Riddles of current politics

27/06/04
Pak. Pol. & Int. Affairs.

By Kunwar Idris

IS Prime Minister Jamali staying or going? It wouldn't matter either way. All power emanates from the president and he decides how it is to be exercised, and by whom.

We have the testimony of no other than Jamali himself for it. He told a news reporter the other day that President Musharraf is above everybody else and above board to boot, hence all his orders have to be "respected, honoured and implemented".

The prime minister claims to enjoy the president's full trust as also of the chairman of his party Chaudhry Shujaat who, Jamali concedes, should have been the prime minister. Jamali is thus the prime minister not because of his own public standing or party support but because of the indulgence of the party chief.

His impending departure is not just rumour-mongering as Jamali makes it out to be. The MMA leaders — Qazi Hussain Ahmad and Maulana Fazlur Rahman — have been alleging for quite some time that plans were afoot to remove Jamali. Now the ARD component of the opposition too has joined the MMA in that refrain led by Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan. Though felt betrayed by the religious alliance in the leader of opposition contest, the PPP is still prepared to make common cause with it when it deems it necessary.

It is puzzling to watch the opposition going against its role and parliamentary tradition in supporting Jamali when he himself is committed to honour and implement all of the president's orders and, further, is willing to leave it entirely to Musharraf when to hang up his general's cap.

The opposition suspects Musharraf's motives and intentions all the way — his constitutional scheme, his war on terror (which now extends to Pakistan's own tribes) involvement of the army in civil administration and even the economy. The blame for instability and violence lies where it belongs — the founders of the regime. It admits of no alibi.

While the forces of moderation are kept on the run, obscurantism is spreading fast in search of ever new niches to arouse passions and create disorder. It has found its latest and unwary victim in the Aga Khan's Ismaili followers. The orthodox assault ominously describes them as a religious minority and not as a sect of Islam.

Alongside attempts are being made to detract from the political services of the Aga Khan III (Sir Sultan Shah Mohammad Khan) in the cause of the Muslims of the subcontinent before independence and now by the reigning Aga Khan in the fields of rural development, education and charity. A glimpse of these services spread over half a century is to be found in the Round Table Conferences of London (1930-32). The Aga Khan led the Muslim delegation which introduced M.A. Jinnah (he was a member of the delegation) to the British government and the public as the emerging statesman of India.

All gates opened to the delegation, says a contemporary account, because the Aga Khan was its leader. In his memoirs the Aga Khan ranks Jinnah among the greatest statesman of the twentieth century alongside Bismarck, the founder of the German Empire, and Clemenceau of France who led the Allies to victory in the First World War. Now it has fallen to the detractors of Jinnah also to run down his admirer, the Aga Khan.

The above was a diversion from the main theme only to draw attention to the new areas of conflict being opened by the politics of religion. It has already taken enough toll of life and property. The people must not be further exposed to its vagaries of hate.

A country that is inhabited by 95 per cent Muslims (some would say 97 per cent) does not need Islamic parties. The citizens themselves can take care of their faith and resolve the differences inherent in the interpretation of its precepts and principles. It has nothing to do with politics.

While the forces of moderation are kept on the run, obscurantism is spreading fast in search of ever new niches to arouse passions and create disorder. It has found its latest and unwary victim in the Aga Khan's Ismaili followers.

The Islamists have brought only strife in the life of a peaceful community. Jinnah knew it all and that is why he never courted the religious groups even in the most desperate hour of his lone struggle against the twin forces of the British and the Congress. In fact alongside he fought against the clerics of Islam with the Muslim masses at his back.

Whatever the aims and ambitions of the political players, the country cannot be abandoned to rumours, intrigues and blackmail. Jamali who stands helplessly at the centre of this unedifying scene, ironically, has all the power to change it. He can advise the president to dissolve the National Assembly. Unless sooner dissolved, says article 58(i) of the Constitution, it shall "stand dissolved at the expiration of forty-eight hours after the prime minister has so advised". There is no qualification, no judicial review that must accompany the dissolution when it is ordered by the president.

Jamali thus has to sign his own death warrant to be born again as a leader in his own right ceasing to be a proxy of Musharraf or Shujaat. In the elections that under the Constitution must follow within 90 days of the dissolution, all parties and citizens should be enabled to participate on equal and fair footing but none allowed to summon Islam to its aid for that stands above politics.

This article was written before Mr Jamali's resignation.

National Security Council the MMA helped to create. Jamali supports all that and more. He lets Musharraf exercise powers much beyond those he has acquired under his own amendments to the Constitution.

Factually speaking, the president's constitutional powers are restricted to a few key appointments and dissolution of the National Assembly in a situation where either the prime minister loses its majority support or when "the government of the federation cannot be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the Constitution and an appeal to the electorate is necessary".

The second riddle, thus, is why would the President seek, or intrigue as the opposition alleges, to replace Jamali. It is unpredictable but unlikely that any other member of the parliament who has the making of a chief executive would concede to Musharraf the expanded role that Jamali has conceded so willingly. An instance in point is Musharraf's persuasion of the parliamentarians of the ruling coalition by direct contact. Any other leader of the house would have resented it. Jamali has thanked him for it.

Musharraf may have been disenchanted with Jamali's hectoring ability but could not, perhaps, be doubting his loyalty despite his having drifted uncomfortably close to the orthodox MMA alliance. But the path to that drift has been paved by Musharraf's own policies and choice of friends as soon as he took over the control of the country.

Chaudhry Shujaat, Musharraf's first chosen ally and the pivot of his politics, by his own declaration is also a "natural ally" of the religious parties. In fact neither Shujaat nor Musharraf had any other choice. Musharraf had dismissed and tried Nawaz Sharif and Shujaat had deserted him. Both of them loathed Benazir Bhutto for their own reasons.

To bolster the military administration to begin with and to cobble together a political government after the elections, Musharraf and Shujaat, thus, had no option but to rely on the religious parties and on defections from the parties of Nawaz and Benazir. This strategy built up and consolidated the religious groups into an alliance (which had eluded them in the past) and at the same time weakened and split the dominant moderate parties.

Musharraf's own scheme of politics has doomed his "enlightened moderation". It remains an empty rhetoric. The tide of extremism continues to rise to hurt the people and