see how most of us with sons react to the scheme. As it is, the army, the navy and the air force are no longer the high priority careers for young men or their doting parents, otherwise why should a Prime Minister's ADC (who also became his son-in-law) and the captain son of a federal minister (himself a retired lieutenant general) successfully wangle absorption in the DMG and become the envy of other officers in the army? These two inductions also took place in Mian Nawaz Sharif's time.

Nothing could be better than military training for young men, especially for the sons of the well-to-do who, before the fulfilment of their desire to enter a superior civil service or a foreign firm, roam about aimlessly firing their fathers' weapons in the air and pinching other people's motorcars for fun, mobile phones glued to their ears. What they sorely need is a drill

parade at dawn in winter in shorts and singlets to teach them some hard facts of life.

Whether the concept of a people's army materialises through conscription and military service for everyone or through some other means, the armed forces are the best judge, because in the final analysis, it is they who have to implement any such scheme. Even if the plan adopted is not ambitious and only involves military training in schools and colleges, it is the army that has to draw up the blueprint and not the education authorities.

So why did that parliamentary secretary for education have to spring a surprise on the National Assembly six years ago by uttering just five words preceded by nothing and followed by nothing? Not that anyone was moved or excited by the idea. The NA has an infinite capacity to operate as a house of the dead except for political fireworks.

Let me add though that the proposal is basically sound. It will give the people of Pakistan an opportunity to show that they really are the descendants of martial races. It may also give a fillip to the spirits of the *mujahideen* across the Line of Control. I know, I know, it is no longer the fashion to talk about hostilities with India, but frankly I do not believe that it has any intention of doing anything worthwhile about Kashmir. The Hurriyat Conference knows this more than the Pakistan government, which is out to portray itself as a peace-loving entity even if it has to shed its sixty-year-old principles.

So even if we don't ever cross the Line of Control, the *mujahideen* will keep on needing the Indian army inside occupied Kashmir, and India is sure to lay the blame for this at Pakistan's door and threaten reprisals. This means that, despite all the hoax calls about amity and understanding, the country may constantly be in a state of alert in the coming days. A people's army, or whatever name you may give it, will be helpful in making the public militarily conscious, enabling it to play a useful role in its own defence.

Besides, it may help to do what political parties have not been able to achieve ever since the birth of Pakistan — bring about a modicum of discipline in the lives of the people through their close association with the armed forces. Though I have my doubts if the top brass of our highly professional army is going to like this idea of people infiltrating into its domain.