

Pakistan's Pitfalls Along the Way

It is understandable that Gen Pervez Musharraf and his spokesmen should be going to great lengths to drive home the point that the country had been brought to the brink of collapse and that Pakistan had virtually hit the rock bottom when the army moved in. M.H. Askari explains

UNLIKE in 1977 when there was a violent mass agitation demanding the removal of Bhutto's government, there was no comparable situation confronting the people on October 12. The need is therefore greater for the nation to comprehend and reconcile to the grim reality that resulted from last month's takeover by the army.

It is understandable that Gen Pervez Musharraf and his spokesmen should be going to great lengths to drive home the point that the country had been brought to the brink of collapse and that Pakistan had virtually hit the rock bottom when the army moved in. Gen Musharraf's down-to-earth statements in his interview to the BBC and the plans for likely electoral reforms primarily at the level of the local bodies, as disclosed by his minister for local government and labour in Karachi last week, have not come a day too soon.

However, how the proposed electoral reform package could also be provided with a constitutional cover, since the military government has made no pretence of functioning within a constitutional framework, is not easy to understand. The objective before the army high command for the takeover was primarily to cope with a national emergency - to rescue Pakistan from Mr Nawaz Sharif's devious plans to politicize the higher echelons of the defence set-up, like what he had done to several other state institutions.

On October 12, when Mr Nawaz Sharif's plans entered a critical phase, Gen. Pervez Musharraf had the option to impose martial law. However, he chose not to do so, nor even to abrogate the 1973 Constitu-

tion. Instead, he has since been presiding over the governance of the country largely through executive fiat. He has thus kept himself above the odium of being looked upon as yet another general who decided to overturn the country's constitution.

It can be said that the journey that Gen. Musharraf has embarked upon is neither easy nor free of obstacles. That so far he has not come up against any insurmountable obstacles is mainly because political parties and factions, disgusted with Mr Nawaz Sharif's authoritarian style of government, have chosen to lie low and implicitly endorse the takeover. They could see that the PML government itself was guilty of functioning with a supreme disregard for the letter and spirit of the Constitution and largely in accordance with Mr Nawaz Sharif's whims and caprices.

Hypnotized by his own mantra of a heavy mandate, Nawaz Sharif had concentrated all powers in his hands. He was also all set to convert his position as prime minister into a law unto himself, under the facade of Sharif, through the mechanism of the Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment, which would have reduced the Constitution to farce.

It is important, however, to realize that the objective of ridding the country of "sham democracy" and overcoming the problems of corruption, illiteracy and impoverishment to prepare the ground for democracy in the true sense of the word, which Gen. Pervez Musharraf has set before himself, cannot be achieved overnight. The state to which Pakistan has been reduced has taken all of the 52 years of its existence. It will only be with a long-term sustained effort that

the people would be able to attain the level of maturity to be in a position to exercise their vote more usefully and responsibly.

What sort of an environment will be needed to fill the political vacuum which has been created as a result of the army takeover and which will persist if political activity remains under a freeze is not easy to comprehend. Gen. Musharraf has not indicated any timeframe, nor given any idea of the direction in which he plans to take the nation.

With Mr Nawaz Sharif and several other key leaders of the Muslim League incarcerated with Gen. Zia-ul-Haq in his plot to overthrow Bhutto's government, the Jamaat-i-Islami emerged as the strongest, and actually formed part of Gen. Zia-ul-Haq's interim government in the initial years. The Jamaat was also strongly supportive of the general's Islamization programme which drastically changed some of the vital provisions and spirit of the 1973 Constitution.

It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the fundamentalist elements operating through the support that they have gained in the civil and military bureaucracy should want to exploit the present political vacuum and try to neutralize Gen. Musharraf's liberalism. (The trend can be seen in the criticism of Gen. Musharraf's apparent admiration for Turkey's Kemal Ataturk).

If one were to venture to sound a word of caution, Gen. Musharraf and his colleagues have to be extremely watchful of these elements both within the bureaucracy and outside. It may therefore be in the interest of the objectives spelled out by the military regime to give an indication of the direction in

which they would want the country to move. By the same token, some idea of the timeframe within which the objectives are to be achieved should be regarded as very crucial.

One has to remind oneself that from time to time the fundamentalist elements indicated that they plan to convert Pakistani society into an obscurantist entity and to work for the elimination from responsible positions all those whom they look upon as being in favour of some form of secular nationalism in Pakistan. What havoc such tactics can wreak upon society is evident from the sectarian and factional killing which has been going on in the country over the last many years and which has divided society into several antagonists and warring camps.

The middle class intelligentsia in Pakistan has a tendency to rule out the prospects of the fundamentalist factions from getting into power as, historically, their share of the popular vote in the past general elections has not been very significant.

Such thinking can be deceptive because parties and factions believing in obscurantist political philosophies do not have any real commitment to the ballot box for an opportunity to come to power. Instead, they depend upon their rhetorics and their impassioned religious slogans to mobilize public support. One should also not lose sight of the fact that, thanks mainly to Gen. Zia-ul-Haq and his Machiavellian methods to stay in power, the fundamentalists are today capable of much greater militancy than was possible in the past.

Courtesy: The Dawn of Pakistan

Sri Lanka Warms Up

In the run-up to the presidential election in Sri Lanka, the opposition alleges the government to be engaged in violence, reports Deshavimala

THOUGH the thirteen presidential candidates pledged to go for a violence-free election when they gave in nomination, violence started from the previous night in the city of Colombo. Political supporters of a PA politician now in charge of the Borella area backed by the supporters of a Mayor in the Colombo district went on rampage assaulting UNP and JVP supporters who were putting up party posters in the city. Opposite the residence of the Colombo Mayor, armed men in two jeeps assaulted supporters of UNP's Colombo East organiser Milinda Moragoda's supporters who were decorating the streets with the posters of the UNP leader. UNP sources said that the two jeeps belonged to a police station in Colombo and have identified the attackers as policemen. The vehicle numbers have been given to the police along with the complaint but, UNP sources said that no action has been taken so far.

In the early hours of nomination day, armed men reported to be supporters of a PA politician in the city along with the supporters of a Mayor stormed the political office of Lalith Front parliamentarian Ravi Karunayake who joined the UNP and crossed over to the opposition in Parliament the previous week. Karunayake was appointed as UNP's new organiser for Kotte, the day before he crossed over to the opposition. The attackers sprayed nearly fifty bullets at the office wounding three men who were in the office. Another group of Karunayake supporters who were putting up posters of Ravi were also set upon by the attackers and the posters re-

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Nandasena fell out with the President a few months ago when the latter reprimanded him for unruly behaviour in the area. The day after the President announced her intention to go for election she met Nandasena at Temple Trees and Nandasena pledged his support to the President. UNP sources said that the two jeeps belonged to a police station in Colombo and have identified the attackers as policemen. The vehicle numbers have been given to the police along with the complaint but, UNP sources said that no action has been taken so far.

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