

*Letter from South Asia*

**Three Cheers for Tedious Resistance**

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[Abstract: As the bullying military regime slowly unravels in Pakistan the courageous one are those that tenaciously insist on order in the place of disorder. The regime's weakness reveals, paradoxically, the strength of the idea of a functioning state with constitutional government.]

There are stock phrases in the Pakistani political lexicon that bad public speakers trot out at predictable moments. When the banker-turned-PM Shaukat Aziz monotones in Urdu that "*kissi ko Pakistan ko buri nazar say naheen dekhney dengay*", one feels like translating it as a benign "we'll provide eye care through public-private partnerships" rather than the intended "nobody dare cast an evil eye on Pakistan". The other favourite reassurer is: "Enemies beware! We are the only nuclear power in the Muslim world". They might as well say: "Handle with care, we might be mad enough to do something really crazy".

All of this sounds pitifully hollow when you daily witness the unraveling of a regime – a "slow striptease" as one columnist puts colourfully. Yes, we have atom bombs, but we cannot arrest a land-grabbing cleric sitting in a government-owned mosque in the heart of the capital who abducts civilians and police personnel, publicly threatens to send out suicide bombers, and issues libelous *fatwas* against a federal government minister. And what to say of the Islamabad *maulana* when you can see pictures in your morning paper of Punjab Constabulary men demonstrating against poor conditions and beating up officers of the Islamabad police sent to make video recordings of the demonstration? What are these Punjab policemen doing in Islamabad in the first place, you might ask. Well, they were brought here to help contain the demonstrations of lawyers and political activists supporting the *refusenik* Chief Justice!

The intelligence agencies clamp down on the launching ceremony of a book detailing the military's economic empire, and the book "disappears" mysteriously from the stores. Within a week though, the kiosk attendant at the international airport – probably a space with surveillance second only to sensitive military facilities – reports gingerly that Dr Ayesha Siddiqi's Military Inc. is the hottest selling item. Amid his usual hectoring General Musharraf introduces a draconian decree to control the activities of private TV channels, only to quietly withdraw its key clauses after protest. There are mass arrests of opposition party leaders and activists for no apparent reason in Punjab one day, and mass releases of the same people a few days later, also for no apparent reason.

Long hours of power failure in the blistering Karachi summer prompt youth and shopkeepers to routinely burn tyres and block roads while the administration run by the feared MQM looks on feebly chastising the privatized electricity company to do more. The heavily armed city police fire tear-gas shells sometimes, but mostly negotiate alternative traffic routes with the outage-outraged. I have a feeling that the policemen quietly egg on the youth and shopkeepers, for they too have young children in their poorly ventilated homes, waiting endlessly for the motion of the ceiling fan.

The minister for religious affairs of this “enlightened moderation” regime declares in parliament that the award of a state honour by the British government to Salman Rushdie somehow justifies suicide bombings, only to tuck his tail firmly back in after an outcry in international media. Not to be outdone, however, the enlightened moderate Speaker of the Punjab provincial assembly announces that he will personally murder Salman Rushdie if he came across the border. We don’t quite know where to look for the honourable Speaker’s tail yet, but he will realize sooner or later that he needs a British visa for “family” shopping in Oxford Street during the school vacations. It is open season this summer, and nobody is quite sure who runs the asylum.

The regime is weak and weakening by the day, and this perception prompts words and actions that make the regime weaker still – a self-fulfilling prophecy. Musharraf might still have a few more fist-shakes left in him, but fewer and fewer people really care. The Aslam on the street was impervious in any case – it is the Akram in the state machinery who is now turning a blind eye and a deaf ear. Some might sniff a whiff of a revolution in all this, but thankfully we are not on course for any such adventure.

Amidst the chaos the heroes are not the ones who are challenging an existing order, but those who firmly stand their ground insisting against all odds for the delivery of the order that has been promised. It is the regime – like all previous military regimes before this one – that has no time for the rule of law. Listen carefully to the other side and all you hear are solid assertions and demands -- whispered, spoken or shouted – for rules, law, and process. After so much pressure and so many threats Dr Ayesha Siddiqa stands out because she insists on her right to speak as an academic. And she wants you take her work seriously for its technical merit. Her main worry before the intelligence agencies got onto her case was that her book will be trashed by her peers – fellow academics.

Or take Iqbal Kazmi – a Karachi lawyer, a mild-mannered, non-descript, middle-aged Urdu-speaking man with a wife and young children. He filed a case against the MQM for the Karachi carnage of May 12 in a court of law. Not for him, the revolutionary’s flamboyant challenge to legality. For his pains he gets abducted – by MQM supporters many suspect – and brutally tortured before being doped and dumped with threats of more if he does not leave the city within five days. His torturers’ main quest: “tell us who you work for”? As though it is inconceivable for a man to stand up for himself as a citizen. The Kazmi family’s response: a press conference where Mr Kazmi speaks about his abduction and Mrs Kazmi announces that nobody is going to drive her out of her city.

Look at what the opposition parties are saying and doing. They want a neutral caretaker government, with an independent Election Commissioner, the opportunity to examine and challenge electoral rolls, a say in the conduct of the elections and the transfers and postings of officials during the run up to the polls. Forget the insurrectionary blood-rush, we are for bureaucratic tedium, the painstaking scrutiny, name by name of the voters' lists. The parties are not naïve. They know that there is a military regime, that all political outcomes are heavily influenced by secret agencies, and that democratic institutions exist in name alone. But they earnestly assert (even pretend) that democratic institutions ought to function as they are supposed to. They propose ways for taking things forward, for breaking the impasse, for getting things back on track after so many years of arbitrariness.

And what about the Baloch? Surely they want to counter the present disorder with disorder of their own. Perhaps. But what we see for the present is the Baloch leadership eagerly lining up with the other opposition parties for a return to constitutional government. The various proposals for "moving forward" floated by opposition parties and echoed by some of the saner elements of the regime include the provision for inviting the Baloch leadership to a round-table in order to end the military campaign in Balochistan. And who is listening to the voices of the Baloch victims of human rights abuse? Not the "international community" that rushed to label them "terrorist" at the behest of the Musharraf regime, but mainstream Pakistani courts, lawyers, human rights activists and opposition parties.

The weakness of the regime reveals that the idea of Pakistan as a modern functioning democratic state has far more unsung partisans than you might have imagined. A naïve figment of the imagination born out of innocence? Possibly. But what to do about the Ayesha Siddiqas, the Iqbal Kazmis, the humble workers and the grandiloquent yet painstakingly negotiating leaders of political parties, and the brave Baloch? They all seem to believe that their future lies in order rather than disorder. If a self-fulfilling prophecy can unravel what appeared to be a strong regime, why might another self-fulfilling prophecy not revive what appears to be a weak state?