

Ignorance — a powerful weapon

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"RESULTS of last two censuses were fudged, says expert", read the headline of a *Dawn* news item of July 3. Did we all not know this? Did we need an 'expert' to tell us?

For years on end, statistics had it that we were a nation of 140 million strong (or weak, depending on how one looks at it), then the Election Commission came up with the figure of 148 million, and Wapda which tries unsuccessfully to supply power, counts us at 158 million.

Reliable NGOs who can show how they estimate, say we are in the region of 160 million. They seek anonymity: "... for after all we have to deal with the ministry concerned...". They calculate that in Pakistan 10 babies are born each minute, 600 each hour, 14,400 each day, equalling 5.3 million each year. Estimating that some half a million die before reaching the age of five, we need 160,000 elementary schools. Where are they?

When President General Pervez Musharraf returns from his grand tour he will have to contend with the question of whether or not to send troops to Iraq. If our men can help save Iraqi lives, why not? He will also have to cope with arguments over Israel's recognition. Again, why should we not recognize a country that has existed for as long as we have? With few friends to our name, should we not start building bridges and befriend those who may help us?

Some blame must attach to Musharraf, as honest and comparatively well meaning as he may be, for the prevailing overall rocky state of the Republic of Pakistan. What was it that compelled him to compromise with politicians who he himself labels as corrupt, unqualified to govern, ineffective and untrustworthy and inflict on us a government that in eight months has proven that it is incapable of, or unwilling to deliver in any manner? He has acknowledged that there is now no corruption at the highest level, thereby tacitly admitting

what we all know — that it does exist at the lower levels (and is in fact out of control).

Prone to advice the general should be, but to sound advice from sound independent-minded advisers with no axes to grind. As it is, his sins of omission outnumber those of commission. Law and order may well have marginally improved over the three years during which he and his half-a-million strong army led the nation up to an election thrust on him by his Supreme Court, but it remains far from what it should be, considering that the maintenance of law and order is the sole field of governance in which the armed forces can claim competence. He failed to deal with the many iniquitous laws that discriminate against, and dishonour, the minority communities.

The general had his chance with the blasphemy laws, but chose to play safe, pandered to the religious right, and left them intact to be abused and misused with impunity. A great champion of promoting women in public life, he failed to touch the many laws under which millions of women of this country suffer untold misery. He ignored one of the two greatest ills with which this country is afflicted — booming population growth, which failed to even figure in his scheme of things — and on the education front, the second of the major ills, he pussyfooted, leaving it to a team which never really got off the ground and which in the space of three years has made no difference to the illiterate masses.

Passionate about his grassroots development and devolution schemes, Musharraf failed to realize that the first thing that must be tackled right from the grassroots level is the mass compulsory education of the people which will lead them to understand the importance of population control to their own welfare and well-being. They must be taught that they cannot compete with rabbits.

For the local governments to even function, surely the people they serve must be educated so that they at least have a mod-

icum of understanding about the system and are able to contribute towards its functioning. As for poverty alleviation, about which the general often waxes eloquently, how does he expect the people to drag themselves out of the ruts in which they are embedded, bereft of learning and of schools? There can be no lessening of poverty without the spread of education — illiteracy and ignorance and over-population are the prime promoters of destitution and beggary.

After the space of over half a century, we delight in still blaming the British Raj for our ineptitude, sloth, inabilities and corruption, rather than being thankful to it for at least having left to us institutions and infrastructures on which to build. That we failed to do this, that we squandered opportunities, that we continuously took the wrong turnings, is entirely our own fault.

One instance is education. The Raj left us a string of schools that imparted sound formal schooling in tune with the world and its times. Whatever is now best about the meagre formal education system that exists has sprung from the system put in place by the 19th century builders of the Indian empire whose goal was to educate as many of the 250 million people of the subcontinent as possible, in such a manner that through learning and scholarship they would be able to bridge the gap between the oriental and the western world, imbibing the best of both.

They realized that the task of governing successfully, and the ability to give to the people of India rather than merely take from them, would be made far easier were the people to be educated. They fell far short of their aims, one excuse being that the money allocated to mass education was insufficient. Money has continued down the years to be insufficient, purposefully kept so by the oppressors of the people. Now, reportedly, of the three billion dollars aid doled out by the Bush administration, a mere \$21.5 million, about one-tenth of the cost of an F-16, will go towards education and literacy.

Shame on us!

Hamida Khuhro, in her biography of her father, Mohammad Ayub Khuhro, tells a fine story about Collector Abbot of Larkana who in 1901 established the Larkana Madrassah (despite its name, a formal school rather than a religious seminary). Abbot was determined that the children of the zamindars of his district should acquire modern education, so he took from the zamindars donations and set up one of the best schools in Sindh. To quote from that book: "Abbot and the collectors after him worked out a technique to overcome the reluctance of the zamindars to send their sons to school. When a zamindar came to call on the collector, as most of them would do about once every two months or so, the collector would ask the zamindar how many children he had and of what age. Then he would bring up the matter of their education and tell the zamindar that he must send his sons to the madrassah."

"If there were any reluctance the collector would issue orders that the offending zamindar was to be denied an interview and his privilege of a 'chair' in the 'darbar' was to be taken away. Naturally the zamindar would be very alarmed at this and would hasten to send his sons to the Madrassah." The affairs of the madrassah were looked after by a regular board made up of leading zamindars and officials. From as far away as Khairpur, the sons of zamindars came to learn.

Today's equivalent of the district collector would no more contemplate the establishment of a school than he would a trip to Mars. Were a school to exist in his district, he would be far more prone to grabbing the building, dispersing the children and teachers, drawing up a list of ghost teachers, and collecting and pocketing their salaries. It is an established fact that the last thing desired by the feudals and the mullah fraternity, both prominently represented in Musharraf's government, is mass education, for they are well aware that the wane of illiteracy

would cut them to size. The armed forces, on the other hand, look after their own. They have schools in all the cantonments, and they ensure that the children of the army, navy and air force receive the best formal education possible. The defence budget covers their needs. Now, this being so, one would have expected Musharraf and his men to do their bit for the majority of the rest of the population who wallow helplessly in debilitating illiteracy. They did not, and it is per-

tain that the government now in place will not.

Population control and education, with numbers such as ours, must go hand in hand, both rigorously applied, although, of course literacy goes far in successfully controlling a galloping population growth. This is easily evidenced in Bangladesh, which from day one concentrated on the education of its women and in just over thirty years it has almost halved its population growth rate.

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