

## BACK TO THE PAST?

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Will the future ever arrive in Pakistan? It is back to the past again. Technically, President Musharraf has declared an emergency, but in reality, it is a coup against the democracy creeping in; which he reluctantly promised eight years ago. This time General Musharraf overthrew the government of the other infernal co-resident in his body, President Musharraf.

Those familiar with the 1885 opera, *The Mikado* by Gilbert and Sullivan may take a cue; the General is everything and everywhere; all the institutions of power reside in him. To Pakistanis, this is not an opera. It is deadly serious to the lives of one hundred and sixty million, caught in the vise of external forces and internal instability exacerbated by an unrepresentative government.

General Musharraf came to power in a coup against the civilian government of Nawaz Sharif on October 12, 1999, with the promise of election within months. In January 2000 as the Chief Executive of Pakistan, he ordered all the judges to take a fresh oath of office swearing allegiance to the military rule. In effect the judges were barred from making any decisions against his rule.

The Judiciary did not play dead. Thirteen judges of the Supreme Court, including the Chief Justice refused. They were summarily dismissed and replaced by pliant judges. In June 2001 Musharraf appointed himself as the President, replacing the constitutional president.

On September 11, 2001 *Al-Qaida* attacked the United States. That changed the dynamics of power. To the US, Pakistan became an indispensable ally to be courted, cajoled, threatened and controlled in pursuit of the war against the *Talibans* and *Al-Qaida*. This aggravated the fissures in a fissiparous Pakistani society that experienced the wrenching away of Bangladesh in 1971.

To attain legitimacy, General Musharraf won a carefully worded, widely boycotted referendum in April 2002, with a promise to hold the elections for National Assembly in October 2002. In that election, a party co-opted for the purpose, won a plurality and gave legitimacy to the government for a five year term ending in October 2007. To quell the rebellion in the National Assembly, in December 2003, Musharraf made a deal, that he will leave the Army and be a full time President by December 2004 which he later reneged.

Musharraf knows; the military has had a strangle-hold on Pakistani governments for about fifty years. As the French saying goes, "A mistress should never become a wife; it leaves the most important office of the mistress to be filled." The General may masquerade as a president, but if he relinquishes the most important office of the Commanding General, his days will be numbered.

Most observers acknowledge that in very precarious post-9/11 times, Musharraf was successful in navigating the ship-of-state. On one side was the US pressure to go after the Taliban, rooted in Afghan-Pashtun tribes that straddle the highly porous, artificial Afghan-Pakistan border (the Durand line). It is a relic of British imperialism imposed on the Pashtuns more than a century ago. On the other side, the Pashtun tribes in NW Pakistan, used to complete internal autonomy through the centuries, deeply resent the new heavy hand of the Pakistan government. The Afghan Taliban are hiding with their tribal kith and kin in the North West Frontier area of Pakistan, with the bedrock belief that "Blood is thicker than water": or in the present context, artificial borders, nations, money or even a superpower.

With the US invasion of Iraq on trumped-up charges in March 2003, more and more Pakistanis became anti-American. Frequent bombings of Pashtuns by the US air power in south-west Afghanistan, tyrannically killing large number of civilians, has made the situation explosive. The Americans see it in false, stark colors of their nebulous all-encompassing war; and the tribal Pashtuns see it in equally false, reverse colors, as attacks on their families and tribes. They perceive Musharraf to be an American stooge.

Gradually Musharraf has found himself losing his grip. Tribesmen accuse him of killing his own people and have adapted suicide bombings, a deadly new import to Pakistan. The secular Pakistanis chafing under dictatorship accuse him of failing to protect Pakistan from the growing reactionary extremism within Pakistan.

Considering the dire situation in which Pakistan finds itself, Musharraf was reluctantly and tepidly supported by the Pakistani intelligentsia, in the hope that he will put the country on a sound footing and return it to democracy. He initially made some headway maintaining a deft balance, but as always, unable to deliver the promised panacea, dictators overstay their welcome.

In March of this year, the specter of the promised elections of 2007 looming, a lawsuit was filed in the Pakistani Supreme Court that the General can not contest the election to Presidency unless he resigns the all-powerful position of the General of the Army. Miffed that the court even entertained such a case, he fired the Chief Justice on trumped up charges. The legal profession could bear no more. The lawyers boycotted the courts and took to the streets. In spite of harsh measures and police firings the situation was getting out of control, so he backed down, re-instated the Chief Justice and promised again that he would contest the election as a civilian.

The US finds itself exposed again by supporting dictatorship while paying lip service to the propagation of democracy. Quietly the US pressurized the General through the summer of 2007, not to mount a coup. The US strung together a formula of Musharraf sharing power with the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, becoming the Prime Minister again. The General reluctantly went along.

Just before the elections in October 2007, a new challenge to the constitutionality of Musharraf's candidacy to the Presidency was filed in the Supreme Court as he still held on to the Generalship. The Supreme Court was supposed to render a verdict this week. It is widely perceived that Musharraf believed that the verdict will go against him. He could wait no more. Defying the US pressure, he declared a state of emergency; suspending the Constitution and thus the opinions of the Supreme Court.

The clock has come full circle. General Musharraf has decided that the uniform is more important and has mounted a coup with a promise, yet again, to hold elections for the National Assembly soon. The Judges that do not take a new oath to the new realities are being fired. Eleven of the seventeen judges refused again. The US has tepidly criticized the coup and has urged the General to reconsider.

There are no quick and easy solutions. Dictators offer quick perfect solutions that always fail; democracy offers a difficult, imperfect, winding road to consensual nation-building. Pakistanis have to decide to trudge through on that rocky road full of pitfalls as all democracies do.

Considering the quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan, and Bush routinely threatening to bomb Iran every week, the General knows that the US is stuck. It cannot cut off aid to the Pakistani military to keep them in his camp or else Bush's cow-boyish dare of the third World War would be closer. The past is haunting Pakistan's future, and Bush's march of folly has landed the US foreign policy in the worst fiasco America has ever experienced.

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*[This was written before Musharraf was sworn in as President without uniform on November 29. And soon after taking oath Musharraf said the month long state of emergency would be lifted on December 16]*