

The lesser evil?

By Ayesha Siddiq

Corruption. -Bak.

FACEBOOK is a great invention. It allows you to interact with people, without having to meet them, and have discussions. I accidentally got into a discussion with some on my friends' list regarding my comment on Gen Musharraf's current status.

There were quite a few who responded to my question about who was paying for the former military dictator's stay at the expensive Dorchester hotel.

There were immediate suggestions regarding the source of money. Some believed that he might have earned his money courtesy his lecture circuit. For instance, the *Indian Express* paid him millions of rupees for his lecture in Delhi. But then Dorchester is no child's play. It is truly expensive and we are talking a lot of money.

The interesting point about the discussion was not whether my friends and I managed to solve what had begun to look like something out of the *Da Vinci Code*, but that the debate highlighted our attitudes towards democracy versus dictatorship or civilian versus military rule. Very quickly the entire debate began to focus on the issue of the lesser evil as opposed to the bigger one and on whether or not Musharraf was a greater problem than the current regime.

Of course, there were some views that were easier to understand such as those of a serving air force officer who tried to reprimand the rest of us for showing lack of respect towards the leadership. One wondered why he bothered to contribute since the discussion was among civilians, generally considered less nationalist and second-class citizens by the men on horseback. One really wondered if the air force officer himself understood that leadership was not about heading an organisation but about motivating people with a set of clear achievements.

However, the rest was more interesting as it reflected the confusion that has gripped the entire nation today regarding the lack of choice as far as the leadership is concerned. The problem has intensified due to the inability of the present regime not managing to

capture the imagination of the people, especially the middle class and the educated and affluent upper middle and upper classes. It is indeed sad that Asif Zardari seems to have broken all records where losing the people's confidence is concerned. Consequently, Pakistanis with a US Ivy League background and those in a better position at home are immediately reminded of the days when Musharraf was in power.

It is also rather comical that today when Zardari announces that he has brought home money no one is willing to believe that the funds are meant for IDPs. A popular perception is that corrupt practices will take care of a lot of these resources. There are also more fingers being pointed at the behaviour of the ministers. We are probably once more in the same cycle that is the fate of praetorian societies. Short-term planning driven by greed, rather than a long-term vision is the hallmark of such societies. Such behaviour is not specific to Pakistan and can be found in a number of Latin American countries where there is a general inclination towards the

generals who take over with the excuse of cleaning up the political and economic system and who manage to do nothing except create greater chaos? Why is it that military regimes never manage to catch the corrupt or is it that there is far more propaganda than what is actually stolen from the coffers? For instance, while the grapevine is rife with stories about illegal money being made by this government, there is very little on how some of the most influential members of the previous government earned their billions.

Second, why should a bad and inefficient civilian leadership make former military dictators or future ones any better? Sadly, the middle and upper classes in Pakistan, as in other parts of South Asia, are constantly tempted by Singapore's political model. Things have to be modern and tidy even if it means no democracy which is not a lame concept dictated by Washington but a system that is marked by good governance and the rule of law.

Moreover, why should we imagine that the inept civilian leadership is not a product of

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military whenever things go wrong, but not to the point of wanting the military to continue permanently.

At this point, there are two issues one would like to raise. First, how real is the corruption of politicians in Pakistan? Surely, we would all like to believe that the present setup is just as corrupt as that headed by its predecessors. It is a fact that the government suffers from genuine inefficiencies and an inept top leadership. However, do we really have a lot of evidence to produce in a court of law regarding alleged corruption? Why is it that successive civilian and military governments were unable to catch 'thieves' despite keeping these leaders in prison, throwing others out of the country and having access to all official records?

This is not to argue that politicians are clean, but then are they any worse than the

its military predecessors? Like many Latin American states, the ineptitude of the civilian leadership distracts people from understanding that corrupt and incapable leadership elements in the military and civilian are interlinked. The greedy senior military

generals, businessmen, industrialists, large land owners and influential mullahs are interconnected. These days there are deep familial connections as well. Hence, it is not surprising that the military does not manage to catch any of the corrupt politicians despite its claims of possessing the 'capability to meet any challenge'.

So, while there is no forgiveness for what this government is unable to achieve, it is unfair to get into the lesser evil-versus-bigger evil debate (this reminds one of the classification made by the US of the good Taliban versus the bad Taliban). Evil multiplies and this is what we have seen happening throughout the six decades of our history. ■

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