

The recent unrelated but important developments regarding Pakistan point to the new levels of degradation to which the Pakistani civil society seems all set to move. One common denominator appearing out of these incidents is gradually narrowing space for the civil society to express itself freely in a democratic environment, realize its potential and give a sense of confidence and participation to its members in the task of building robust state institutions that are reflective of people's will and aspirations.

The goal of establishing vibrant civil society has come to be anchored with democracy. The long-tested notions of freedom of speech, action and equality, epitomized in democracy, give the system the strength and force to address challenges that the people face at large. Thus the idea of democracy has arisen out of the need to make state more responsive to the wishes of its people and include them in all decision-making processes without any discrimination.

Pakistan is most unfortunate in the sense that it is still in search of a system that may be suitable to the genius of its people. From democracy to quasi-democracy to dictatorship to presidential system, each kind has been tested from time to time only to be found incompatible with the peculiar situation in the country. Little wonder then the controllers of Pakistan's destiny have been indulging in experimentation much at the cost of their responsibility towards people.

Out of the efforts marking the search for a suitable system, the last one has been made by yet another military

Where is civil society?

The Nation
14.6.03

BY AMANAT ALI CHAUDHRY

Human Rights

The report of Amnesty International has mentioned that the state has been involved in human right violations.

man, General Pervez Musharraf. One who describes himself as a democrat at heart; the good general has tried to introduce the true essence of democracy shorn of all verbiage that came along with it in the past. This is another matter that the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group has found the present measure of democracy revived in the wake of October elections to be incompatible with the true spirit of democratic system.

On the one hand their decision to keep Pakistan's membership suspended has cast a slur on the civil society and questioned the very democratic credentials of Pakistani nation that has a history of being led by unrepresentative leadership, be it pseudo-democrat or men in Khaki. Their refusal to give Pakistan a seat has called the Governments' bluff regarding its relentless mantra to have revived democracy in its purest form.

As if this was not enough, the hapless drama enacted at the Punjab Assembly where Opposition MPs were debarred from entering the assembly premises, arrested in undignified manner and detained by the Police, has exposed the governments' commitment and respect of democratic norms and tolerant behaviour. Perhaps encouraged by men behind the scene, the government decided to teach dissenting MPs a lesson. This is not an attempt to prove the innocence

of the Opposition in the matter. But certainly all they were doing is part of parliamentary democracy and hence tolerable and permissible.

The way Police roughed up the Opposition MPs sends a very negative message to others. The message is shrouded in no unclear terms. It may well be directed towards rowdy Opposition still entangled in LFO and hitherto free print media that enough is enough and military Junta would not allow any dissent from now onwards. After all the MPs have been elected by the people and certainly as their representatives, they do not deserve the treatment meted out to them by the treasury benches. In the presence of such incidents can we still hoodwink the outside world into believing that Pakistan is back on democratic rails?

Another glaring incident that should prick the conscience of the people is the state-sponsored repression of poor

tenants in Okara at the hands of Pakistan Rangers. Whatever the legality or otherwise of the matter, the resort to use of force to compel the tenants into submission is reprehensible and deplorable.

So far almost 18 deaths have taken place and many more injured in the clashes with the Rangers. Here are the Pakistan Rangers, who at the behest of military authorities use torture on their own people, while the rulers make lofty speeches regarding human rights violations in Kashmir and elsewhere. In addition to bringing a bad name to the country internationally, the Okara tragedy has raised a number of questions regarding mutual interaction between the state and its citizens. The very inability of Pakistani civil society to come to the rescue of the poor tenants has exposed its inherent vulnerability when it comes to confronting Establishment and vested interests.

The report of Amnesty International regarding human right violations in Pakistan has mentioned that the state has been involved in human right violations. The manner in which Taliban and Al-Qaeda elements were handed over to the Americans without due process of law indicates the rulers' haste to appease Americans.

The ongoing Islamization drive of MMA government in NWFP premised upon vandalism, public harass-

ment and narrowing the already narrow space for entertainment is yet another attack on civil liberties and freedoms. It seems that clerics are bent upon Talibanizing the Pakistani society, come what may. The passage of Shariat bill and the proposed establishment of 'Vice and Virtue Department' is the last thing the strangled Pakistani civil society needs.

The recent statements of Qazi Hussain Ahmad and Fazlur Rehman making their support of LFO conditional with governments' implementation of Sharia should open eyes of the few thinking people in this country. On the other hand the rulers' complicity in the matter and their wish to co-opt the so-called champions of Islam points to new dangers ahead.

This proves that the slogan of 'Pakistan first' is merely an eyewash and it is the personal interest of the ruling clique that comes first. The military's relentless efforts to banish the two-party system and undermine the credibility of the popular parties has led it to find new partners in the power struggle. The rise of Mullah politics in Pakistan owes itself to the Establishments' disdain for PPP and PML-N. Without calculating the risks involved in this shift, the rulers are looking forward to their short-term gain, which is to strengthen their foothold in power corridors.

Thus civil society is pitted against formidable challenges that have the potential of erasing its existence as a force in the state structure. The time has come when it should rise from its proverbial slumber and move forward to protect its interests.