

THE OCTOBER 10 ELECTIONS
APPREHENSIONS, OPPORTUNITIES

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October 10 can become a decisive turning point in Pakistan's history. By now, the outline of the future political and ideological road-map has become quite clear. The real issue is about whether a genuine Islamic welfare democracy would be the destination of the nation, or that it would be a 'test-tube democracy' where the decisive role would be played by the army chief with a parliament to provide it the required façade.

In this context, the forthcoming elections have assumed the kind of importance that was held for the elections of 1946 in the history of the subcontinent and then the elections of 1970 in the later history of Pakistan. In the former, the nation took the right decision under the leadership of Quaid-e-Azam, and an independent Islamic state of Pakistan came into being in spite of the stiff opposition from both the English rulers and the Congress Party of India. In the case of the latter, the Quaid's Pakistan was bifurcated as a result of a wrong decision and the country is in the grip of internal chaos, poverty, reliance on foreign debts, and the nexus of civil and military bureaucracy and the feudal.

Taking advantage of the political leadership's self-serving policies, short-sighted plans, and inability to take right course of action in keeping with the demands of the times, General Pervez Musharraf came to power with pledges for across-the-board accountability and true democracy. He is ruling for three years now on the crutches provided by the apex court. His pledges have, however, not proved much different from those of the past rulers. He gradually devised a political plan whose objective, we sadly say, is to prolong his own rule, to change the system of governance according to his own liking and whims, and to give a permanent role to the military in the political system to eternalize the 'generals' rule' in the garb of democracy.

The direction the General wants the nation to take is now quite evident. Its salient features have eventually become quite clear during the past two years. The way he secured presidency for himself, followed by the fraud of referendum, and then the dialectics of the legal framework, the philosophy of 'unity of command', the partisan accountability, the making of the king's party, and now the utterance in New York on Sept. 13 that "give me seven years, I would change the political culture in Pakistan" (**Dawn, Sept. 14, 2002**) – all clearly indicate to where he wants to take the nation and the country.

If there is any ray of hope on the entire horizon, it is the forthcoming elections on Oct. 10 that afford the nation an opportunity, in spite of the dangers of the 'arrangements' to ensure a result that is acceptable to the rulers, to check this blind march and to save the country from destruction.

The 55-year history of Pakistan has many lessons for all to learn. While the historic struggle of just seven years under the sincere leadership of Quaid-e-Azam resulted in the realization of the dream

about the establishment of the biggest independent state in the Muslim world, the self-serving, insincere and inept political leadership, civil bureaucracy and military rule pushed the country into crises, one after another. Poverty increased, and the dream of prosperity, literacy and quality education got shattered. The Eastern Wing of the country was lost, and now stakes are high in Kashmir. Debt burden on the country is increasing, to the extent that it has now started affecting our independence and sovereignty. The fate of the nation is decided under foreign pressure, threats, and 'no-option' warnings. The 28 years of civilian rule and the 27 years of military rule, both present a telling tale of failures. Politics, economy, education, health, energy, social justice, rule of law, moral standing, national security – from whatever angle the situation is assessed, and an impartial balance sheet of gains and loss is prepared, the negative aspects far outweigh the positive developments. The Objectives Resolution, the Constitution of 1973, and nuclear capability are milestone achievements, yet it is a fact that every civil dispensation added to the despondency of the nation and every military regime furthered the deterioration and worsening of situation.

That both the experiments have failed is because that none of them adopted the path of abiding by the Constitution, upholding the rule of law, ensuring justice, and respecting the rules of the game. How can a leadership that is itself responsible for breaking the law and the Constitution demand or expect that others respect the law and abide by the Constitution? The root of all our ills lies in violating our pledges with Allah and His Prophet (pbuh), deviation from legal and established norms, neglect of the needs and aspirations of the people, preferring personal interests over national interests, and the lack of a sound system of accountability. The frequent disruption of the democratic process could not lead us to anywhere else, but here, where we are.

In these circumstances, the elections provide an opportunity that people can avail to put the political course again on the rails by playing their right role.

In the background of these prevailing conditions, the elections have assumed extraordinary importance. They should be taken rather seriously. General Pervez Musharraf's 3-year rule and ambitions for the next five to seven years have increased the dangers and challenges before the nation's manifolds. There is no denying that civilian dispensations and political parties, particularly the ruling and so-called big parties, only disappointed the nation, and that their record is shameful. But, it is also a fact that the generals' rule and the nexus of the civil and military bureaucracy have hurt the nation even more. Since the military's failure after being involved in politics affects not merely politics and economy, but also badly hurts national security as well as the uncontroversial character of the military itself, this bargain is more harmful. The nation should now determine once and for all that democratic process, in spite of its weaknesses, is the best way of governance. Our well-being and welfare lies in marching ahead on the democratic path while trying to remove its weaknesses, not military's assuming power by disrupting the democratic process or its calling shots from behind the scene.

Five Important Issues

Five aspects of the present complex situation add to the importance of the October elections.

Military's Role:

The first is about the military's role in the country's politics. General Pervez Musharraf is now openly demanding a role, rather a decisive role, for the military. We think that this approach is harmful and leads to destruction. Whoever tried to involve the military in politics, directly or indirectly, committed a grievous wrong that cannot become a justification for military's permanent role in politics. The record of military governments, including Pervez Musharraf's, has been rather more dismal. Moreover, it is not just true in Pakistan; the experience of the whole world is that military leadership is not capable to run political system and to meet the requirements of the democratic governance. It is futile to expect it to play such role; but to top it all; it even fails to realize that it is not suited to play this role. What happened on Sept. 9 at General Pervez Musharraf's address at the Harvard University is but the latest proof of this notion. The General asserted before the teachers and students of the university, "I am extremely democratic, you have to believe me". And, there was a burst of laughter in the hall!

It is a foregone conclusion that military's training and democratic system's demands are not compatible with each other. If 'unity of command' is a must in military, then diversity and difference of opinion are the essence of democracy. The demands of governance cannot be met merely with the use of force. Above all this, military ceases to be good military after being involved in politics, its professionalism is grossly affected. Also, it begins to lose the nation's trust, becomes controversial and, quite naturally, a target of criticism.

These elections should decide once and for all that military's proper place is defense of the country under a civilian dispensation.

Ideology of the Country:

The second important issue is about the ideology of the country and its moral and civilizational identity. The oft-repeated talk of 'Kemalism' and secularism, fight against extremism, and intervention in Madaris, distancing from Jihadi culture, 'progressive' approach and 'flexibility' during the rule of General Pervez Musharraf, the consistency in repeating the same, along with the actual steps taken in the fields of education, media and culture among others make it clear that the General and his associates want to drag the country away from its historic Islamic foundations to the path of Western secular culture that conflicts with the aims, aspiration and the historic struggle of this nation, as it militates against its objectives and its faith. It should be decided in these elections that being a Muslim nation, Pakistan has to be an Islamic welfare state that it

wants to establish the rule of God on His land. No other system can grow here, though efforts to this effect might be kept veiled.

Global Colonial Designs of the US:

The third issue concerns our role and place in the context of the global colonial designs of the United States. In each and every period of military rule in Pakistan, the country has moved closer to America, but America has always betrayed and adopted sheer self-serving attitude. Pakistan has become a mere tool in the American hands in the course that America adopted for global domination after the events of Sept. 11. And, the epitome of General Pervez Musharraf's politics is that he allowed America to use his shoulder, i.e. use Pakistan, for targeting Muslims. The General used to claim that American action in Afghanistan would long only for a short period, that it would be limited to certain specific targets or goals, and that America would leave soon. Today it has become clear to all that neither the action had to be for a short period, nor was it limited to Afghanistan. It is now clear that this was, and is, but a part of a global war whose main targets are Muslims countries, the Muslims, and Islam itself. The real problem for Pakistan now is how to get out of this quagmire.

We have no war with America and we want friendly relations with it, provided that our independence, our values, and our interests are safe and secure. But, to become an American stooge and to retreat on Pakistan's strategic interests in the face of US-India nexus is what this nation can never tolerate. It is also evident from the General's own utterances that he is ensnared and does not know how to come out of it. On the other hand, despite its tall claims about democracy and its promotion, America's compromise with dictatorship and friendship with dictators is a game that goes in favor of General Pervez Musharraf. This explains why he has taken the steps in foreign policy and internal politics, alongside the 'upright' statements on Kashmir that may result in further strengthening America's grip and its foothold in the region - including Pakistan. It, therefore, needs to be decided in these elections as to what are the limits of our friendship with America, and what would be Pakistan's role in safeguarding its own independence and sovereignty, in a just and lasting solution of the Kashmir dispute, and in safeguarding the interests of the Muslim world.

Economic Revival:

The fourth issue is about reviving the economy and freeing it from the clutches of the World Bank/IMF. In the Musharraf era, the grip of international financial institutions, the World Trade Organization, and foreign corporations has tightened even further resulting in increase in poverty, unemployment, stagnation in productivity, and more unjust distribution of wealth. The life of the commoner has become even more miserable because of the privatization of education and health facilities. The grower does not get the proper price of his crop. Industry is moving away from self-

reliance, and dependence on the foreign world in the name of market economy is increasing. Exploitation and oppression hold sway. Government and people, rulers and traders, farmers and others are up against one another. The daily commodities are costlier. The prices of electricity, water, gas, petrol etc. are increasing resulting in the higher costs of production and living. There is no economic stability in the country. People and traders are succumbing to the large number of taxes. The dream of economic prosperity is becoming more and more remote with each passing day.

The forthcoming elections, therefore, also provide an opportunity to the nation to free itself from the grip of the World Bank and its functionaries, to make a new economic strategy for Pakistan's development on the basis of self-reliance and for the achievement of prosperity for the people.

Industry in the majority of Muslim countries in the world is 'mortgaged' with the World Bank. Without getting rid of it, there is no possibility for real economic and political independence and sovereignty. The once developing countries of the Latin America present a telling example of what the World Bank strategies and the politics of debts can do to nations. The same is the condition of Indonesia. There is only one way to avoid this: the path of self-reliance; not the one imposed by General Pervez Musharraf or Shaukat Aziz.

Respect for Democratic Values:

The fifth issue is about internal setup and system of governance. Elections are necessary and an inevitable condition for democracy, yet democracy is not the name of the game of holding elections. It means respect for the Constitution, guarantee for the basic rights and liberties, protection of rights, the right to differ and opportunity to do so, keeping the elections free from the government's meddling and refraining from encouraging the establishment's 'favorites' and 'like-minded'. The process that the General kick-started with his referendum is showing up, in new forms. To destroy the Constitutional structure, concentration of powers in one person, establishment of king's party, involvement of governors, secretaries and of the intelligence agencies in politics - these are all harmful for democracy. It is necessary to hold accountability of all those who plundered national wealth and misused their offices - irrespective of their being from the breed of politicians or their being from administration, military or judiciary - but the accountability that panders to some one's liking and disliking and partial accountability is in fact a negation of the concept of accountability and a worst form of corruption. To stage-manage the elections to suit to one's design is like strangulating democracy. But, the General, his Accountability Bureau, his Reconstruction Bureau, his governors and other functionaries have taken this line. No doubt it does not bode well for elections; it can have a grave impact on elections and should be resisted with full force. Yet, the elections are the means to struggle against this trend. Elections have their own dynamics that may sweep away all the stage-managed moves.

The forthcoming elections can be made a cornerstone in that the door of official meddling is closed forever and the way is paved for 'popular' rule in its real sense.

These are the points that, in our view, have given extraordinary importance to the forthcoming elections. We invite the entire Pakistani nation to show the sagacity and courage of 1946 and to do their best to save the country from the wrong like the one of 1970's elections.

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