

Changing horses midstream

BY HUMAYUN GAUHAR

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Pak Govt & Internal Affairs

Why did the President want a new Prime Minister?

Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali resigned without knowing that he had the power to pull the rug out from under everyone's feet. Sadly, one of the many problems besetting Pakistan is that often our rulers do not know the limits of their power.

So they either over-reach and burn themselves, as Nawaz Sharif did when he took on President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and lost the National Assembly and his government. Or they under-reach, as Nawaz Sharif did after the Supreme Court restored his government but he meekly submitted to the 'order' of the then army chief and resigned.

His only satisfaction was that he took the president down with him. In the first instance, he didn't realise that he was still only a child of the establishment, yet like Don Quixote tilting at the windmills he took it on and lost. In the second instance, after the Supreme Court restored the National Assembly and his government, the limits of his power had extended considerably and if he had refused to resign and called the army chief's bluff he could have won and become even more popular. And if the army chief too had lost touch with the limits of his own power and forced him out, Sharif's power flowing from mass popularity would have been even greater. Again, when he hijacked the passenger aircraft carrying General Musharraf and ordered it to land abroad, in the first instance in India, Sharif had so lost touch with reality that he must have imagined that the limits of his power were limitless.

In one very important sense the prime minister too has as much power as the president. What is the president's real power, forgetting for a minute that he is also the army chief, for eventually we will have one who is not? His real power is that he can dissolve the National Assembly.

The prime minister also has the same power. Under our constitution, if the prime minister asks the president to dissolve the National Assembly he has no choice but to do so. If he doesn't act, the Assembly stands automatically dissolved in 48 hours. That is why I say that Mr. Jamali could have pulled the rug out from under everyone's feet? That would have really put the cat amongst the pigeons. Not being a powerful or popular political leader, it would have been nothing more than a churlish parting kick to be sure, but if he has the stuff that it takes to make a popular leader, he could have taken his chances. Patently he does not. He is too decent a man.

On the other hand, the president is very savvy; he is brimming with the stuff leaders are made of. That is why he can run circles around our mediocre politicians. The president knows that this system is no good. He knows that it will never throw up a good government, even if Thomas Jefferson were to head it. He knows that there is no governance and no

He knows that the opposition is a joke, protesting vehemently in the National Assembly while many of its honourable members not-so-secretly keep their lines to the establishment open.

Look how Jamali tried to save his government. By saying to the Press and anyone who would listen that he is in no danger of removal. That, in fact, convinced people further that there is a serious problem to which there could be a serious consequence. Have you ever heard of a happily married husband telling all and sundry that there is no problem in his marriage? He doesn't need to talk about it if there is none. In fact, it won't even occur to him to comment on his stable marriage. Yet we witnessed the hilarious spectacle of a prime minister trying to save his government with the help of the opposition. Only in Pakistan could such a thing happen. And the opposition was happy to do so, for it thought that it is would cause the president discomfiture by forcing him to live with a prime minister whom he doesn't want. If this doesn't throw up in stark relief how nonsensical the parliamentary system is, what does?

Why did the president want a new prime minister? Being a man who finds it difficult to dissemble, the president's body language and tone had made it abundantly clear that he was not happy with Mr. Jamali. Why? Why would he wish to change him? Mr. Jamali was pliable and obedient. He said repeatedly that the president is his boss. He knew his place and did as he was told. So what was wrong? Plenty. He was neither able to get political momentum going nor any semblance of governance. He didn't command the loyalty of his party, only grudging acceptance. His ministers did as they pleased, each one a universe unto himself. In short, he was ineffective. He has neither charisma nor the makings of a popular political leader. To put it in a nutshell, Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali was not capable of being an effective Number Two to the president to assist him in crafting the Pakistan Muslim League into a popular political party and take it to victory in the next elections. That is the kind of man the president wants.

Is there anyone in the National Assembly who fits

take to a job like a duck takes to water. Conversely, often the most likely people rise to the level of their incompetence when they find themselves with more power than they can digest, a small man (or woman) showing just how small they are. A good minister doesn't necessarily make a good prime minister. There is an ocean of a difference between the two jobs. We have two examples before us. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the best foreign minister we have ever had and Nawaz Sharif one of the best chief ministers. But as prime ministers both were unmitigated disasters. So one can never tell.

It is best to go by what is natural instead of bucking the system. What is natural to this wretched parliamentary system is that the leader of the majority or largest party in parliament should become prime minister, not necessarily a person that the people want or don't want. If the leader of the largest or majority party does not become prime minister you get an unnatural situation.

The prime minister becomes ineffective and eventually resentful as the real leader wittingly or unwittingly keeps trespassing on his jurisdiction. At the time of writing I have no idea who the next prime minister will be, but like it or not, for we are talking theory not personalities, the natural prime minister of this parliament is Chaudhry Shujat Hussain son of the martyred Chaudhry Zahoor Elahi. He is the leader of the largest party in parliament so he is the natural prime minister. Any other could become the next sacrificial lamb.

Of course there are other yardsticks than just who is the leader of the largest party in parliament. Who is the best educated? Who has a good (not necessarily tribal or feudal) background? Who has good health and is young? Who is likely to be effective yet not likely to get too big for his boots? Thus, who understands the power dynamic and knows the limits of his power? Who is most presentable, nationally and internationally? Who can speak well? Who really knows the issues in his bones? Who can target an objective into the future, know how to get there, is capable of making course corrections along the way and stay the course? But these yardsticks can only apply in a presidential election held under one-person-one-vote. In a parliamentary system they don't because they can't.

The contention of many of us has always been that there should be no prime minister because there should be no parliamentary system but one in which legislature and the executive are separate and independent of each other. Thus I am of the firm belief that nothing good can ever come out of this system. But now that we are landed with it, how do we make the best of it, at least so long as it lasts? We will talk about that next week, unless something bigger happens.

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Is there anyone in the National Assembly who fits the bill? One wouldn't bet on it. But you never know unless you try. Sometimes the most unlikely people

get an unnatural situation.

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