

CONTENTS

Main News
National
Islamabad
Karachi
Lahore
Briefs
Foreign
Editorial
Business
Sport
Infotainment
Advertise



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VIEW: Bullies and cowards —*Feisal Naqvi*



Either General Musharraf can see off the mullahs, in which case his existence is justified, or he is just another politician. If he is a politician, then he is useless. And if he is useless, then we might as well have a democratically elected useless leader

In his autobiography, General Pervez Musharraf describes how he learnt at an early age that bullies crumble when confronted. The next week will show whether he has since learnt that the same applies to the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal.

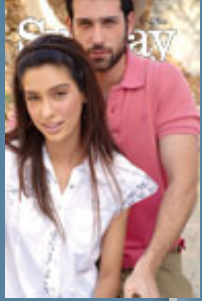
To put the above point in context, General Musharraf's government announced several months ago that the Hudood Ordinance would be repealed. After much parliamentary activity, the bill was referred to a select committee which deliberated on the matter and then produced a flawed but serviceable bill to amend the Ordinance.

Since the parliamentary committee's bill was supported by both the Pakistan People's Party and the Mutahidda Qaumi Movement, simple arithmetic indicated that General Musharraf did not need any further votes. The whole exercise was also accompanied by an elaborate media campaign, in which the aura of sanctity surrounding the Hudood Ordinance, was convincingly dismantled.

So, the General had the votes in Parliament, he had the public and he had the righteous might of the world's human rights community with him. But then the simple script began to change: the MMA threatened to resign and start street protests, the nervous ninnies in the ruling PML-Q began worrying about their post-election future and the Women's Protection Act suddenly got shoved into a very dark and cold place in the earnest hope that it would quietly shrivel and die. In short, confronted by an array of puffed-up composites, the government choked. If it makes



- ▶ **EDITORIAL:** [India's predictable blame-game](#)
- ▶ **VIEW:** [If only he could play the guitar —*Syed Mansoor Hussain*](#)
- ▶ **AT HOME ABROAD:** [Hip hip hypocrisy! —*Angela Williams*](#)
- ▶ **LETTER FROM LONDON:** [Political drama of another kind —*Irfan Husain*](#)
- ▶ **VIEW:** [Bullies and cowards —*Feisal Naqvi*](#)
- ▶ **VIEW:** [Whose Georgia? —*Igor Giorgadze*](#)
- ▶ **PURPLE PATCH:** [Black Pride —*Muhammad Ali*](#)
- ▶ **LETTERS:**
- ▶ **ZAHOR'S CARTOON:**



the government spokespersons feel any better, they are welcome to use the technical term for this condition — “a sudden build-up of lactic acid in the throat.” But those of us who are not doctors will still know the truth.

Now, two weeks of book-promotion later, we are back to square one. Human rights organisations confronted with the spectre of an unamended Hudood Ordinance are preparing to throw their weight behind the parliamentary committee’s bill; the mullahs have gone back to threatening terrible things if the Hudood Ordinance is amended; the wise men of the PML-Q remain unconvinced that passing the bill is the best course of action and the rest of Pakistan is holding its head, wishing a plague upon all their houses.

In some ways, this scenario is tailor-made for General Musharraf. Indeed, many conspiracy-minded people (also known as the rest of Pakistan) are convinced of this. However, regardless of whether the proximate cause of today’s impasse is incompetence, lactic acid or political cunning, the point is that the time has come for the General to deliver.

General Musharraf is not a politician. He has not been elected. More importantly, he is not popular because he has been elected. Instead, he is popular precisely because he claims to be able to make decisions in the public interest without being handicapped by the vote-seeking and crowd-pleasing antics that handicap most politicians.

Whether General Musharraf is justified in his claims regarding himself is another matter. However, my point here is very simple. To repeat, the General is not a politician. If he acts like a politician, he will soon lose whatever claim to legitimacy he has and will wind up like other exiled politicians, i.e., living in a Dubai suburb, watching BBC Food for entertainment.

Instead, if the General wants to protect his “mandate,” he has to walk the walk of a reformer, not just talk the talk. If his claim is that the people of Pakistan prefer an enlightened dictator to a corrupt and ineffective democracy, then he has to deliver on both prongs of his appeal. He must be “enlightened.” And he must be a dictator, which is to say that he must enforce his will rather than worry about the re-election prospects of his underlings.

For the liberal supporters of the General, and there are some, this is the moment of truth. Either General Musharraf is capable of seeing off the mullahs, in which case his existence is justified, or he is just another politician. If he is a politician, then he is useless. And if he is useless, then we might as well have a democratically elected useless leader so that we no longer have to endure taunts about living under the thumb of a military dictator.

The only mystery in this whole affair is why General Musharraf has grown so petrified of the mullahs. The chances of the MMA resigning en masse over amendments to the Hudood Ordinance are essentially nil. The

chances of MMA supporters coming out on the streets are pretty good but that the government should be able to handle without breaking a sweat.

To sum up, the General now has a golden chance at doing a number of good things. By supporting the Select Committee's version of the Women's Protection Act, he can reaffirm parliamentary democracy, he can justify his own powers, he can help better the lives of thousands of women and he can, for once, just do the right thing.

The writer is an advocate

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