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What were the stars m

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No one listens to the people. They don't have food or security. They don't get education or housing or medical care. Instead of doctors they get quacks. Instead of houses they get graves. Water is become scarcer by the day. Our children eat contaminated food, drink contaminated milk and breathe polluted air. People are victims of the pagan-tribal whims of the feudal lord. Justice is altogether absent. They have been looted and raped and wasted. If our rulers don't desist with the crime of being 'pragmatic' very soon the people will say 'this is unacceptable' and rise. There will be chaos. There will be anarchy. If we are lucky they will find a patriotic leadership and there will be genuine revolution.

Musharraf has got what he wanted, but whether the people have got what they wanted is moot. Time will tell. It won't be very long. Time is not on the side of the ruling elite. But mark my words: if what is cooking is not good for the people it won't be good for the rulers either. Soon after elections we will know whether we are finally headed for political stability - an essential precondition for economic stability and growth without which the people's condition can never improve. Any bets? I have a terrible foreboding that if elections do take place the old-new lot will be in a mess before long, with the domestic security situation out of their control and the global situation beyond their comprehension, particularly if Iraq is attacked.

What else can we expect if our choice remains limited to the same old, largely corrupt, completely devoid-of-imagination politicians that our pre-Islamic pagan-tribal-feudal society cannot help producing? So don't be surprised if the turnout is ridiculously low. It's all very well for the sage to say that the fall of a people is heralded by their inability to differentiate between a useless, thorny 'kikkar' tree that gives neither shade nor fruit, absorbs vast amounts of sub-soil water and lays the land to waste or a shady, fruit-bearing tree that gives comfort and sustenance. But if the only choice the people have ever been offered is a wild jungle of kikkar trees, what are they to do? If, however, they postpone elections, it had better be for a very credible reason else whatever is left of Musharraf's own credibility - still more than that of any traditional politician - will be in tatters. I have this foreboding because we are running out of options.

Musharraf wanted, first and foremost, to secure his power. That he has done. He wanted the president to have a hold over prime minister and parliament to keep them in line, but if a prime minister goes off his rocker again he wants others to share the burden of dismissal with him. This should also prevent the president from removing governments willy-nilly. Musharraf has done that with the National Security Council, which will also make it more difficult, but not impossible, for an army chief to 'hit at the state', which is the literal meaning of coup d'etat. Musharraf wanted to deal Benazir and Nawaz Sharif out of the elections, but not their parties. That he has also done.

When due to the increase in the number of seats even the largest parties will be hard put to find credible

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candidates for all National Assembly constituencies, how will any win even a simple majority? If you include the provincial assemblies it means more than a 1,000 credible candidates. Not possible. Unless there is a complete upset and the voting pattern changes entirely, as it did in 1971, the federal government will comprise a multi-party coalition that the president will be able to manipulate. Such a government will suffer from acute inertia thus vitiating any chance of improvement in the human condition. What might then logically happen is that there could be a power shift, and thus natural devolution, from the center to the provinces. Our salvation, or part of it, could lie in that. The role of provincial governments could become vital, which is all to the good. Perhaps the provinces will become the hotbeds of positive change, which would be the best of all possible outcomes. And if it even half works we will find the Bhuttos and the Sharifs marginalized, even eliminated, from our political life forever. What could be better? So for the moment Musharraf looks as if he is sitting pretty in the midst of lawlessness, turmoil and the breakdown of order, a bog in which the new government will be stuck.

What the people want is quite simple. First of all they want to live, which means food and security. They want homes, clothing, jobs, education and medical care. And they want justice. I doubt whether they will get any of these in a hurry, or at all, from the same dispensation that is about to re-emerge in slightly different garb. Such a dispensation maintains the privileges of the rulers. All that is happening is what happens every decade when either the civilians or the military try and grab too big a slice of the cake. Then the ruling section that is being deprived its 'due' share forces a 'satisfactory' redistribution of the spoils. The people, as always, remain below the table, looking up, hoping for a few crumbs to fall their way. You see, they are all wolves in different clothing,

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these rulers of ours, singing the same dead dirge of false democracy that always produces a false dawn, both 'peti-wallahs', the politician associated with one kind of 'peti' (the Urdu word for ballot box), and the military with another (the Urdu word for belt).

What Musharraf should have done is quite simple too. He should have respected what the people wanted. First, he should have gone to the people, not the Supreme Court, and held a referendum immediately on takeover to get a mandate to clean the system of the corrupt. Next he should have banned every member of every assembly since 1985 from politics for 10 years.

At the same time he should have rid us of corrupt judges at all levels and got an honest judiciary going as soon as possible. He should have changed to a presidential system in which the legislature and executive are separate and independent, thus obviating the need to create artificial checks through a powerful head of state above a head of government and an undemocratic National Security Council comprising people way below the prime minister - admirals and suchlike - lecturing him on how to do his job. There could be paralysis. It's only the rapacious feudal-tribal lords of the small provinces who would have objected because they wouldn't be able to get into the executive with all its opportunities for privilege, power, patronage and plunder (that's four 'Ps' but if Madam wants a fifth she can add 'pelf'). And he should have looked to not only stabilizing our collapsed economy (which he has done) but also setting it on a course that is people-friendly, for only then will it be genuinely country-friendly. Otherwise it will remain elite-friendly. But Musharraf did the right things too late, or in the wrong way, because he tried to be everything to everyone to please everyone. It's still not too late.

This would have been the realistic thing to do. What we got instead was simplistic confusion in the name of realism with too many cooks pretending to be chefs creating an inedible witches' brew that will only cause cramp and pain. But such times are upon us that being realistic has become idealism while expediency has been given the name of realism. The only realistic course left open to us is to be idealistic, for it is idealists who create a better world. It is no longer a question of either mending the status quo, as generals are so wont to, or of overthrowing it, as 'idealists' are accused of dreaming. There is no status quo left to mend or overthrow. There remains no paradigm to shift. It has vaporized. The imperative now is to evolve a new status quo, create a new paradigm and a new set of clean standards.

To people with vision it should have been quite simple. Simple doesn't mean easy. Neither does it mean simplistic. It means straight, uncomplicated. Simplistic means uni-dimensional, flat, the thought process of those devoid of imagination whose grasp is not beyond their reach so they will never know what the stars were made for. What else but to reach out and grab a few? This is how destinies are changed, how new realities are created.

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