**Political blow-ups**

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN | 11/7/2019

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| `REMEMBER, remember, the fifth of November!` These lines were more than a chant to be recited on the anniversary of the gunpowder plot of 1605, when Guy Fawkes and his accomplices attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament at Westminster.  It served as a reminder of the fragility of a new political union that brought the Scottish King James VI to the throne of England as King James I, and of the unresolved friction at the time between the Protestants and the dispossessed Roman Catholics.  Guy Fawkes was described by a contemporary as `pleasant of approach and cheerful of manner, opposed to quarrels and strife ... loyal to his friends`. This amiability was overtaken by a militant antipathy towards the Scots. He declaimed that `it will not be possible to reconcile these two nations, as they are, for very long`. His prediction, although 400 years old, could be fulfilled if the fretful Scottish Nationalist Party, post-Brexit, decides to remain part of the European Union, even if that means amputation from the United Kingdom.  The night before Guy Fawkes and his fellow-conspirators planned to detonate the barrels of stored gunpowder, one conspirator betrayed them. To mark that dangerous nonevent, even today the cellars of the British Houses of Parliament are scoured to ensure that there are no explosives secreted underneath. The horse bolted 400 years ago; the stablelocks are stillrechecked everyyear.  Today`s parliaments are no longer under threat from below as much as from without and within. Take, for example, the ham-handed attack in December 2001 on the Indian parliament buildings in New Delhi. Those triggerhappy insurgents could have benefited from Guy Fawkes` more meticulous planning.  The attack by the PTI on Pakistan`s Parliament House in August 2014 led in time to a PTI government occupying the same chambers it had disparaged and sought to dismantle.  And violent discontent was shown against the Supreme Court by an incumbent PML-N government, when in 1997 a mob led by the then minister of information attacked our Supreme Court. A beleaguered chief justice had to appeal to the army for protection.  Does our parliament or other insecure, precarious pillars of state deserve the protection they resort to in the last resort? Are sermons and homilies by well-meaning cohorts the panacea to an endemic ailment our inability to govern ourselves? Or should we reconcile ourselves to H.K. Mencken`s uncharitable but arrow-sharp observation that `democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance`? Countries larger than ours with the same DNA have undergone periods when theirperception of democracy was tested by the compulsions of private ambition. `The liberty of a democracy,` US president Franklin D. Roosevelt once wrote, `is not safe if the people tolerated the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than the democratic state itself. That in its essence is fascism: ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or any controlling private power.  Roosevelt knew what he was talking about. He had been elected as president for an unprecedented third term. He waged the Second World War to defend his belief in the power of democracy. He shared the same table as Winston Churchill the scion of Westminster-style democracy and Marshal Josef Stalin the dictator who ruled the Soviet Union with an iron fist and with bullets as fingers.  Our politicians have neither the skill nor the will to make democracy work. They suffer from a condition known as legislative amne-sia. They have forgotten why they were elected.  They forget what laws have been passed, what laws need to be passed and which overdue laws require modernisation.  They prefer to chew on platitudes and are content to subcontract legislative business to the expediency of presidential ordinances.  It is clear that the present dharna is amulti-legged race, run by opposition parties who do not wish to be seen bound to each other. They loathe Prime Minister Imran Khan as much as they are suspicious of each other. They know from experience that power may come through the barrel of a gun, and for the time being that barrel is pointing in another direction.  An unsubstantiated report has revealed that, before Maulana Fazlur Rehman`s dharna reached Islamabad, he had a private meeting with army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa.  The substance of their now not-so-private tête-à-tête reportedly contained a warning to the hyperactive maulana that any attempt to remove a constitutionally elected government might result, like an inexpertly thrown boomerang, in causing more damage to friend than to foe.  That report (still undenied) disclosed that a bottle of perfume was given to the maulana by his host. Presumably it did not smell of cordite.  The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |