

Opening up defence deals

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Admiral Mansurul Haq's arrival must be sending shivers down many a spine. This is a troubled man at the lowest point in his life. He has just been to jail, his reputation is in tatters, and his wealth is in serious danger of being drastically reduced. He is in no mood to go gently into the night.

More than just desperation may be involved here. He may feel that if others are tarred with the same brush, his crime may seem less horrendous. This is shallow and hopelessly pathetic but often the last resort of many a scoundrel. Or, and this is interesting, he may be trying to scare the military into giving him a better deal.

This kind of cold calculation may well hit the bull's eye. The military has a consistent self-image of competence, fearlessness and patriotism. At the core of this, and in a sense above everything else, is the notion of integrity. The emphasis on integrity is not something hidden in the background. It is drummed into everybody from day one in the military academies. Officers have been sacked for no offence greater than lying. This is how central integrity is to the military. No wonder it always claims a higher moral stature for itself compared to everybody else in the country.

This notion of moral superiority is an important part of the military's worldview and colours its behaviour with everyone else. It is noticeable in its dealings with the higher social classes such as the traders, the industrialists, and the landowners. It is an important reason why it has contempt for the bureaucracy, which is seen to be both corrupt and inefficient. It is a critical factor in its dealings with the dreaded politicians. They are seen not only as corrupt and inefficient but audacious enough to demand power.

The military's reluctance to interact with politicians has defined the current regime. Even the like-minded faction of the Muslim League, which for a while thought it was the chosen mate, has been kept at an arm's length. Its pathetic bleating reminds me of a baby lamb whose mother has disappeared after giving birth. Few more days of this and it will surely die, without a prayer, without a burial.

The politicians as a class need to understand something. The military's lack of interest in dealing with them is not only because they are competitors in the game of power. It is more than that. They are genuinely considered inferior beings. Only this can explain the visceral hatred with which they are seen. Only this tells us why even ex Prime Ministers are treated shoddily and without dignity. Their credentials of having been elected by the people are of no consequence. Such definitions are touched with gold in the democratic discourse. They leave the military cold.

Motivation is big in the military and should be. If you are going ask people to give the ultimate sacrifice, there has to be a good enough reason. Motivation to take over and rule however does not require any great indoctrination. Politicians are corrupt and the military is not. This is reason enough. The military goes through the motion of getting legal legitimacy but in its heart that is not what counts. It has a right to take over because politicians are looters and plunderers and are destroying the country. This is moral legitimacy and in the military worldview nothing else is necessary.

Mansur's revelations, if they were allowed to be aired, would not only threaten military's self-image and worldview but in a philosophical sense remove the moral underpinnings of this regime. He is thus a potential threat not only to those individuals who may be named by him. He is also a threat to the very basis on which this edifice

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of military rule has been constructed. No wonder there is already talk of his trial being in camera. We have begun to hear the morale word. Under its broad shadow much lies hidden.

No one would understand all this better than Admiral Mansur. Although from a lesser and dare I say inferior service, he has been brought up in the military milieu. He would know the potential damage he can cause if he goes all the way. Therein lies his salvation or at least a part of it. That is why he is here and not rotting in some Texas jail.

The more I think about it, the more this makes sense. Mansur is in a mood to blackmail. He has huge properties in Pakistan and is ready to give up some but not all of them. He wants plea bargain terms that would allow him to do this. If these cards were not up his sleeve he would have contested extradition. Such cases normally take years. Yet, he chose to come back of his own free will. Are we going to allow him to blackmail his way out? In more ways than one this is a test case for the government. Mansur is the highest-ranking military officer ever appre-

hended on charges of corruption. It is necessary that his trial should be open. It is also important that he should not be let off with a plea bargain. Corruption is not just about money. It is a crime against the state. It is a crime that must be prosecuted. This is what is happening to the politicians. Why should it be any different for him?

Mansur is a very rich man. It would be no problem for him to hand over let us say 10 crores. His properties in Pakistan are worth many times this figure. I hear his house in Karachi alone is worth three or four crores. He would laugh all the way the bank if he can legitimately keep the rest of his loot even after paying a hefty sum. This kindness should be denied to him. He must not only pay what he has plundered off this poor country. He must also serve time.

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If he decides to point fingers and has evidence to prove it so be it. Why should plunderers of this poor country be given any consideration? If their background is military, it would only prove that this government has transcended partisan interests. The sums being mentioned in newspaper reports are huge. It is time that the veil is lifted over the taboo subject of defence deals.

Open and transparent inquiry into defence deals is also in the interest of those retired officers whose names are so freely being bandied about. Many of them are not only Gentlemen but have served this country well. Why should they be condemned by hearsay, innuendo and idle talk? They might suffer momentary discomfort if inquiries are initiated but in the long run such a step is in their interest. It is better to face the truth now and be absolved than bleed slowly but steadily over a long period of time.

The government must seize this moment of Mansur's arrest and extradition to establish credentials of non-partisan fair play. This can only happen if the veil of secrecy over defence matters is lifted. It would add lustre to an accountability drive that has picked up real steam since the new NAB chief took over. It would also make the ranting of corrupt politicians and bureaucrats easier to ignore.

History has judged Kings and Queens, Dictators and Democrats by a simple yardstick. How sincere were they to the ideals they espoused. If they failed in what they set out to do but were faithful to their beliefs, they have been judged kindly. The verdict on the hypocrite has invariably been harsh. We have to decide in our heart where we stand.