

A time for cha

VIEW



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THE RELEASE OF ASIF ZARDARI, SPOUSE of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, has provided a bit of a charge to the political scene in Pakistan. This development is being seen as the most clear-cut indication so far of the winds of change blowing across the political landscape. Of course, the release itself was long overdue. Having spent eight years in jail Zardari has more than done time for whatever cases were instituted against him. It is another matter that since November 1996, when he was arrested after the government of Benazir Bhutto was dismissed by President Farooq Leghari, the prosecution was unable to get a conviction on any one of the many cases. The last one for which he was held till bail was granted by the Supreme Court on Monday seemed particularly surreal given the context of his arrest. Charged with all kinds of serious crimes including the murder of Benazir's brother Mir Murtaza Bhutto and enjoying an unenviable reputation much before he was arrested, Asif Zardari was eventually being held for evasion of import duty on the import of a BMW car. The case was instituted by the National Accountability Bureau after he got bail in a number of other cases.

Courtesy NAB, in addition to other players, Mr Zardari has emerged a much more formidable 'political being', a term he helpfully used to describe himself on his release, adding that he was ready to play a role in bringing together the forces for democracy. That the move is being seen in a broader context of political reconciliation between the Musharraf

regime and the mainstream political parties is given credence by the statement of Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed who referred to it as a good sign for strengthening democracy in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto similarly described the release as a possible first step in a conciliation process and expressed her relief that the government had not chosen to obstruct Zardari's release. That they could easily have done so was volunteered by a not-quite-overjoyed chief minister of Sindh, Arbab Ghulam Rahim: "We could have booked him in a 'goat theft' case, if not any other".

Be that as it may, one can only hope that the release of other political prisoners mentioned by the secretary general of the PML-Q, Mushahid Hussain, will also not be obstructed by the regime. It is interesting that hard on the heels of Zardari's release came the news of something that had apparently taken place earlier: President Musharraf, it turns out, had telephoned the Sharif brothers to condole their father's death and observed that it had not been his regime's policy to obstruct the family's return for the funeral and that what happened was the result of a misunderstanding.

There is always the danger of reading too much into such developments but there is little doubt that President Pervez Musharraf has been under pressure for some time to re-induct the major political parties into the proceedings. This is a necessary if not a sufficient condition for moving forward on the agenda of 'enlightened moderation' that he so relentlessly advocates. It is surely not the MMA that can help him in this task.

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Musharraf also needs broad-based support for a reoriented Kashmir policy that has few takers in the MMA. Political forces that intrinsically possess and espouse a tolerant and plural culture are a critical element in conflict resolution both within and without — their mixed performance notwithstanding.

The timing is important, too, in the context of the upcoming local government elections. Even if Benazir is not allowed to return just yet; allowed a free hand the PPP could do well in these elections and stake a claim for office in the general elections that may well take place in about a year's time — giving the usual suspects enough time to effect the appropriate realignments. An issue to be addressed here would be the role for the other national party, the PML-N. To not reach some kind of accommodation with the latter would leave the initiative to create the necessary space for the mainstream parties, incomplete.

All of which still leaves open the issue of power sharing between the incumbent regime and the aspiring political parties that may have been given the green light. It is clear that President Musharraf, and the army, have no intention of leaving the field entirely to a political dispensation. The overt power sharing — as opposed to handing over power — puts the army in the position, to a degree, of taking responsibility for the consequences of its policies in Afghanistan, Kashmir, on the nuclear issue and with respect to strengthening the politico-religious elements. Initially, this may even work to the advantage of the mainstream parties. But, eventually the principle of civilian

supremacy will have to be upheld. However, if very little of this is on the agenda or if President Musharraf is simply seeking to gain a little more room for manoeuvre for himself as December 31 approaches and differences with the MMA — particularly the Jamaat-e-Islami — become more pronounced, he would have missed a much-needed, perhaps critical, U-turn on his policy of excluding elements that are central to the national goals he himself articulates.

In fact, this may also be a good time to review the policy of appointing retired generals to key positions and to run all kinds of civilian institutions. The vast range of such appointments in virtually every area of administration and management has been well documented in the press and does not bear repetition. Two recent appointments by the Musharraf regime, however, may serve to illustrate the nature of the phenomenon: a former ISI chief is now the federal minister of education and the former Gujranwala corps commander has been made the principal of the Pakistan Administrative Staff College, Lahore. Such appointments are becoming more and more the rule rather than the exception. This policy, too, may have serious long-term consequences. While there is much to be said for 'enlightened moderation', modern nations must place a degree of premium on expertise and specialisation in order to prosper.

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