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**VIEW: A handshake, not a fistfight —Syed Talat Hussain**



*Pakistan's security establishment should have no problem in coexisting with a president who co-chairs the country's largest political party. They must admit that losing political calm in these crucial years is not an option*

'Coup' is the most popular four-letter word in Pakistan these days. It is on everyone's lips. An outright military takeover, a sudden political change, ouster of President Asif Ali Zardari, formation of a national government – all sorts of scenarios are being debated in all four corners of Pakistan. It is almost as if a military-backed change has become an inevitable, imagined reality. The only question that remains is its shape and form.

Seemingly what has triggered this flight of analytical imagination is the Supreme Court's verdict against the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO). But at a deeper level, the issue is not about 17 judges' judicial slant against a sitting government – the allegation that is so rife in the PPP's inner circles. It is about a complete breakdown of trust between Pakistan's powerful military and intelligence establishment and President Asif Ali Zardari.

The history of this mistrust is well known. It is born of the peculiar circumstances that threw up Mr Zardari as an accidental choice for the highest office in Pakistan. While the election of the president was beyond reproach and procedurally correct, concerns were common in the military establishment about Mr Zardari's competence and qualification for the job. These in part related to his inglorious record, and in part his exceptional closeness to the American power brokers – something he did not hide, and in fact wore on his chest as a badge of honour.

But these objections were put aside under the pall of Benazir Bhutto's murder. The single most important reason why Mr Zardari waded through the thicket of the establishment's objections to his candidature was the feeling that this should pacify Sindh. The other reason was the assumption that Mr Zardari would not punch above his weight while in power. At that time there was little to suggest that Zardari would shake off his docility and transmute himself into a power centre dictating policy on national security matters such as nuclear weapons, India and even Afghanistan.

These assumptions were proven wrong. The first few months of Zardari presidency were defined by a monumental effort on his part to take charge and become the sole arbiter of the country's fate. Like his predecessor, General Pervez Musharraf, he attempted to become Pakistan's only window to the world, not realising that Pakistan's geographical situation had become far more complex than to allow any one individual or institution to be in the driving seat of power. The gap between him and the military establishment grew wider. No effort was undertaken to mend the fences and create functional communication with the generals he constitutionally commanded but seldom called to find out how they looked at the country's situation.

Failing to grab the reigns of complete power, President Zardari swung to the other extreme. He completely vacated the field of strategic policy-making. Now the situation is that while official appearances are kept, there is no love lost between the army as an institution and President Zardari as the head of the state. This dysfunctional relationship looks more ominous now that the Supreme Court of Pakistan considerably whittled down the constitutional protection available to President Zardari against criminal investigation. Jurists are debating the finer points of the apex court's direction to the 'federal government and other concerned

authorities' to restart mutual legal assistance proceedings in cases abroad, including Switzerland. There is little disagreement over the message of this directive: cases of kickbacks and money laundering against President Zardari are no longer taboo. These, like thousands of other proceedings in cases of corruption and other heinous crime, are to be revived.

A controversial president, mired in a deep personal crisis of credibility and consumed by the passion to hold on to what he believes is his right – i.e. a five-year term in office – is in charge of a country that is in the eye of the storm of a peaking global war against terror. This is where domestic politics becomes an extension of defence and foreign policy. In the coming days, the outcome of this mounting internal turmoil would be defined by the stresses of the war against terrorists at home, and the anticipated backlash of enhanced international operations in Afghanistan, some of which are bound to spill into Pakistani territory.

But therein lies the opportunity for President Zardari to save the day for himself. Pakistan cannot be internally unstable at a time when its borders are becoming hot. The US war being lead by Obama is as much about Afghanistan as it is about Pakistan. And if you hear Obama's civilian and military lieutenants, it is more about Pakistan than about Afghanistan. Speaking before the Council on Foreign Relations, Richard C Holbrooke, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, was typically blunt about the cause of and the purpose of this war.

"It is obviously true that the people who did the [9/11] attack were driven east into Pakistan, and that is why we now talk about Afghanistan and Pakistan as an interrelated situation. And I will state right upfront that success in one country requires success in both. We will not be able to succeed in Afghanistan unless our Pakistan policy is equally successful. While the [US] troops are in Afghanistan, the hard core of our core enemy is next door," said Holbrooke.

This means that Pakistan's security establishment's first preference would be not to lose domestic ground to political agitation and friction. There are only so many wars the Pakistan Army can fight; and those fought internally never produce clear winners and losers. Pakistan's security establishment should have no problem in coexisting with a president who co-chairs the country's largest political party. They must admit that losing political calm in these crucial years is not an option.

At the same time, President Zardari should also carefully examine the state the country is in and make a businessman-like assessment of the options before him. Fake heroism borrowed from quotations sells well in party meetings. It has no place in level-headed politics. While his party seeks another crown of political martyrdom by playing the NRO victim, the fact is that Asif Ali Zardari has been a disappointment. But he can still hang in there if he changes the way he functions and what he brings to the presidency. If he is willing to do this much, it would not be a bad idea to have a meeting with his army chief to work out what can best be done to arrest this dangerous domestic drift.

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