

Goodbye General Musharraf, Hello 'Troika'

HARIS GAZDAR

As Pakistan faces the prospect of returning to the "troika" system of governance after eight years of direct military rule, political parties have important decisions to make about fighting elections and electoral fraud. They also need to keep an eye on history to make the most of the chances that the end of direct military rule is likely to offer.

The military regime of general Pervez Musharraf ended with a sniffle on November 28, when he passed on the ceremonial baton of the army chief to his successor general Ashfaq Kayani. As the world looked on, a visibly shaken Musharraf shed a tear and also that which he had declared a few months ago to be his second skin. The following day he took oath as civilian president for the next five years. Musharraf's loyal yes-man, Shaukat Aziz, who had served him as finance minister and then prime minister, suffered the indignity of being denied a ticket by his own party for contesting the forthcoming elections. It was rumoured that Shaukat Aziz, the alleged architect of a supposed economic miracle, would return to his banking career abroad. Thus ended Pakistan's third long experiment with direct military rule, with the chief disrobed, and his favourite mascot shooed away.

While all this happened without much fanfare, overshadowed by the dark clouds of the emergency, it is important to recall how far Pakistan has travelled since this time last year when Musharraf supporters had vowed to elect him as a uniformed president not just once but twice over. The lawyers' movement for the restoration of judicial independence will stand out as a key turning point in Musharraf's political fortunes. The unity of the bar associations in defence of the sacked chief justice and the courage of many judges in defying the military forced the commando general into several retreats and the grave strategic error of the November 3 emergency.

But there have been other factors too. Opposition political parties, much battered and maligned, must be given credit for maintaining their constituencies and keeping their nerves, through eight-long years of suppression, vilification and exile. It is easy to overlook their role in the lawyers' movement until one realises that

nearly all of the 60 or so people who have lost their lives in that struggle have been political party activists.

Then there is the crucial part being played by foreign powers such as the US. They supported Musharraf, almost unconditionally until this year, but have remained deeply involved in the process of a peaceful regime change – something they could not have done if credible interlocutors had been unavailable on the political side. The shift was precipitated by growing unease with the dual game that the regime had played in the war against the Taliban and Al Qaida. The US and Britain, and lately Saudi Arabia are openly involved in negotiations between various sides, ostensibly to ensure that regime change remains peaceful, and presumably to advance their own political interests in the country.

A Threesome Now

For over eight years general Musharraf ruled Pakistan alone. He did so by virtue of being army chief and president, and through closely and directly line-managing his prime ministers. He went through three of them, kept them at his beck-and-call, and exercised authority over them well beyond anything sanctioned even in the emasculated version of parliamentary democracy that his own self-serving constitutional amendments prescribed.

Musharraf must revert to the much-reviled Pakistani "troika" system of governance that prevailed between 1988 and 1997, in which power was unstably shared between president, prime minister and army chief. Two slots in the "troika" are already filled, and the third, that of the prime minister, will be occupied once elections are held. Even if he gets his way in picking a friendly and amenable prime minister, that person will enjoy far greater powers than the three prime ministers who served Musharraf in the previous parliament.

That would be the most favourable outcome that Musharraf can look forward to now, and it is the one that he is doing everything in his power to ensure. The pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-e-Azam), also known as PML-Q,

Haris Gazdar (gasht@yahoo.com) is a political economist who works with the Karachi-based Collective for Social Science Research.

and allied regional parties such as the Karachi-based Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), are the ones that must win the elections called for January 8 if Musharraf is to retain his slot in the "troika". The two main opposition groupings, led, respectively, by Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the PML-N, have already indicated that they would not like to keep Musharraf as president if they came to office. Musharraf today needs the support of civilian politicians like he never did before, which means that even his former toadies are in a position to extract their pound of flesh.

How to Fight Fraud

In the meanwhile, the hot political debate is about how to approach the forthcoming elections. The opposition has demanded an end to the emergency and the reversal of draconian measures taken under it as preconditions for taking part in the elections. Some of these demands will be conceded, but one conspicuous action that will not be reversed is the en masse dismissal of judges. Musharraf believes that restoring the chief justice and his close associates will be tantamount to political suicide, and he is probably right. The judges have become cause celebre, and there is an argument that elections should be boycotted unless the judges are restored. There are indications that the government wants to offer a deal through which all of the deposed judges, save a handful of senior ones including the chief justice, will be restored. This is not likely to be accepted at the moment by the deposed judges or their lawyer supporters.

The post-emergency Musharraf is desperate for legitimacy, and sees elections as the way for achieving it. Some of his opponents such as the lawyers, and smaller parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami and Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaaf believe that an opposition boycott of elections will ensure that Musharraf is further delegitimised. Nawaz Sharif's PML-N has made the judges issue its one-point agenda, but maintains ambivalence about an electoral boycott while continuing with its campaign preparations. The PPP and other parties such as the Pashtun-nationalist Awami National Party (ANP) and the

clericalist Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam of Maulana Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) believe that it would be wrong to leave the field open for the pro-Musharraf parties. A boycott, they believe, will play into Musharraf's hands, as people will turn out to vote due to local factors, and Musharraf will get a parliament full of his own supporters.

Despite the rhetoric, the key issue facing the political parties is not the restoration of judges, but the prospect of massive electoral fraud. The government's actions indicate that it is preparing to fix the elections. Caretaker administrations are stacked with PML-Q and its allies, and the Election Commission is widely believed to be partisan or toothless. The question for the main opposition parties is whether participation or boycott will create a stronger momentum for an anti-government movement against electoral fraud. They veer towards participation because they believe that mobilisation for the election campaign will give them a headstart for possible agitation in case elections are massively rigged. Then there is also the possibility that vigorous electoral participation might make rigging more difficult. A boycott, they argue, will obviate the need for rigging and will let Musharraf and his supporters off the hook.

Back to the 'Troika'

The "troika" system was first put together in 1988 as a precondition for the transfer of power to Benazir Bhutto when she won the election held following the end of Zia-ul-Haq's military regime. The PPP was allowed to take office after agreeing to the oversight of the president who was to protect the corporate interests of the military and ensure continuity of key strategic policies. It was a deal underwritten by the US, which sought policy continuity with respect to Afghanistan and the cold war. In truth, the "troika" was not a three-way sharing of power, but simply a check placed upon the elected civilian government by the military. The president was the constitutional lever through which the military acted.

The "troika" arrangement broke down with clockwork regularity, and almost always at the expense of the prime minister. The courts waded through Benazir Bhutto's two dismissals in 1990 and 1996 respectively. The Supreme Court did come

to Nawaz Sharif's rescue when his first government was dismissed in 1993. He was nevertheless forced to leave office because the army chief stepped in to resolve the crisis between him and the then president, getting both of them to resign. In his second tenure Sharif had a large enough majority to restore de jure parliamentary sovereignty over the president, thus ending the "troika". According to the then US ambassador, however, an informal US-brokered power-sharing deal was in place between Sharif and Musharraf a month before he made a botched attempt to dismiss the army chief, triggering the coup.

Limited Options

When the dust settles on the present regime change, there is little to indicate that any of the options before Musharraf, the judges and the lawyers, and the opposition parties including the boycotters, will leave us in a place other than the dreaded "troika". If Musharraf gets his way with the new parliament he would have to work with the military chief Kayani and the new prime minister. If the opposition parties win the elections they may get a new president, but they will have to work within the "troika" at least until Musharraf's constitutional amendments can be overturned. Finally, in any agitation against Musharraf, or against electoral fraud, it is the military that will be looked upon as the implied arbiter. Short of directly confronting the military – something that no democratic firebrand has advocated as yet – all political outcomes of an agitation will require the cooperation of the generals.

The 1988-97 interregnum showed that the "troika" is not a stable arrangement. It was simply the price that needed to be paid to get a breather from direct military rule. The previous round also demonstrated that judicial and legislative means are not enough to ensure constitutional government. Politics are important, and there is no alternative for the political parties other than to strengthen their organisations, expand their outreach, and cooperate more actively with one another. Moreover, they can use the current favourable international opinion of Pakistan's democratic politics to end the military's monopoly in shaping relations with the rest of the world.