

Urdu journalism's ^{The News} pundits

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Punditry is not confined to Urdu journalism: all those who write for newspapers have a bit of the pundit in them. Most of them believe that what they have to say is important. They also believe that what they have to say is so significant that it deserves an audience beyond their immediate circle. Everyone has an ego, but the ego on display in Urdu columns, of which our newspaper-reading public gets an industrial-strength dose every morning, is massive and unrelenting. English language columnists may suffer from the same delusions, though I think not to that extent, but it is only proper that the mickey—no not Kamran Shafi—be taken out of them by one of their Urdu counterparts. It is another matter that so full of themselves are most Urdu columnists that if it was suggested to them that they may actually have counterparts in the other language, they would feel gravely insulted.

One problem with Urdu columnists is that all of them want to instruct whosoever is ruling Pakistan as to how Pakistan should be ruled. During the lifetime of the ruler of the day, their advice is rendered in the most abject manner and after he has been thrown out of office, his great misdeeds are denounced in the most intemperate terms. The readers are also reminded that even during the days of power of the fallen one, they alone had the courage to warn him (and her in the case of the Vanished Lady) of the tragic consequences of his actions and policies. These heroic claims are rarely borne out by the record, but then who keeps old newspapers or

even remembers what was printed in them.

Grateful we should all be, therefore, to Dr Mohammad Farooq of Lahore for having written a book about what he calls the somersaults of Pakistan's Urdu columnists. If he is half as good a doctor as he is a compiler of records, I would advise those who are getting robbed at those private clinics set up by US-based Pakistani doctors (who have not had their fill of making money in America) to trudge along to the homoeopathic clinic of Dr Farooq.

But before I turn to Dr Farooq's delicious take-off on Urdu journalism's big pundits, let me first get a few side swipes of my own out of the way. Abdullah Butt used to say of Mian Muhammad Shafi (Meem Sheen), "When I read his column, I know exactly what he wants out of whom." This may have been true of some of practitioners of this black art once, but it is true of so many of its present Urdu practitioners today. A year or so ago, the chief minister of the NWFP invited a few Urdu columnists for a weekend of lavish hospitality, Pukhtun style, in his kingdom. On return, within the next few days, all of them, without exception, wrote about him as if Akbar the Great had come back to life. A young man who had shown promise in his early columns in *Jang*, soon went the way of the majority when after a trip to Norway, he could not stop regaling his readers with stories of the generous hospitality shown to him by his Pakistani friends in Scandinavia, all of them duly named. He was one the Frontier entertainees as well.

The most formidable—and easily the most erudite—Urdu columnist of all, whose first name appropriately enough starts with the letter I, can't help reprinting his old columns to prove 'I told you so' or reproduce the texts of speeches or radio talks he has been invited to make. He, along with most other Urdu columnists, prints letters from his fans (occasionally

critics, but only occasionally) on lean days. Could there be room for the lurking suspicion that some of the letters printed by the Urdu pundits may actually have been written by them themselves? With hardly any exception, every Urdu columnist is a declared super patriot, a crusading reborn Muslim, a sword-brandishing holy warrior who has dedicated his life to the liquidation of the enemies of Islam and Pakistan and an adviser extraordinary when it comes to statecraft and foreign policy. The dirtiest word

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in the Urdu columnists dictionary is secular which he understands to mean godless and atheistic. True is the observation that ignorance is one disease for which there is no known cure.

And now to Dr Farooq's book. He picks out five of Urdu journalism's big noises: my dear friends of many years, Abdul Qadir Hasan and Nazir Naji, Mujib-ur-Rehman Shami, Altaf Hasan Qureshi and Asadullah Ghalib (the poet must be turning in his grave in old Delhi). He has reprinted their before and after columns to show and he has produced smoking gun evidence that these gentlemen change their opinion of a leader as soon as he has been toppled from power by man or, in a rare case, God. The man who until a day ago was the great saviour of the people, the much loved leader of his adoring masses, the farsighted builder of the nation, the brave defender of Islam, the guarantor of the rights of the powerless, the statesman without peer, the true successor of Quaid-i-Azam Muhammad Ali

Jinnah, the king with the heart of a faqir, the answer to the masses prayers, becomes the greatest disaster that ever hit Pakistan as soon as he has been shown to the door (and not always of his front living room).

This 180-degree turn is taken without the least apology or self-consciousness. Such disdain for the intelligence and even retentive memory of the readers is unique to Pakistan. And so, this, the country of firsts, has another first in that.

Asadullah Ghalib, who was framed by a chamber maid in his New York hotel room under a grand conspiracy jointly hatched by CIA-FBI-KGB-MI6 and Cuban intelligence during a recent State Department-sponsored trip to the United States because of his bold columns against the anti-Islam role of the US and Israel, wrote this about Nawaz Sharif on June 3, 1998: "My heart goes out to Ziaul Haq who in his own lifetime, picked out a man who has put Pakistan in a place of distinction among the nations of the world, who has made Pakistan walk tall and proud." That man is Nawaz Sharif. And here are the great columnists thoughts on Nawaz Sharif just two days after he was toppled: "He who made a deal over the blood of the nation's martyrs, he who heaped insult and calumny on Islamic sentiments, lies face down today in the deep and blind pit of infamy."

One column is not enough to do justice to the pundits and I seek leave to be allowed to devote one more column—and no more—to our before and after friends.