**Derailing democracy**

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The intrigue that started against Pakistan and its democracy after the untimely demise of the father of the nation, Quaid-e- Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the final act that permanently derailed democracy and rule by the people was the abrogation of the constitution of 1956. For two years elections were avoided by the civil-military bureaucracy through palace intrigues and self-declared, false ownership of the state by the then president Iskander Mirza and the likes of him.

The events that led to an unfortunate, uncertain and unstable future and in the liquidation of the Quaid’s Pakistan in 1971 with the secession of East Pakistan are now fully exposed in the recent memoirs of Mirza. Iskandar Mirza, leaving behind his papers and writings (now his published memoirs – ‘Iskander Mirza: Pakistan’s First Elected President’s Memoirs from Exile’, compiled and edited by Syed Khawar Mehdi) helped the present and future generations by sharing his experiences, decisions and interactions with his contemporary leaders – particularly by expressing his own thoughts and ideas about governance in Pakistan.

Mirza was commissioned in the British colonial army and his later induction into the Indian civil service and experiences as such open up a window into the British colonial administration and a mindset. His experiences while holding administrative positions such as assistant commissioner or deputy commissioner in the Peshawar and Dera Ismail Khan districts are highly informative.

An important part of his memoirs relates to his interactions with Quaid-e-Azam. He claims to have been assigned an important task by the Quaid of inciting rebellion by way of jihad among the tribal people in 1947. This sounds rather strange and unusual because being a civil servant he was not so trained. The task was abandoned after acceptance of the demand for an independent Pakistan. He correctly observed that giving Ferozepur to India by the Boundary Commission (headed by Radcliffe) was a tragic decision that deprived West Punjab of valuable water resources.

Being an important official in the Ministry of Defence after Independence, he had an insider’s knowledge of the Indo-Pak war on Kashmir in 1947/48. His recollections regarding this inform about the launching of the jihad in Kashmir through the tribes of Wazirabad – a grave mistake.

Mirza acknowledges that due to the efforts of Generals Messervy and Gracey, the Pakistan Army became a fine fighting force. According to him, the failure to attack Akhnoor during the Kashmir war, which could have cut India’s communications with the Kashmir valley, resulted in the loss of Kashmir. The capture and occupation of Gilgit-Skardu during the Kashmir war was a major success of the war for which substantial credit goes to the people of that region.

It has been rumoured over the years that India was initially prepared to make a deal with Pakistan over Kashmir in exchange for the state of Hyderabad. Mirza has stated this in the following words: “After the Junagadh fiasco, a messenger came to Karachi from Sirdar Patel, the strong man of the Indian government who was in charge of the integration of princely states. Patel said that if we would lay off Hyderabad, we could take Kashmir. It was a fair offer but the government let it go”.

Mirza takes credit for imposing martial law in Lahore during the anti-Ahmadiyya movement of 1953. He appears to be supportive of the undemocratic removal of Nazimuddin in April 1953 and disastrous dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in October 1954. He was also supportive of Pakistan’s entry into pro-American pacts like the Baghdad Pact (Cento) and Seato. His explanation of taking over from Ghulam Muhammad as governor general of Pakistan in rather simplistic terms is not easy to believe. He appears to give little importance to the framing of the constitution under which he assumed the office of president of Pakistan.

The chapter titled ‘Acting As Umpire’ is one of the two most important chapters of the book. He has posed himself as a reluctant umpire while frequent changes of ministries were taking place during the period (March 1956 to October 1958). He has put the entire blame of political instability on the politicians and their selfish intrigues.

Mirza conveniently ignores that after the constitution came into force in March 1956, general elections ought to have been held at the earliest. He forgot his primary duty towards the constitution and democracy. Even when general elections were finally called in February 1959 and the election campaign was in full swing, he sabotaged all that by declaring martial law on October 7, 1958 and abrogated the constitution. He derailed the constitutional dispensation in Pakistan, eventually leading to the breakup of Pakistan in 1971.

In Chapter VI (‘The Finale’) he tries to justify his taking the fateful step of imposition of martial law and abrogation of the constitution. His justifications for his unlawful and unconstitutional conduct are hardly convincing. He ignores that he provided a template for the future subversions of the constitutions in Pakistan. He was himself responsible for creating instability in governments.

On what basis could he unilaterally declare the constitution unworkable and abrogate a constitution agreed upon by all the political parties in the country? Was he wiser than the collective wisdom of all the politicians? How did he judge the collective opinion of the people of Pakistan without holding any referendum? How did he assume himself as sole arbiter of welfare and happiness of the people? There is no answer to these legitimate questions.

Many thought over the years that it was the ambition and adventurism of General Ayub Khan which resulted in the martial law of October 1958. He has however clarified that he was the one who actually did it. It is thus his action that led to repeated and lengthy military governments in Pakistan, which have ditched constitutional dispensation in the country. He was lucky to die in 1969. Had he lived for three more years, he would have seen the bitter fruit of his actions that detailed democracy and alienated East Pakistan, leading to the grave tragedy of 1971.

It appears that either he did not know or did not care to note that the provisions of the constitution of 1956 were similar to those of the Indian constitution of 1950 which has been a success despite the greater complexities of the Indian union with dozens of ethnicities and languages and hundreds of dialects. What right had he to give his verdict on parliamentary democracy without even having tried it?

He expressed himself as favouring the presidential system prevailing in the US. It appears that he knew little about the U.S. Constitution and its evolution. It is disturbing to learn about his notion of ‘revolution’. He thought that a military coup was a form of ‘revolution’. In this respect, his thinking was no different from that of then CJ Muhammad Munir who gave the same meaning to the word ‘revolution’ as is apparent from his judgement in Dosso’s case.

Mirza appears to be aggrieved by the actions of General Ayub and his military junta in throwing him out of power after a few days of imposition of martial law and sending him in exile to Britain. After all, he ought to have known that you die by the sword you live with. He should have known better that the constitutionalism he unleashed on Pakistan would continue to cause harm to the polity of Pakistan. His grand idea of thirty or forty men of goodwill and experience writing the constitution for Pakistan was simply outrageous. Why did he not realize that the constitution was given by the people of the country through its representatives duly elected for this purpose and not by a dictator as was subsequently done by Gen Ayub Khan in 1962?

Iskander Mirza emerges as a financially clean public official, a rare breed in Pakistan. He lived in misery in a foreign land and was unfairly deprived of his pension and other benefits that were due to him as a retired public servant. He was unfairly denied a return to Pakistan by General Yahya and was unjustly deprived of burial in Pakistan. He should have been given an official burial in Pakistan, having been the country’s first president.

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