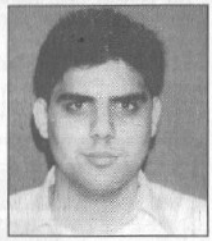
Beating history

VIEW



SAVAIL HUSSAIN

If General Musharraf manages to hold on to power despite the rocky road ahead he will indeed have beaten history, for never before has a political leader in Pakistan survived the failure of his political system

WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND. MR Jamali may well find solace in this old saying after his unceremonious departure from perhaps the most ceremonious of public offices in a parliamentary democracy.

A quick review of our history over the last five decades reveals that whosoever toys with the political system detracts from long-term political stability. He sounds his own political death-knell.

Governor-general Ghulam Muhammad dissolved the constituent assembly that had finalised Pakistan's first Constitution. He did not last long and was deposed by Iskander Mirza. Mr Mirza's collusion with the military to abrogate the 1956 Constitution led to his ouster and exile by Ayub Khan and the dawn of a presidential form of government. As the political dispensation Mr Khan set up floundered, he was shown the door by the very institution that had put him there, the military.

General Yahya Khan, who had introduced his own amendments to the system of governance, decided, in collusion with Mr Bhutto, to prevent its functioning by disallowing the elected leader to take oath as prime minister. The result was the dismemberment of the state and Yahya's exit into the wilderness. Mr Bhutto, Yahya's replacement, trudged along with a civilian dictatorship for a while until he reverted to a parliamentary form of government enshrined in the 1973 Constitution. Within days of inaugurating the new system, he began tampering with it to create a personal-political fiefdom.

Unlike his predecessors, Mr Bhutto was deposed together with the political system he had created. He did not go into retirement or exile but ended on the gallows. General Ziaul Haq carried on, merrily injecting religious intolerance and promoting the mullahisation of society, for over a decade. Along the way he founded a lopsided system that was helmed ceremoniously by Mohammad Khan Junejo until Mr Junejo fell out of favour. He was sacked together with the system that put him there. Zia was assassinated soon after he dispensed with the system he had created.

Mr Sharif in the latter half of the 1990s, while he wasn't wrecking the economy with nuclear tests, runaway corruption and chaotic mismanagement of the affairs of state, decided to take on every independent institution that existed — the press, the judiciary, and finally the army. The outcome, a military coup that sent him packing to the holy land together with the system he had distorted.

We now have Musharraf's system. It, too, appears to be tottering on the brink with an increasingly vocal and troublesome opposition led by the MMA on the one hand and an alarmingly divided ruling party on the other. The promise of making Shaukat Aziz a prime minister has, of course, not helped in uniting the heterogeneous individuals who just happen to be members of the ruling party. Mr Aziz better be as nimble-footed as he is well-regarded in financial circles, for he has landed in the snake's pit.

Recent political developments, therefore, are more of the same. Is General Pervez Musharraf about to join his predecessors in political oblivion if his attempt to introduce 'home grown democracy' flounders as appears increasingly likely? History, as we have seen, strongly suggests so. But maybe he is relying on the law of large numbers — hoping that he'll be the one to survive the odds.

General Musharraf's short-term political survival rests on his ability to rein in the PMLQ through a carrot and stick approach. Simultaneously, he will have to renege on the Faustian bargain he has struck with the MMA. The MMA is completely at odds with Musharraf's 'enlightened moderation' as it is for any other enlightened or humane view of the world. The idea of 'keeping your friends close and your enemies closer' is clearly not working as the political system is wracked from within by obscurantist and retrogressive forces led by the MMA. Cutting the MMA loose either through sending the assemblies packing in the NWFP and Balochistan or marginalising them in the opposition will both involve making a deal with the secular, currently marginalised political parties.

General Musharraf's medium- and long-term survival depends on his success in building a political constituency in civil society, which will hinge on his ability to deliver on the economic front and making good on his pledge to devolve governance.

This means GDP growth in excess of 8 percent, a serious attempt at poverty alleviation rather than fudging poverty numbers, getting the international community on board not for a paltry $3 billion over the next five years, but over $5 billion a year for the next five years in development aid and direct investment.

Rapid economic growth takes root in a good institutional environment. That means establishing the writ of the state, restoring law and order in the major cities, making a durable peace with India, and introducing reforms aimed at cutting red tape and minimising the role of state in economic activity through arbitrary duties, tariffs and regulations. These deter investment and serve as conduits for diverting funds to corrupt governmental functionaries.

Getting local governments to run effectively will require fiscal empowerment and administrative authority through a separation of powers enshrined in the Constitution and a local government cadre. Recent research suggests that the resource-starved local governments have to fight the provincial governments and the bureaucracy. The latter are fighting back to maintain their hold on domains that are officially in the ambit of local governments.

High growth, a significant dent in poverty and grassroots-level involvement in the affairs of state can also, for the first time in Pakistan's history, give its populace an economic stake in governance. That is essential for ensuring that a stable political system takes root.

No system can prevail for long unless it is based on a broad consensus and real economic benefits for the majority.

Such advice to General Musharraf is not new. So far he hasn't listened. What makes it particularly relevant is the historical context. If he manages to hold on to power despite the rocky road ahead he will indeed have beaten history, for never before has a political leader in Pakistan survived the failure of his political system.

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