

Finding Common Ground

By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

Elections 2008 were so promising for the people of Pakistan because not only had their anti-dictatorship pro-democracy message been recorded, but the two largest parties they had voted into power, the PPP and PML-N, historical adversaries, had agreed to work together, we thought, in the larger interest of the nation. While cynics routinely mocked the coalition vowing that it would not work, many of us expressed hope in the possibility that politicians had suffered at the hands of the establishment in Pakistan previously and perhaps learned their lessons.

It is no secret that Pakistan is going through an exceptionally testing time. With militancy on the rise, a respected judiciary prevented from carrying out its duties for over a year now, rampant inflation and lack of basic necessities, the people are understandably frustrated. The problems are so severe that they cannot be solved without cooperation from all segments of society. That is why the coalition is really the need of the hour.

But instead of working on finding common ground, it appears that the coalition partners are working at odds with each other. There is a basic lack of trust manifesting itself which comes not from the fact that the parties have different positions on different issues (that is not the problem as it was fully expected) but that their intention seems to be to point score at each other's expense as opposed to compromise on stated positions such that the country can move forward.

The PPP, the main coalition partner, was the first to renege on promises. By signing the Bhurban Accord and then dismissing it, the foundation for mistrust was laid. Subsequently, certain members of the PPP lectured us on the importance of compromise, but what they fail to understand is that for compromise to work, trust is extremely important. Trust can only be built if principled positions are supported. The PML-N's position vis a vis the judiciary is far more principled than the PPP's and in line with the wishes of the people. By signing the Bhurban Accord the PPP acknowledged that. But then renegeing on that promise, the PPP essentially set the stage for further confrontation instead of cooperation.

The PPP, after renegeing on its promise to the nation, began to shift blame onto the lawyers' movement, as if the lawyers' movement is responsible for inflation, joblessness and lack of electricity. On the contrary, the lawyers' movement was never meant to be a thorn in the side of Parliament. It had the intention of strengthening and working with Parliament to establish rule of law and supremacy of the Constitution in Pakistan, to prevent further military takeovers and conspiracies against legitimately elected rulers. It behoves the mind that PPP policy is now attacking the very segment of society that can strengthen real democracy in Pakistan.

Unfortunately I was not in Pakistan on February 18, 2008, but had I been, I would have voted PPP, because not once did I think that they would take the stand they are now taking vis a vis the judiciary. I would have voted for them and then become extremely frustrated with my election. I suspect this is the case with at least half of those who supported the PPP in February.

As a result of this policy, the PML-N has reluctantly given up the ministries they had initially taken in the Cabinet, and it appears that their policy is now based on the premise: let the PPP mess up, we are part of the coalition but we will act like the opposition, and try to sweep the next election, which, if we are lucky, will be very soon, maybe even next year. This is a highly irresponsible approach and certainly not one that is in the interest of the Pakistani people.

While PML-N's stand on the judiciary is one that has support amongst the people, it must not use the platform given to it by the lawyers to exploit public sentiments about the Lal Masjid operation (mishandled as it may have been), AQ Khan (who is like an older, more bitter version of an asset gone bad from a Bourne Ultimatum film, gone really bad) or on-going efforts to combat militancy in the northern areas. Campaign time is over. As coalition partners in the government, it is the PML-N's job to ensure along with

the PPP and ANP that the army operations are sincere and effectively working to root out the very real terrorism problem.

Let's take each of these issues in turn. According to all reports of scared civilians in the area, dialogue with the militants can only work from a position of strength, once they have been demilitarized and no longer in a position to challenge the writ of the government. If dialogue means acceding to their unreasonable demands and the Pakistan military surrendering to them, then Pakistan's territorial integrity is threatened. It is a folly to presume that the Pashtuns are opposed to the use of military force in their area. The Pashtuns want peace, and if there are lawless elements who threaten that peace, then the way forward is not by talking to them so there is a temporary break (if that) in violence, but by effectively using military force to weaken the anti-state renegades so that they are demilitarized and average people can resume normalcy and not have to fear further abnegations of half-baked peace deals.

As my Pashtun sister-in-law said to me, "It is one country. We are as much a part of Pakistan as any other part. Why should it be acceptable to Islamabad that a different law should apply in our area? Why should anyone be allowed to challenge the writ of the government in our part but not in other parts of the country?" Mr. Nawaz Sharif and his party must be cognizant of this Pashtun sentiment.

It is very unfortunate that during Musharraf's eight-year rule, the Pakistan Army's image has been so tarnished that leaving aside politicians (who always had a beef with the army) even average citizens have begun to question the army's sincerity and operational capability. This is not only sad for the army but very dangerous for the country as a whole. It is imperative that the politicians work together to re-define and limit the army's role. The army must leave the politics of the country to the civilians. On that, there is mass consensus. But by the same token, it is the army's job to protect us from both external and internal threats. And when it does that, including in its operations in the northern areas, it must be supported and guided in that role. That is the army's job. That is why countries require an army. Mr. Sharif should not let his hatred for the military blind him to the point that he cannot see the wisdom in an army doing its job. If there are issues on how sincerely those operations are carried out, certainly the PPP, PML-N and ANP must come together to monitor those intentions and operations strictly. But the army must be supported and not criticized in these sensitive times.

In the case of Lal Masjid, if young girls were killed ruthlessly was it the fault of the government, the Lal Masjid administration/maulvis or both? In a recent television show, I really wanted to ask Umme Hassan how come she escaped safe and sound without a scratch on her body while so many little innocent girls perished. Let's assume for a minute that the government was ruthless and callous, did she not have a duty to the young girls? Couldn't she have asked them, even forced them to leave during the days prior to the operation? Or were those young girls kept hostage and used as human shields so that Umme Hassan could be safe in her bunker but the poor little souls die at such a tender age?

Finally, in the case of AQ Khan, certainly he deserves his day in court. Certainly, his family may have suffered undue inconveniences during the last few years. Certainly, he has been a fall guy for some others who may have also been involved in proliferation, much to Pakistan's detriment. But, would this have happened to him had he been completely innocent? Would this have happened to him if he had not amassed incredible wealth in addition to spearheading the Kahuta Research Laboratories? Would this have happened to him if, like Iftikhar Chaudhry, he had displayed the courage to say "No" and been willing to stand up for principle? The answer is certainly not. If we are to believe that he lied to the country when he read out the statement accepting blame just because he was promised freedom, is that respectable? Is that patriotic or selfish? If he can lie to us once, why should we believe him now? His recent statements moreover display as much disregard for Pakistan's integrity and national security as Musharraf's reckless remarks in "The Line of Fire".

In sum, Pakistan is faced with a very troubling scenario and it is incumbent upon those who have been voted in and the army, which has institutional strength, to work together and find common ground by doing the right thing. The right thing is standing up for principle and looking out for Pakistan's national security. The PPP therefore must take the lead, acknowledge that PML-N has a correct position on the judiciary, and restore the November 2 judiciary without further delay. In return, PML-N must not play to the next

elections, but try to sustain the current set-up by supporting the PPP's lead on crucial national security issues such as rooting out terrorism and extremism from our midst. The army, for its part, must work with the political forces in finding a lasting solution to the terrorism problem and leave all civilian affairs to the political forces in the country.

If this is not done, we are headed for even worst disasters. For as Jinnah said in his address to the Quetta Municipality on 15 June, 1948, "representative governments and representative institutions are no doubt good and desirable, but when people want to reduce them merely to channels of personal aggrandizement, they not only lose their value but earn a bad name. We must subject our actions to perpetual scrutiny and test them with the touchstone, not of personal or sectional interest, but of the good of the State."

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