

Meeting people's basic needs

By Zubeida Mustafa

IN his address to the nation last Thursday, President Pervez Musharraf very spiritedly defended his decision to stay on as the army chief while holding the civilian office of president. Among others, one argument he advanced was that "uniform is not an issue for the people, but the opposition wants to exploit it for its own benefit".

To a certain extent, the president is right when he says that the people are not interested in the "uniform" issue. But the fact is that the masses of Pakistan have stopped taking interest in any political issue now. They hardly care who wins or who loses an election. They do not seem to be bothered as to who becomes the prime minister/chief minister — probably most constituents do not even know their names. When a government is dismissed, there is no public reaction.

When elections are held, the people, by and large, are indifferent and their apathy is signified by the dwindling turnout of voters. If there is anything the masses feel, it is cynicism. After all, their life goes on as before and it makes little difference to them who is in office — be it a military dictator or a civilian government — their problems remain unmitigated.

The president in his speech said that he had fulfilled all the promises he had made to the people. This included the devolution of power and the holding of fair and free elections in 2002. Ask a man or a woman on the street and she would not understand what is the concept of the devolution of power while few would be able to recall when

(All statistics from Pakistan Economic Survey of the government of Pakistan.)

It is plain that people are not protesting against a president in uniform because they have reached the depth of despair. Besides, the political parties claiming to fight for democracy failed to do much for the people when their governments were in office. Had they really worked to improve the lot of the common man, he would have definitely responded to their call and raised his voice in support of the parties' struggle for a civilian president.

It is important that the president should judge the public mood from some seemingly insignificant phenomena but in reality of far-reaching implications. It is the people's reaction to the failure of good governance for which the government of General Musharraf is held responsible. When a speeding truck/bus knocks down and kills a motorcyclist/pedestrian on the road, a common response of the people is to burn the truck/bus and beat the driver if they can lay their hands on him. When there are long hours of loadshedding/power breakdowns in summer, the consumers come and agitate before the KESC office and very often create a law and order situation. When there is no water for days in a locality, a water riot takes place.

All this indicates a breakdown in the confidence of the people in the government and its machinery. They feel the police is inept and corrupt and cannot maintain discipline on the roads. The KESC and the water board functionaries are inefficient and corrupt and they cannot be expected to perform if one takes the normal course for redressal. Hence the people's tendency is to take the law in their own

president and his prime minister speak about in glowing terms every now and then, would make little sense to the common man since the benefits of the 6.5 per cent GDP growth rate and the foreign currency reserves have not trickled down to the grassroots level.

What, then, matters to the common man most? True, he may not be concerned about the apparel of the president. But he doesn't understand macroeconomics either. He is, however, worried when the prices of essential commodities go up as they have spiralled in the last four years. The State Bank report itself points out that there has been a steep rise in inflation which stood at over 14 per cent in the first quarter of fiscal year 2005. A housewife would recall that five years ago low grade atta cost Rs 9.80 a kg while in July 2003 it was Rs 11.53. A packet of tea leaves (250 gm) used to cost Rs 53 in 2000. Now it is Rs 65. The poor man's fuel, kerosene, was Rs 13 per litre in the year 2000. Today it is Rs 26.

What about opportunities in life a person wants to provide his children? The first step towards that is of course education. In other words, good schools that are affordable to the poor should be there in abundance. Good quality education is not a luxury. It is a fundamental human right and a basic need of man and society because it increases economic productivity and improves the health and life of the people. How we have fared in this regard is shocking.

In 1999-2000 Pakistan had 170,000 primary schools with 20.3 million children (5-9 year old) enrolled in them. In 2003-04 the number of primary schools had come down to 156,000 and the enrolment had fallen to 17.4 million. The statistics for middle level school and high school enrolment had the same story to tell, although the number of these institutions registered a rise. The number of middle schools went up from 24,900 in 1999-2000 to 28,000 in 2003-04 but the number of enrolments declined from 4.6 million to 4.0 million in the same period.

The number of high schools increased from 14,000 to 16,000 but the number of children studying there went down from 1.9 million to 1.6 million in the period when General Musharraf ruled the roost.

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It is ironical that these hardships are suffered by the low-income classes and those living below the poverty line. Their number is pretty large. The policies that are being followed have stratified society and the gap between the rich and the poor is widening. Those who can afford it do not need to walk on the roadside without pavements. They have their own transport. If they do not receive water in their pipelines, they buy water from bowisers and bottled water to drink. If there are too many power breakdowns they acquire a generator. They don't need government schools to send their children to study or government hospitals to visit when they fall ill. They can afford private schools and clinics.

This stratification of society is a dangerous phenomenon. The unrest seething below the surface is like a tinderbox waiting for a spark. If General Musharraf's government had attended to these aspects of people's life in Pakistan, even though the principles of democracy had been neglected, he could have rightly claimed today to enjoy the public's total support vis-a-vis the political leaders who are challenging his dual role. In the present circumstances the people are on one's side.