

# You don't shoot admirals, do you?

corruption/Society

25-05-01 Dawn

## Islamabad diary

By Ayaz Amir

THE air of triumphalism attendant upon the extradition of Grand Admiral Mansurul Haq deserves to be kept in perspective. The Grand Admiral was an enterprising person. Of that there can be little question. What heights would he not have scaled in corporate finance?

This is just one example, albeit a telling one, of how we mix priorities in Pakistan. The Grand Admiral should have been head of the State Bank or an investment corporation. And Amer Lodhi, reputedly the chief whip in the Agosta submarine deal, should have headed the navy. Since Pakistani lawyers are not famous for being choosy in these matters, it should come as no surprise to anyone if Amer Lodhi has been taken on by Mr S. M. Zafar as a client. On his behalf Mr Zafar, as eminent and expensive a lawyer as they come, has issued a plaintive statement disclaiming any Lodhi connection with arms procurement.

The rewriting of memory is one of Pakistan's most thriving industries. Scams and disasters that would cause upheavals elsewhere scarcely cause a ripple on the calm surface of our national waters. That all responsibility is denied is understandable. But we go one step further and deny the very existence of the performances enacted, or the calamities staged.

Next to memory-fixing the most productive industry is the laundering of reputations. In this dry-cleaning business the dirtiest linen comes out clean. The National Accountability Bureau is nailing people for misdemeanours, small or breath-taking. Otherwise who is guilty in Pakistan? Not Benazir, Zardari, Nawaz Sharif, Saifur Rehman, Ukraine tank dealers, Agosta submarine commission agents, second-hand Mirage handlers, high-flying bankers, hospitality-purveying industrialists or entrepreneurs whose abilities would leave even fiction writers amazed. What's so surprising then if Mr S. M. Zafar claims innocence on behalf of Amer Lodhi, a gent whose enterprising abilities get a tell-tale reference

in newspapers every now and then?

In fact, what scope is there for surprises of any kind in a land where defeated generals (remember Niazi) have the gall to make tall claims in public? Where generals who deserted their commands (remember Rahim?) could rise to further heights of fame and glory? The army is now building an Army Heritage Museum in Ayub Park, Rawalpindi. True to its hallowed traditions, GHQ has not been able to resist the temptation of acquiring (a softer name for taking over) what remained of the much-abused acres of the Ayub National Park. Once a serene piece of woodland, it has been turned over the years into a visible symbol of the horrors we are capable of inflicting on pristine nature in the name of theme parks and development.

What will the Army Heritage Museum house? What imaginary victories celebrate? The memory of which conquistadors — Ayub, Yahya, Zia — preserve? What ghosts, it is worth asking, will keep vigil in its sacred grounds?

Military architecture, especially as resurrected in Pakistan, can have a more pulverizing effect on the mind than the heaviest artillery. Look at some of the old British army messes — Baloch and Piffers in Abbottabad, to mention only two out of a long line — and then take a look at the Armoured Corps mess just outside GHQ's pearly gates and the meaning of this distinction become clearer. The first are examples of proportion and spartan restraint, the second a second-rate architect's idea of a Roman building.

As a patriot and ex-soldier (although admittedly a poor one) I am constrained to accept on trust the army's ambition to build a brave new world. But I would the more readily be convinced of its ability to master cosmic themes if it could first demonstrate its expertise in smaller things. To someone who fumbles with a tyre puncture, would you entrust the refitting of your engine?

But I began with the Grand Admiral and have meandered down a different (if somewhat related) path. The important thing to remember is that the admiral is no flash in the pan, no lone ranger, but a representative, even if a bold one, of a tribal order which has held the country in its clutches for the past 50 years. The Grand Admiral's real fault, and for which he should be penalized, is that he made his money in too audacious a manner. Otherwise, there is no shortage of others

like him who have created adequate pension funds for their declining years.

Come to think of it, even for his audacity the admiral is scarcely to blame because he operated in the times of Asif Zardari and Benazir's principal secretary, Ahmad Sadik (the last built like Falstaff and like him in several other ways), when the only game worth playing in Islamabad was to make money in the grand manner. The example set at the top encouraged others to follow suit. For every unsuspecting person caught there must be at least a score of other high-flyers still laughing at the people of Pakistan.

Indeed Mansur and Sadik were kinsmen and it was through Sadik that Mansur became Grand Admiral. A favour was done him and he returned it in kind. Favour for favour: that's how it happens. And if anyone thinks that in a billion-dollar deal, which is what our Agosta submarines are worth, it was only the admiral who benefited, he is living in a world of his own. Mansur made his pile and others made theirs. Everyone had a good time.

As I say, the admiral went about it too fast. He was also silly into the bargain. Imagine being picked up by federal agents in Austin, Texas. Didn't he know he could be extradited to Pakistan? There are Americans (ask Denise Rich's husband whom Clinton pardoned as one of his last acts in the White House) who are wanted in the US but who have no problem staying one step ahead of the law. Even Ronald Biggs, the great train robber, was smarter and until his money ran out had no problem staying in Brazil, safely out of the reach of Scotland Yard.

Or take Amer Lodhi. He has friends in the US but as Mr S M Zafar informs us, he is a citizen of Monaco. You can't get any smarter than this. And here's one of our former navy chiefs, someone who might have been credited with greater sense, making a mistake any small-time crook would have avoided.

Even so, let us not lose sight of perspective. In the cesspool that is Pakistan's defence procurement system the tainted fish are so many that counting them is an impossible task. What contributed more than anything else to this state of affairs was our holy war in Afghanistan. With American dollars and Saudi riyals freely pouring in, fortunes were made and a whole new class of entrepreneurs came into existence. Islamabad was no better than a hick-town previ-

ously. All the gleaming villas you see in the outer sectors came up during that golden period.

Now everyone is moaning and pulling a long face because of the economic downturn. The economy was buoyant while the good times lasted. With the end of the American involvement in Afghanistan the dollars stopped coming, international donors got stingy and we were left to our own devices. Since we have always lived on external largesse there was only one direction the economy could go: down. Then of course we had to be carried away by our exuberance and test our nuclear bombs. That really did it for us. Since then we are trying to recover our balance. All we are managing in the process is to raise gas, utility and fuel prices every few months.

The nabbing of the Grand Admiral is a useful piece of theatre. It is a sop to the mentality of the Pakistani mob (another name for the people) which, forgetting its misery for a while, will be led to believe that the walls of Jericho are tumbling and the great are being called to account.

That line from Faiz that crowns will roll in the dust — sung beautifully by Iqbal Bano — is not a call to arms. For those on the wrong side of the tracks it is a cup of consolation. In Christian doctrine it is the meek who are supposed to inherit the earth. In communism's heyday the romanticism of the times was typified by poets like Faiz (and Neruda) although Stalin who dealt with power and not poetry had a better appreciation of reality than many of the poets on whom he conferred Orders of Lenin. The fog of political metaphysics Stalin was wont to cut through by asking such simple questions as: how many divisions does the Pope have?

But theatre apart, I am sure there is also a more positive side to the admiral's fall from grace. Others will be more careful, if not entirely virtuous, in future. Money-taking will not stop but at least those doing the taking will look out of the window before counting their money. Let us not forget that across the world vice inspectors, and other purveyors of morality, get alarmed when street-walking comes into the open and spreads to respectable areas. It is not street-walking they object to but its open and brazen display.

Money-taking in Pakistan had become too open. It will now go back into the shadows, which is where in any well-ordered society it rightfully belongs.