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Again, desperate times : General Musharraf's 1999 Coup

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The late Eqbal Ahmad once wrote : "It has all been said before. Yet those who should, do not listen. And, as in talking to the deaf, one is compelled to repeat in louder, more agitated tones: The army may bring temporary relief. But the problem is eminently political; it shall not yield to military solution."¹ There is little more that should need to be said about the situation in Pakistan after the 12 October coup by General Pervez Musharraf. But, unfortunately, more will have to be said, loudly, and often, because for too many people memories have become short and the needs of the moment have silenced the warnings of conscience, history and political sense.

To understand the origin and character of the present coup requires going back to the beginning of Pakistan. The decade after partition and independence was one of enormous political instability and opportunism; there were seven prime ministers and four governor-generals between 1947 and 1958. In August 1958, General Ayub Khan, then head of the army and defence minister, wrote in his diary "I am receiving very depressing reports of economic distress and maladministration through political interference, frustration and complete lack of faith by the people in political leaders... The general belief is that none of these men have the honesty of purpose, integrity and patriotism to root out the evils of the country, which will require drastic action."²

The action came on 7 October, 1958, when President Iskander Mirza abrogated the constitution and appointed General Ayub Khan as Chief Martial Law Administrator. Ayub Khan addressed the nation on the radio the following day, describing the abrogation of the constitution and declaration of martial law as "a drastic and extreme step taken with great reluctance". But, he said, "there was no alternative to it except the disintegration and complete ruination of the country." The situation was one of "total administrative, economic, political and moral chaos" brought about "by self-seekers, who in the garb of political leaders, have ravaged the country".³

¹ Eqbal Ahmad, *The challenge in Sindh*, Dawn, February 1992 ?

² Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military ruler*, Oxford, 1996, p. 62

³ Radio Pakistan broadcast to the nation, Karachi, 8 October, 1958, *Ayub Khan, Soldier and Statesman: Speeches and statements (1958-1965)*, ed. R.A. Jafri, Mohammad Ali Company, Lahore, 1966, p.31

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Ayub Khan's 1958 text could have served General Pervez Musharraf for his speech to the nation on 17 October 1999. After a decade which has seen seven prime ministers and three presidents, Musharraf claimed, like Ayub Khan, that the military had to take over to save the country; he said "There is despondency and hopelessness surrounding us with no light visible anywhere around... we have reached a stage where our economy has crumbled, our credibility is lost, state institutions lie demolished".

On seizing power, both Ayub Khan and Pervez Musharraf claimed to have a clear mission. Ayub Khan claimed "martial law will not be retained a minute longer than is necessary, it will not be lifted before the purpose for which it has been imposed is fulfilled." For his part, Musharraf declared "The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge longer than is absolutely necessary to pave the way for true democracy to flourish". He did not say what "true democracy" was, or how he planned to create it, or whether anyone but he would recognise it as such.

Despite the claims that the coup was a response to current circumstances, the present set of coup-makers have borrowed abundantly from their predecessors. Musharraf has announced that he would have three civilian advisers in his National Security Council. The people who have been picked are known for having co-operated with military governments in the past. Most notable among them is Sharifuddin Pirzada, who has been named as the senior civilian advisor to General Musharraf, and has faithfully served every military government including that of Ayub Khan. The tragic history of these earlier efforts seems to have been forgotten.

Along with the reaching back to Ayub Khan, there are some notable borrowings from the July 1977 coup by General Zia-ul Haq; although not the desperate search for legitimacy which led the 1977 coup to be called Operation Fairplay. Musharraf has copied General Zia's little innovation of saying that he was not abrogating the constitution, merely suspending it. Like Zia, he has also kept on the President, at least for a while. It is to be seen if like his predecessors who each ruled for over ten years Musharraf settles in for the long haul.

This phenomenon of borrowing from the past to shape a response at a time of acute crisis was described most vividly by Karl Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, when he observed that "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past... And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionising themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language."

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The response of the media and Pakistan's intellectuals to Ayub Khan's coup forewarned of the response to General Musharraf. Altaf Gauhar, Ayub Khan's Minister for Information and Broadcasting, wrote that after the 1958 coup: "Academics, scholars and writers, particularly in West Pakistan, welcomed Ayub's arrival on the scene and the press gave him considerable support." Gauhar noted tellingly, "The media surrender was so complete the government did not have to resort to any kind of censorship. Not one newspaper uttered a word of criticism against the imposition of martial law. Indeed, most newspapers acclaimed the advent of military rule as a blessing and many of the press barons became willing tools of the regime." In such a situation, it is easy to announce as Musharraf has done that the press shall remain free.

The media and larger intelligentsia were not alone in their response. Musharraf's seizure of power was welcomed with a general sense of relief in the country. Nawaz Sharif's government was seen as having become a problem facing the country, rather than a mechanism for solving its problems. At a time of growing poverty, he was squandering resources on grandiose infrastructure projects and building palaces for himself and his family. He amused himself playing cricket in front of the media while the country watched aghast as poor people burned themselves to death in public as a way to voice the agonies of their lives and their only escape from them.

It was not just these mughal displays that made his going such a relief for so many. Like Zulfikar Ali Bhutto before him, Nawaz Sharif's absolutist sense of power drove his efforts to ensure that no one, and no institution, should be able to challenge his authority. He picked a puppet President, ignored the cabinet, railroaded his political party, and amended the constitution in a way that ruled out a parliamentary challenge. On a larger canvas, he bought, brow-beat, and terrorised the judiciary and the press. Until stopped short by the coup, some of the same forces were being brought to bear on the army.

A lot has been said about the relationship between the seeds of the putsch and the war in the Kargil area of Kashmir earlier this year. It is clear now that the action was planned by the army and the civilian government invited on board. Nawaz Sharif went along with it lured by the promise of glory. The halo created so assiduously after the nuclear tests had already worn off as far as the public was concerned. When the adventure in Kargil failed miserably, Nawaz Sharif blamed the military and the military blamed him.

This "sense of failure in war" has been identified as key in that it "often induces military officers to blame the political system and leadership. Occasionally resentment transforms into revolt." It has contributed in the past to attempted coups in Pakistan, namely the rawalpindi conspiracy case in 1951, which was provoked by the "frustrations"

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in the 1948 Kashmir war, and "humiliation" in East Pakistan is traced as leading to the Attock conspiracy.⁴

Now that it is freed from all political restraint, the military may try more adventures like Kargil. Musharraf said as much before the coup. It is significant that the unilateral pull back of armed forces that Musharraf announced as a sign of good faith has been restricted to the international border and not the Line of Control which divides Kashmir. This suggests Pakistan's military rulers shall continue their support for the mujahideen groups fighting in Kashmir. Despite Musharraf's exhortation that Islam "teaches tolerance not hatred, brotherhood not enmity, peace not violence", to keep the mujahideen pliant the rulers will have to turn a blind eye to the international holy warriors, their training camps, their schools, and their politics.

The Pakistan military's obsession with India helps focus on a largely unremarked motive for the 1958 and 1999 coups. In late August 1958, barely six weeks before the coup, Ayub Khan wrote an angry letter to the Prime Minister attacking, for the first time, a senior government official. His target was Abdul Qadir, the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan; Ayub Khan wrote "I see from the press that [Qadir] is going about saying that the way to check inflation in the country is to cut expenditure on the army and reduce America's military aid as it leads to inflation... if the government likes to be considered in command of the country, it should take steps to curb his nefarious activities. .. I am told that the army is fed up to the teeth with this man's fulminations."⁵

The coup not only forestalled any cuts in military spending, it also led to increased US military aid to Pakistan. Pakistan became, famously, "the most allied ally" of the US in the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War brought an end to US aid to Pakistan because of its nuclear weapons program. The subsequent terrible state of Pakistan's economy, which had grown dependent on this aid, has made it increasingly difficult to maintain the military budget, and certainly restricted the kind of increases that military planners want to stick with their strategy of keeping up with India. The nuclear tests of last year were only a way station on a longer and more expensive commitment to the development of a real nuclear arsenal for both states. This arsenal is not to be bought by cutting back the conventional forces. The new Foreign Minister, Abdul Sattar, recently argued that Pakistan needed both nuclear weapons on mobile ballistic missiles and large conventional forces.

⁴ Eqbal Ahmad, *The signal's soldiers pick*, Dawn, 12 November, 1995

⁵ Altaf Gauhar, *Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military ruler*, Oxford, 1996, p. 63

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Not surprisingly, General Musharraf has declared reviving the economy to be critical. It is a tall order by any standard, and one that the military is unlikely to find being obeyed. The military budget, over \$3 billion, is about the same size as the budget deficit this year. The only bigger drain on state revenue is debt servicing, which cannot be wished away and is growing rapidly. Having cut development spending to the point where it was all dependent on foreign aid, the state needs to generate and collect more revenue if the military are to get as much as they want. Musharraf in a meeting with journalists on January 16, 1999, said the military itself was making an economic plan and "we must generate enough income to take care of our defence needs. I am trying to use the Army to increase the income and also to make economies. This way the share of the defence budget would come down."⁶

It is already clear where money will not be spent. There was not even a passing mention of increased spending on education or health, or any social sector for that matter, in Musharraf's speech on 17 October.

On the revenue side, things look grim. Unlike the times of Ayub Khan and General Zia, there is no cold war to lure the American dollar to Pakistan as aid. The famous bank defaulters, the rich and powerful who borrowed heroically with no intention of repaying it, are the target of much public resentment. But, even if the money is recovered from them it will go back to the banks which lent it not to the public exchequer. The claim to end corruption and bring about accountability is nothing more than a hollow slogan. Every previous government, military and civilian, has claimed this mission and failed. The reason is simple. Pakistan's elite is small and everyone has relatives, even generals. The rich and powerful will simply corrupt or marginalise the few honest people left in the military and bureaucracy if they try too hard.

The only means available to increase state resources are more taxation, enforced austerity, and increased exports. This amounts to further squeezing the poor and the salaried through indirect taxation, driving down wages, and reducing the size of state corporations by increasing unemployment. Poverty and inequality have both been growing in Pakistan in recent years, and with Pakistan's economy in recession such measures will worsen existing suffering. Authoritarian governments are more effective at this than democracies, and for this reason have been viewed sympathetically by the World Bank, IMF, and many investors, domestic and international.

It is worth recalling that a primary goal of Ayub Khan's military government was economic growth. The military was devouring over 40% of government spending, and the military wanted to spend even more as it tried to catch up with India. This led to

⁶ M. Ziauddin, *The mystery deepens*, Dawn, 15 November, 1999, [<http://www.dawn.com/daily/19991115/fea.htm#2>]

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anticommunist military alliances with the United States in the search for economic and military aid, and the determined pursuit of economic growth. Steered by supposed experts from Harvard University and their local clones, including Mahbub-ul Haq, growth was pursued regardless of the consequences. The outcome was enormous regional disparity, with East Pakistan suffering most acutely, and growing social inequality. Ayub's decade of development famously left 22 families owning two-thirds of Pakistan's industry, and nearly all of the insurance and banking sectors, while for the rest, wages fell, healthcare and other social sectors were neglected. The suppressed tensions exploded with the mass protests in 1969 that brought down the dictatorship, and paved the way for civil war and genocide in Bangladesh.

The problems identified with Nawaz Sharif, and before him Benazir Bhutto, and before her Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and on the other side with Pervez Musharraf, and before him General Zia-ul Haq, and before him Ayub Khan, point to deep systemic problems in Pakistan. The most significant among these is not the venality, corruption and ineptitude of Pakistan's political class, nor the reckless ambitions and simple mindedness of its military leaders, it is rather the absence of organised public opinion strong enough to discipline either. Put another way, the fundamental problem is the enduring inability of Pakistan's people to organise collective action to define and protect their own interests.

Musharraf's coup has hastened a creeping double disillusionment that lessens the chances of creating such opinion and organising such collective action. The coup truncated a democratic process that would certainly have thrown Nawaz Sharif out of office as decisively as Benazir Bhutto had been rejected in the last election. Eqbal Ahmad pointed out "the oligarchy intervened in 1953, 1954, 1958, and 1977 to offset an actual or imminent affirmation of popular power. Each time Pakistan's feudal elite applauded and collaborated with military rule."⁷

The next election may have created political confusion, coalition government and instability, but it would have reinforced the feeling in Pakistan that the citizens would not tolerate the gross abuses of power they had suffered at the hands of both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. The sharp political lesson, that the people matter, shall now not be learned by political leaders or the electorate. Instead, for many there shall be only a memory of democratic politics as the system that failed. Democracy shall have even fewer defenders in Pakistan.

⁷ Eqbal Ahmad, *The signal's soldiers pick*, Dawn, 12 November, 1995

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By putting the old partnership of military and bureaucracy that has ruled Pakistan for half its history back at centre-stage the coup has also exposed the weakened and tottering structures of the state to new stresses. State institutions have been eroded by earlier efforts and failures at government, and by the unprincipled compliance of every public institution with the politicians they claim to despise. The problems are so grave and the state's capacity to govern so poor that the longer the military and bureaucracy try to rule without consent the greater will be their failure and their loss of legitimacy. The call for reform of the system shall grow even less convincing.

The real dangers will come when decisions are made and policies carried through regardless of public consequence. Dissent will grow. The present liberal face of the putschists shall then change. They shall resort to coercion or shall have to step aside, with few if any of their problems solved. If the military regime become ruthless, there shall be a desperate need for a new source of public legitimacy. Like all other governments in crisis in Pakistan, the military are likely to resort to the cover of Islam. This time, however, waiting in the wings are the armies of god.