

Shaukat Aziz, a former international banker groomed by US and Saudi financiers, is aimed at not only giving an aura of political stability, but also ensuring the supremacy of the military in domestic politics, while providing a credible civilian face acceptable to those on whom the regime depends heavily for support, both domestically and abroad.

However, this gambit is also likely to fail, sooner rather than later. Any hope that the country will get back on the democratic rails under this regime is not only forlorn but futile. The regime seems destined to crumble under the weight of its own contradictions, ambitions and follies, especially if the US government's disenchantment with the services rendered in the War on terror increases and its frustration in the quest for key Al Qaeda leaders mounts further.

General Musharraf and his colleagues have lost a God-sent opportunity to disabuse the military of the accusation of constant interference in domestic politics and to allow democratic institutions to take root and flourish, rather than being weeded out every ten years and replaced by cactus *militarus*. Instead of imposing the half-baked ideas of the National Reconstruction Bureau on governance and decentralization, they would have been much better served by allowing a consensus on the major issues facing the country to be built through dialogue and discussion among various political, social, regional and professional groups. The latter could indeed have included the military, without giving it the commanding role that is its wont.

The setting up of an independent and neutral election commission and ensuring the independence and integrity of the judicial system, would have been some of the more salutary contributions which the October 1999 coup leaders could have made and with which they would have greatly assuaged the search for the inevitable exit they have been groping for. Instead, they have chosen to overstay their welcome and enlarged their mandate to the extent that now they have become a significant part of the problem that they set out to solve.

The military's ostensible raison d'être for continuing its firm hold on the governance of the country and allowing only the minimal and peripheral powers to the executive and legislative branches of the government, even though it has had a direct hand in choosing their key personnel, rests on several factors. First, it derives from its emphasis on the country's security interests for which it has arrogated to itself the sole responsi-

rightly perceived not to be a serious threat in itself. However, it did introduce a basic contradiction in Pakistani politics. While it provided the military an additional reason for its continued presence in the political arena, it became vulnerable not only from the religious right, but also from the fleeing Taliban and Al Qaeda elements who found refuge not only in the border areas, which had always provided safe haven for them, but also in the urban centres, where they had political sympathizers who could help in creating trouble through hired assassins and committed fanatics.

Those who thought that the military would be able to cut down to size the fundamentalists and will help usher in an era of a modern, secular and forward-looking polity were also disappointed, as the military keen on prolonging its tenure, adopted an ambiguous attitude towards the religious parties and allowed them to form governments in two provinces.

The third reason for the military's continued involvement in domestic politics is the ongoing process of negotiations with India, which recommenced last January at the initiative of Mr Vajpayee, after a long lull and considerable prodding of both countries by the US. The military does not trust the civilian government to undertake these talks for fear that they may compromise on the most critical and strategic issue of Kashmir, which it views as the 'core' issue.

It is, however, becoming increasingly clear that the Indo-Pakistan relationship cannot be normalized without taking a broader view of the political realities that have emerged in the past half a century and the challenges that face South Asia at large. The military's narrow and strategic view of Kashmir as the core or the first among equal issues is unlikely to lead to any long-term detente with India. It also serves to strengthen its resolve not to give up its continued stranglehold on domestic politics.

The extended period of military rule in Pakistan — spanning over half of its existence — has had the debilitating effect of diminishing consciousness of the benefits in democracy in the public mind in Pakistan. The repeated dismissal of civilian governments on charges of corruption, irresponsibility and other allegations, never conclusively proved, has bred deep cynicism about democracy and elections, which provides a powerful glue to the stability of military regimes. The fact that the tradition of political dissent in Pakistan has historically never been strong has also served to corrode the evolution

ment's arbitrary policies will be dealt with appropriately and the underlings, if caught, will be left off the hook.

Indeed, the political culture being imbibed these days is beginning to resemble more and more that of the US which sets the tone for conformist uniformity and 'group think' by declaring 'if you are not with us, you are with the terrorists'. The way in which the regime has been able to quell opposition against Mr. Aziz, a political non-entity until now in the two feudally-dominated constituencies, by cowering down the voters with veiled threats and use of official machinery and feudal power, as recorded by HRCP observers, shows how well the regime has learnt the methods of its US mentors. A frequent refrain of General Musharraf's public addresses is to castigate his critics as cynics and 'pseudo-intellectuals' who are oblivious of the 'national interest', which he and his regime presumably have the exclusive prerogative of defining.

If there is one thing common to every political change in Pakistan's chequered political history, it is the chorus of unbridled sycophancy that greets the incoming wheeler-dealers, often accompanied by a litany of complaints against the ousted incumbent. The brazenly foretold 'election' of the new prime minister, Mr Shaukat Aziz, both inside and outside the Parliament, provides an added occasion for the display of such sycophancy, notwithstanding the considerable outrage at the methods adopted to elect him.

The capital city was reportedly decorated with outlandish banners and posters applauding his victory showing Mr Aziz as the newest national hero. Since the intensity of the adulation and praise showered on the new appointee is often inversely proportional to the person's suitability for the job, Mr Shaukat Aziz should be thankful if the chorus on his appointment has not exceeded his expectations, primarily because of the aura of jealousy among his peers, many of whom were keen aspirants for his job and, as King's Men, are likely to be engaged in infighting now.

(To be concluded)

50 years ago today

Holiday

There was no issue of the paper on September 12 as the offices of *Dawn* were closed on September 11 on account of Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah's sixth death anniversary.