

The establishment strikes again

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THE exit of Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali marks the continuation of the unhealthy political convention in Pakistan of dismissing prime ministers or forcing them to quit, never allowing them to complete their tenure.

In our 57 years of history no prime minister has been voted out in parliament. With the exception of Z. A. Bhutto, no prime minister has dissolved the National Assembly of his own accord. Prime ministers have been either removed by presidents or toppled by generals.

The departure of Mr Jamali brings out the weakness of our parliamentary democracy. In a normally functioning parliamentary democracy the president or head of the state is a mere figurehead who acts on the prime minister's advice. However, in the case of Pakistan, with the exception of Chaudhry Fazal Elahi and Mr Rafique Tarar, the person holding the office of president has not been content with playing the role of a mere constitutional head. Rather, successive presidents have tried to keep prime ministers under their thumb.

This has been the major cause of conflict between the two in which, save on one occasion when prime minister Nawaz Sharif forced president Farooq Leghari to step down, presidents have always been triumphant.

The first blow to parliamentary democracy and the position of the president was struck by governor-general Ghulam Muhammad when he sacked prime minister Nazimuddin. In fact, there are quite a few similarities between the removal of Jamali and Nazimuddin: On both occasions, the decision to replace the prime minister was made by the establishment. On both occasions, parliament was denied any role in the change of government. On both occasions, the PML parliamentary party meekly accepted the decision. And on both occasions, a pro-American outsider was chosen as future prime minister (Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain is only a stop-gap arrangement). Who says history does not repeat itself?

The removal of Mr Nazimuddin established a dangerous precedent, and all his

successors were removed in an uncereceremonious fashion. Some — Mohammad Ali Bogra, Chaudhry Mohammad Ali, I. I. Chundrigar, H. S. Suhrawardi — were forced to resign. Others — Feroz Khan Noon, Z. A. Bhutto, Muhammad Khan Junejo, Benazir Bhutto — were dismissed by presidents or army chiefs. Nawaz Sharif was twice dismissed, though on one occasion he was reinstated by the apex court, and once made to step down. Mr Jamali is the latest addition to the casualty list.

Two factors are mainly responsible for this practice: constitutional provisions and parliamentary conventions. The 1956 Constitution had empowered the president to appoint and dismiss prime minister. President Iskander Mirza used this power to ensure the exit of successive prime ministers. The 1973 Constitution made the president a titular head. However, the infamous Eighth Amendment, vide Article 58-2(b), empowered the president to dismiss the National Assembly and the prime minister. It was in exercise of that

power that Ziaul Haq, Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Farooq Leghari sacked parliaments and prime ministers. President Ghulam Ishaq performed this feat twice. Prime minister Nawaz Sharif during his second term got Article 58-2(b) repealed. However, the article was resurrected by President Musharraf when he amended the Constitution. Subsequently, parliament put its seal on all Musharraf-made amendments, including the resurrection of Article 58-2(b), by passing the 17th Amendment.

After this amendment, Mr Jamali was on a sticky wicket. Few believed he would complete his tenure. Though he has resigned, not been dismissed, the presidential power to dismiss the prime minister in all probability forced him to hang his gloves.

In Pakistan, presidents instead of acting on the advice of prime ministers want the latter to follow their dictate. And the establishment, instead of parliament, makes or breaks a government — through presidential orders or military coups. Again, the establishment, not

political leaders, makes and breaks political parties.

The PML leadership maintains that Mr Jamali's resignation will strengthen both the party and democracy. But will it? Mr Jamali's exit has weakened the office of the prime minister and undermined the status of parliament. The fact is that the decision to change the prime minister was made outside the PML and later communicated to the party leadership.

Finally, in Mr Jamali's removal is the message that whether there is a democratic or a non-democratic set-up in the country, the establishment will continue to pull the strings and that political forces will have to play a subdued role.

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