

Politics of intimidation

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IN ADVERSARIAL encounters it is fit and proper to identify the other side's weaknesses and exploit them to one's advantage. In war, it is legitimate also to create weaknesses in the enemy's ranks. But it is not right for one team in a cricket match to hurt and disable the other side's players deliberately. The same rule applies to democratic politics, for here the opponent is not to be treated as an enemy.

In Pakistani practice, rules have been violated more than they have been followed. The powers that be have both taken advantage of existing weakness and created new ones in the political system.

Khawaja Nazimuddin became the prime minister following Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination. He was soft-spoken, gentle, almost meek of manner, moderately competent and, left to himself, inclined to be indecisive. His political base in East Pakistan was weakening and he had none in the western wing.

Taking advantage of his weakness, Ghulam Mohammad, the governor general, inclined to be arrogant and abrasive, dismissed Nazimuddin and added to the system's existing weaknesses by appointing Mohammad Ali Bogra as the new prime minister. Bogra, our ambassador in Washington at the time, had no political base anywhere in Pakistan. After the formation of a new Constituent Assembly, Chaudhry Mohammad Ali, who had never been a politician, was called in to replace Bogra. These were cases of creating political weakness.

Iskander Mirza, who replaced Ghulam Mohammad, had gained considerable proficiency in the art of political intrigue during his tenure as a political agent in tribal areas in the northwest. He summoned this art to his aid in dealing with politicians. He thrust Dr Khan Sahib (the pre-independence Congress party chief minister of NWFP) as the chief minister of West Pakistan upon a reluctant PML. He responded to its continuing protest by breaking it up: with the assistance of Governor Mushtaq Gurmani, he seduced nearly half of the PML assembly members to defect and form the Republican Party. After making and unmaking prime ministers and the coalitions that supported them, he brought in Ayub Khan, the army chief, to seize the government and outlaw politics.

When it transpired that some kind of democratic politics had to be readmitted, Ayub Khan instituted his system of basic democracies that disenfranchised the people of Pakistan for all but elections to municipal and rural local councils.

Ziaul Haq ruled as a military dictator, with the aid of martial law, for nearly eight years. He did all he could to destroy the PPP but failed in spite of the stark brutality his agents visited upon its leaders and workers. Intelligence agencies split some political groups and merged others. When he decided to allow politics to return, he amended the Constitution to provide for an authoritarian president possessed of a great deal of discretionary authority.

After the elections of 1985, he chose a relatively obscure politician, Mohammad Khan Junejo, as prime minister, expecting that being politically weak he would be pliable. But when it became apparent that Mr Junejo had a mind of his own, Ziaul Haq dismissed him and the assemblies.

The present situation in Pakistan replicates the one that Ziaul Haq had created. Before returning the country to a quasi-civilian regime, General Musharraf too disfig-

ured the Constitution by adding provisions that would enlarge his role and authority.

The grossly unethical practice of instituting bogus or unviable criminal cases against selected members of the opposition continues. These cases go on for years on end, possibly because the government itself does not want to bring them to a conclusion, causing the impression that its purpose is not to have justice done but simply to exhaust and weaken uncooperative politicians.

Following Ziaul Haq's example, General Musharraf sent out his men to disrupt and destabilize the political system. They seduced a majority of the notables belonging to PML-N to defect and set up a rival group (PML-Q). They intervened in the elections of October 2002 to advantage the nominees of this faction, enabling it to emerge as the largest single group in the National

There is one situation in which Pervez Musharraf's retention of the army post may come handy — a situation in which he has dissolved the National Assembly but the Supreme Court has invalidated his action. There is nothing he can do as president except to comply with the court's verdict. But acting as the army chief he can make another coup, set aside the Constitution, impose martial law, and rule as a military dictator.

Assembly. PML-Q is thus in General Musharraf's debt, and many of its MNAs owe their positions to his exertions in their behalf.

His agents also went after the PPP. All kinds of hurdles were placed in the way of its leading men and women before, during, and after the elections. The party won a plurality of seats in the Sindh assembly, but intrigue sponsored by the higher powers prevented it from putting together a coalition to form the provincial government. Several persons who had won the election as its nominees were persuaded to defect, form a separate group, and join the government. Held in relatively low esteem because of their opportunism, they too are now weak and in the general's debt.

Having spread all this weakness around, the general should feel secure in his position as the "king of the castle," regardless of the fact that the "castle" is in a state of terrible disrepair. Actually, he doesn't. He believes that his hold on power will remain shaky unless he continues to be the army chief at the same time that he is president. This is an interesting proposition and it deserves to be explored.

Let it first be noted that several heads of state in our experience — namely, Ghulam Mohammad, Iskander Mirza and Ghulam Ishaq Khan — were influential in government decision-making even though none of them headed the army. Each of them had a reasonably good working relationship with the army chief. It is appropriate then to ask how the retention of the army post will bolster Musharraf's effectiveness as president. In other words, what exactly is it that he can do if he keeps both posts that he will not be able to do if he gives up his uniform?

The answer is by no means apparent. It has become fashionable to say that if Musharraf gives up the army post his policies (e.g., those with regard to extremism and terrorism, relations with America, peace-making with India) might be discontinued. The reasoning behind this apprehension is not clear. The implication here may be that Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, and his colleagues in PML-Q may then no longer be amenable to his advice or direction. If that indeed is the reasoning, it is not sound. These men and women seem to be doing

well under the present dispensation and they would appear to have no incentive for disrupting it.

It may not be inappropriate at this point to ask what the nature of the general's hold on Shujaat Hussain and other PML-Q MNAs is. As I have said above, many of them are in his debt inasmuch as government officials and the "agencies" were beyond the bounds of law in helping them win their electoral contests. But this is something that happened the day before yesterday. Consider also that they are not accustomed to repaying their debts. Left to themselves, they will want to know what Musharraf has done for them lately.

On the other hand, it may be just as appropriate to ask what it is that he is refraining from doing which, if done, could work to their great discomfiture. He is putting

ting NAB's fearsome investigators to sleep so far as the PML-Q leaders and legislators are concerned. He is keeping them from probing the wrongdoing of which many of these politicians may be guilty. Is the general then holding sway through the politics of intimidation? Yes, but that is nothing new in our experience. Each successive government has resorted to these gruesome practices — at least since 1972.

Let us suppose for the sake of advancing the argument that somewhere

along the line Mr Shaukat Aziz, or another person who replaces him as prime minister, develops his own policy preferences and decides to heed the views articulated in parliament, the advice of his cabinet, and his own judgment instead of simply implementing Musharraf's directives. What can the general do if he does not like this turn of events?

Even if he is still the army chief at the same time that he is president, he cannot move troops against the prime minister or other recalcitrant politicians. Acting in his capacity as president, he can do nothing other than what General Ziaul Haq did in a like situation: he can dissolve the National Assembly and dismiss the prime minister. He has the authority to do so under Article 58 (2-b) of the Constitution, and his retention of the army post has no bearing on this subject whatsoever.

It is possible that Musharraf's authority to deploy troops against certain hostile forces within the country, and his ability to get the intelligence agencies to make or break politicians and political parties, will diminish if he quits his army post. He will then have to proceed in concert with the new army chief if he wants to requisition the personnel and resources under the latter's command. The new chief may, or may not, go along with him, depending upon what his purposes are. But this development, if it does materialize, cannot be regarded as a loss to the country.

I can think of only one situation in which Pervez Musharraf's retention of the army post may come handy. Let us postulate a situation in which he has dissolved the National Assembly but the Supreme Court has invalidated his action (as it had done in the case of Ghulam Ishaq Khan's dismissal of Nawaz Sharif and the assemblies of 1993). There is nothing he can do as president except to comply with the court's verdict. But acting as the army chief he can make another coup, set aside the Constitution, impose martial law, and rule as a military dictator. This is the only use to which his retention of the army post can be put.

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