

Pakistan's appeasement policy towards the armed forces

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The government of Pakistan has once again come out in support of our armed forces in an attempt to present them as brave and innocent—a legacy of Bhuttoism. The government is reluctant to initiate an independent inquiry commission into the incidents of Abbottabad and Mehran Naval base, and their silence is welcomed by senior officials of the armed forces and intelligence agencies. The history of Pakistan's civilian governments shows their lack of courage in admonishing the generals for their continuous defeats, whether in war or against terrorist action. Furthermore, the government is turning a blind eye to the grabbing of national resources by the armed forces.

This was first done by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after the successful freedom movement of Bengalis and the shameful defeat of our soldiers. It was following this debacle that he started developing a heroic image of the army and generals. He begged Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to release all the soldiers who were captured during the war with India in 1971, thinking that this would make him a popular man before the armed forces. It was the very same armed forces however, that hung him through their minion, the respected courts of the land.

The military government of General Zia Ul Haq enjoyed unchallenged rule for 11 years.

Not learning anything from the fate that befell her father, Benazir Bhutto followed in the same path and agreed not to take any action against the officers involved in the conspiracy against her father. She also agreed to accept army demands of non-interference in foreign policy, defense policies and the Finance Ministry. To further illustrate her loyalty, she awarded the Medal of Democracy to General Baig, the then chief of army staff. General Baig in turn demonstrated his loyalty to Benazir Bhutto by conspiring to overthrow her government with the support of the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) and money sequestered from the Mehran Bank. The ultimate victim was Asif Ali Zardari, the incumbent President, who remained in prison for many years on the charges of corruption. Now, history repeats itself as President Zardari, who was severely tortured in custody, is also working hard to appease the army.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif also appeased the generals and supported the military on the Kargil issue, thinking he would become Sultan Salah Uddin Ayubi by blindly following the wrong policies of the generals. The Kargil incident took place in 1999 when the Pakistan armed forces entered Indian Kashmir and captured some strategic heights, thereby invoking an undeclared war with India. There was much public anger over this incident because of the potential of full scale war (with nuclear deterrents). India repelled the Pakistani forces, leading to the loss of thousands of lives. People demanded an inquiry into the unconscionable action by the generals, but Nawaz Sharif refused these in an attempt to appease the military generals. History repeated itself once again when the generals toppled his government and compelled him to surrender. To save his life, Sharif wrote a letter of apology begging for amnesty before General Musharraf.

This was the armed forces way of telling the Pakistani people that even governments

could be toppled if they dared to oppose the army's arbitrary right to wage war without consulting the government or the people. The military government of General Pervez Musharraf ruled for 10 years.

Today, the government of Gillani and Zardari are again following the same path by attempting to ignore the failings of a demoralized army. After the Abbottabad incident when the whole nation was agitating about the security agencies' performance, or lack of, regarding the violation of the country's sovereign air space and demanding accountability, the Gillani-Zardari team came forward to shield the armed forces and take the blame themselves, rather than sharing it with the real culprits.

This government has missed a God-sent opportunity to initiate action in favour of civilian rule and democracy by listening to the demands of the people and ensuring the accountability of the armed forces. No doubt, in their private meetings to discuss these matters they cannot help but reminisce on the downfalls of their predecessors who, at one time or another fell afoul of the army generals. There can be no doubt whatsoever that they have every intention of avoiding the same fate that befell the Bhuttos and Nawaz Sharif. However, they do not realize that remaining silent and offering blanket impunity to the generals does not confirm their safety.

What is to follow in the months to come? Pakistan already has a judiciary which cannot say NO before the generals; can we now expect martial law under the guise of securing the nation?

This government's habitual performance has been to turn a blind eye to the illegal and inhuman actions of the armed forces against the Pakistani people. The very people they are sworn to protect are now being disappeared and tortured in no less than 52 torture cells operated by the army and several by the navy and air force. Solid evidence has been produced in the courts with eye witness accounts by victims themselves, and yet no person has ever been recovered and no agency's official has ever been held to account. There is even video evidence of extrajudicial killings by army officers and evidence of mass graves in locations where the army conduct operations in the name of counter-terrorism. Despite all this, no action is taken by the civilian government.

In their ongoing programme of appeasement the government has completely ignored calls from local and international human rights groups demanding accountability for these acts of terrorism against the people by their own army. After the international community documented the army's aerial bombardment of Balochistan in 2005, Gillani-Zardari's ruling party promised to hold inquiries when they came into power. Unsurprisingly, no such inquiries have been instigated. Instead, the disappearances in Balochistan continue to increase.

It is terribly sad to acknowledge that no government has learned a lesson from Pakistan's recent history. No representative of the people has ever paid attention to the character of the armed forces of the country.

This is the time for the government to take strong action against the wrongdoings of the armed forces and prosecute all those responsible for supporting terrorism and terrorists in the country, whether in the government, the religious community or the

armed forces. An independent commission made up of the judiciary, academics and experts must be set up immediately to look into this if the power exercised by the generals is ever to be contained.