

Pak Politics & Inter Aff
10/7/04 The Nation

The beginning of the end

BY SHERRY REHMAN

It's not that there are just cracks in the coalition straggling behind the General.

When Musharraf took over from Nawaz Sharif in bloodless coup in October 1999 he had more supporters at home than abroad. Before 9/11, in fact, he was a pariah for the international community until he became an instrument in their hunt for terrorists, but his apologists among the chattering classes and business elite all over Pakistan were a noisy enough crowd.

After the absurd and shameful transfer of power from PM Jamali to the Chaudhry of Gujrat in a drama that rivaled any farce in living history, the equation seems to have reversed. While his supporters abroad continue to rely on him as a one-man conduit for executing their still unrealised goals, back home the air around his once-impregnable office is perceptibly thinning. Although the General still has his band of political profiteers to carry out his agenda and to do his public relating, his support-base in Pakistan has been rocked to the core.

Three major factors point to the unraveling of the Musharraf system of control cloaked as legitimacy. First, of course, is the breakdown in the law and order mechanism of the weakening state. Challenges to its crumbling hold on day-to-day stability were evident when a pliant Chief Minister was changed overnight for an equally obedient executive who appeared cavalier as well as impotent in the face of mounting anarchy all over urban Sindh. The Karachi by-polls became a killing match where murder and bloodshed nullified the results.

No-one, nowhere appeared to safe in a landscape where targeted killings of opposition spokesmen and party stalwarts like Munawar Suhrwady of PPP and Binyamin Rizvi of PML-N remained mysteriously uninvestigated. The city's only working anti-crime institution, the CPLC, was systematically battered down when the first thing the new Governor of Sindh reportedly did was erase his own record from their files. Fissures in the Sindh ruling consensus were by then as numerous as the number of bullet-riddled bodies choking the morgues of Karachi or the bodybags from Operation Botch-up in the defiles of Wana. With a corps commander attacked on Clifton

bridge, 56 rockets fired on Sui airport, sectarian violence claiming hundreds, 78 dead in one month in the port city, and the missions of Musharraf's staunchest foreign allies under terrorist shut-down in Islamabad, the Presidency was beginning to acquire the air of a besieged putschist force imploding under the weight of its own compromises.

The second factor eroding Musharraf's credibility was his unabashed embrace of corruption in proven places, when his entire plank for legitimacy was based on across-the-board accountability. The infamous NAB, which cost Rs 12 billion to just set up, acquired the tarnished patina of an office dedicated to pursuing political opponents and blackmailing potential recruits. The National Arm-twisting Bureau, as it came to be known, met its first crisis of credibility when it masterminded a bizarre so-called deal between Nawaz Sharif and family for their continued exile in exchange for release from prison.

The dubious principle of plea-bargain married with the expedient tool of half-shelved cases became the standard operating mechanism for this organisation to write off loans for previous victims like Ch Shujat and floor-crossers like the incumbent ministers who were needed to get Musharraf's hand-picked Prime Minister the one-vote victory he needed to form the King's Party government.

While Rs 12 crore were spent re-opening the case against ex-PM Bhutto in the Swiss courts who quashed the first enquiry against her after SGS Cotecna made an out-of-court settlement with Islamabad, NAB thought nothing of writing off Rs 26 billion against pay raises and junkets for its officials that registered a 307 percent increase in the last budget.

The failure of the much vaunted nazamate system riddled with a new layer of corruption and poor governance was only matched by the daily leakages of state resources like the exorbitant prices paid for PIA to purchase new planes, or benefits to cronies through the Australian wheat import scandal.

Yet what a marked a turning point in Musharraf's political hold was the

haste and crudity with which he micro-managed the whole Exit Jamali operation. The fault-lines in his model of consent had become evident when he staged a referendum to select himself President. Later when he got the MMA to sign up to indemnify his quasi-military Presidency by rubber-stamping the Seventeenth Amendment, both he and his blow-hot, blow-cold allies felt the freezing breath of public distaste. Now that the most docile of PMs has been made to resign in unceremonious haste, without overt cause, by the General's own design, the fault lines in the system are beginning to expose his desperation.

It's not that there are just cracks in the coalition straggling behind the General. It is true that every PML-Q meeting is reportedly marred by in-house disputes and challenges to the current solution of stop-gap PM and then elections for the new incumbent. It is also true that aspirants from the 190 Q League MNAs will naturally continue to publicly court but covertly plot against the new imported PM.

Humayun Akhtar, who is not to be underestimated both politically and fiscally, will form a natural forward-bloc against anyone hand-picked to thwart his ambitions. But these are all road-blocks that Shaukat Aziz can conceivably handle. What has saddled him and his real boss is the stigma of being pre-picked as an electoral winner in a crucial by-poll that has yet to be conducted. This is not some small point undeserving of attention in a milieu where the scene is changing faster than the scorecard on a football match. The fact that the government in all its hamhandedness announced Shaukat Aziz as the next PM, not as its candidate, since he is a Senator and has to go through the rigours of a contest, proves just how

far gone it is tangled in its own labyrinth of lies.

The dropping of such an important façade of the democratic procedures the government claims to uphold to its international benefactors is crucial for two reasons. One, it exposes the General's state of mind as being close to panic as the days grow closer for him to drop his uniform. Two, it brings him nearer the edge of the abyss which he himself has opened by refusing to accept that all good and bad things must end.

The school of thought that believes Shaukat Aziz will be beholden to Musharraf as a man without no base has forgotten one important thing. Shaukat Aziz is no push-over, and once he is elected PM, with his own direct line to the US State department, it is not he who will ultimately be worried about offending Musharraf, but the other way round. If Musharraf hopes for a more seamless relationship with Mr Aziz than with the more home-grown Jamali, on say, the nuclear issue or any other commitment he has made to his international supporters, he will have a lot of sleepless nights before shedding the coveted uniform.

Office always has its own dynamics. Just like the floor of the National Assembly has a way of infecting even the most pliant PM with the seductive power of its own legitimacy, the office of COAS in Pakistan also has a lot of temptation built into it. Musharraf may retain the chopping prerogative of 58-2[b], but once he is out of uniform, he is only one member of the troika, nothing more. If he retains the uniform, his whole arrangement with the MMA as well as his international credibility will begin to unravel even faster. His only route to survival then will be the dismissal of the National Assembly or imposition of martial law. In either case stability in Pakistan will be sacrificed for stability in Musharraf's house.

And here is the crux of the mystery behind why poor Jamali was sacked. It was not that he challenged Musharraf on the NSC, spoke out at the ASEAN conference about the need for elected PMs to complete their tenure, or did not come out publicly to

support Musharraf on his Achilles heel of the uniform issue. It was also not about defending Baluchistan or any of its tribes against army action, refusing to budge on the anti-women laws, or even ultimately transfers and postings. It is essentially about the fact that General Musharraf, like so many of his military predecessors, has attempted to establish a system which is inherently unstable.

It is unstable because it does not factor in the reality that Pakistan has a parliamentary system, and that no leader of parliament can be reduced to a staff officer of a military general, no matter how obsequious that person may be. For those who argue for the separation of executive from the legislature in favour of a presidential system it should be understood that unless the presidency is genuinely representative, and based on transparently elected leaders, even that system will remain unstable.

If General Musharraf has any feeling left for the country he has managed to bring to this point, he should understand that democracy cannot prosper with just macroeconomic stability. Pakistan is at a dangerous crossroads. It needs consensus-building between provinces, it needs a diversion of resources and real commitment to the social sector, it needs an unemployment plan and women empowerment programmes, not just lip service.

All this has to come through the ranks of genuine political leadership, bad or good, not through power-sharing deals with the security agencies. For this the political parties must also be allowed to reinvent themselves as genuine links to the people who elect them as public representatives, not by qualifying through interviews with the ISI. If the aspirant to the PM's office wants to be taken seriously, and to genuinely steer the country out of this crisis, he or she would be well advised to rise through the ranks of a real political party. Civilian politicians are still the only people in the country who are subject to accountability on a daily basis. Pakistan would be better served with an imperfect democracy than a floundering dictatorship.

Sherry Rehman is an MNA and President of the PPP Central Policy Planning Wing