

Civil society without democrats?

*Civil Society
Down
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By Aqil Shah

GENERAL Musharraf's velvet gloves are off. Answering questions at the Auckland Foreign Correspondents Club recently, he reportedly admitted that he had barred Mukhtaran Mai from travelling to the United States to prevent her from maligning Pakistan over the "terrible state" of the country's women. He then took a swipe at the "westernized fringe elements" of civil society by equating them with "Islamic extremists".

If intent be fully manifest, what better demonstration that the routine application of physical coercion and verbal intimidation to silence dissent and opposition is essential to the logic of authoritarian rule. In other words, General Musharraf is but another military dictator rehearsing the standard operating procedures of authoritarianism.

Yet his blunt disclosure seems to have nonplussed some sections of moderate, liberal opinion in the country. For instance, one newspaper editorial captured the sentiment in these words: "The truth is finally out. It was none other than President Pervez Musharraf who ordered the travel ban on Mukhtaran Mai." The editorial went on to note that "conservatism in society gives credence to Gen. Musharraf's agenda for transforming the country into a modern, forward-looking state" but that his actions and words were risking the alienation of "pro-

reforms or augment institutions of participation and accountability. That the generals used the veneer of "reform mongering" as a means of concealing their actual projects of authoritarian consolidation mattered even less.

The paradoxical result: instead of questioning the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime, prominent sections of liberal civil society settled for the role of tailor to the naked emperor. Clothed in their apologies and shielded by the military's coercive power, the liberal emperor set about the task of establishing a decidedly illiberal regime. One that talked of "enlightened moderation" but walked with the Islamist political parties. The aim was twofold: to marginalize its more secular opponents and to extract benefits from its external allies in Washington by presenting them

hence ambivalent about democratization especially if it means crossing swords with the military. Hesitant to challenge the legitimacy of military-authoritarianism as a political regime, their typical strategy is to criticize particular policies and sporadically protest violations of individual rights.

The implications have been dire. Civil society's "qualified" political support has allowed the military to claim a degree of legitimacy for its coercive actions that it otherwise lacks. In the process, civil society has become a site for reproducing rather than resisting authoritarian domination. It is no surprise that our basic civil and political freedoms and rights remain subject to growing authoritarian discretion and are tolerated by the state one day but snatched the very next.

Mukhtaran Mai praised for her courage one day, is kidnapped the next. The enforcement of a state protected framework of citizen rights requires responsive public institutions such as a strong parliament, an impartial judiciary as well as an autonomous press. These institutions, in turn, require political democracy. More specifically: democratic control over the coercive institutions of the state.

What is to be done? There is an urgent need for a renewed focus in civil society on collective action for democratization. If liberal human rights groups can hold a mini-marathon in defiance of state authority, why stop there? Why not expand the repertoire of resistance by holding civic protests calling for restoration of the 1973 constitution

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Why should "progressive forces" be supporting General Musharraf in the first place? The standard line goes something like this: the "good-hearted" general who has risked his life for "enlightened moderation" needs a 'margin of manoeuvrability' as he balances the needs of political expediency with his commitment to fighting the reactionary forces of religious extremism. Liberals' support for Musharraf also issues from their profound disillusionment with partisan politics and, especially after the October 2002 elections, by their fear of an Islamist-dominated state. Not to mention the utopian vision of 'changing the system from within' which convinced many in civil society (amongst them economists, NGO leaders, journalists and academics) to work in close alliance with the supposedly new breed of military-authoritarianism installed in October 1999.

Co-opted in the authoritarian "reconstruction" of Pakistan, however, they decided to overlook the fact that the military had assumed power to preserve and advance its vital corporate interests, not to institute social

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with a stark trade-off between a "secular" military and "mad mullahs".

Duly worried over the military-facilitated electoral rise of the MMA, some of these same liberals started pushing for a pragmatic "compromise" between the military and the moderate parties. Such an alliance, they thought, would kill two birds with one stone. First, it would endow Musharraf with reliable democratic credentials to blunt external concerns about democracy. Second, it would broaden the support bases of the authoritarian regime and work as an antidote to the extremist threat.

But the vested interests of authoritarian consolidation demanded that any cooperation with these parties would be acceptable to the military sans their top political leadership. Not surprisingly, this political-military rapprochement has not yet come to pass.

The point is simply this: our liberals are contingent democrats for the very reason that they are consistent defenders of the authoritarian status quo. A few notable exceptions aside, they remain beholden to the state and

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What is to be done? There is an urgent need for a renewed focus in civil society on collective action for democratization. If liberal human rights groups can hold a mini-marathon in defiance of state authority, why stop there? Why not expand the repertoire of resistance by holding civic protests calling for restoration of the 1973 constitution as it stood on October 12, 1999? Or for removing the democratic anomaly of a military president and introducing transparency in the rising and scandalously opaque military budget?

It would be naive to think that dissent and opposition emanating from civil society will not invoke state repression. But hardly ever has the modern state, let alone a military dominated one, voluntarily extended democratic freedoms and rights to a prostrate civil society. If civil society organizations are to regain a semblance of public credibility and counter their image of empty shells painted over by foreign money, they ought to use their unique access to financial resources and international networks to challenge the existing configuration of state power.

In that struggle, they should join hands with the mainstream political parties, even if that means having to swallow their reservations about "corrupt" politicians. There is no other option if the authoritarianism rapidly creeping into our social, economic and political lives is to be contained and ultimately reversed.