

TIME OVER TO QUIT HONORABLY

By Dr. Ijaz Shafi Gilani

Many observers counseled General Musharraf to quit honorably after he made the fatal mistake of imposing Emergency rule in November last year. Seven months hence that option seems to have run out. In the meantime Musharraf has been publicly disgraced more than any sitting ruler in Pakistan's history. But he has persisted stubbornly, apparently without much remorse for the repercussions to the nation as well as his own person. Both have bled profusely. Consequently the General's irresponsible behavior has taken its toll. A majority opinion in the country now wants to punish him before he is allowed to exit. According to the latest survey findings, 61% of a national sample of men and women believe that Musharraf should be punished for violating the Constitution of the country, only 21 % are in favor of the "forgive and forget" option, while the remaining 18 % did not give any answer. In a question posed slightly differently to know popular views on the propriety of imposing November 3 Emergency, only 11 % believed it was not a mistake, the remaining were split between the "forgive and forget option", favored by 23%, and the impeachment and dismissal option favored by 64% and only 2% in this case did not give an answer. *(The survey was conducted by Gallup Pakistan among a nationally representative sample of over 1500 men and women in both rural and urban areas of all four provinces in the second half of May, 2008).*

More than eight years ago when General Musharraf imposed his first Martial Law, around 70% favored his unlawful act according to survey findings of Gallup Pakistan. Despite occasional ebb and flow Musharraf's performance was approved favorably or at least tolerated by an average of more than 60% of the population until early 2007. There is a dramatic shift in popular mood since then. As an analyst of public opinion, I find a sustained, almost stubborn popular support for the upholding of the Constitution of the country and rule of law. It is an unusual metamorphosis in a nation with a history, as seen through opinion surveys, of endorsing all previous Martial Laws and a sense of cynicism about rule of law. When this change surfaced over a year ago I was not sure whether it would persist. But it has. It has lasted for over a year and in my assessment the change is grounded in deeper shifts in socio-economic developments, global environment and generational differences. The change is unlikely to peter out in another

few months as some of the hardened cynics among our political and intellectual leadership tend to believe. The change of heart, or the metamorphosis, cuts across traditional political loyalties and ideological divides. Notwithstanding whom they voted for even as recently as in February 2008, the popularity rating seems to be decisively influenced by the divide on the issue of independent judiciary. In the latest survey findings performance rating of key national leaders reflects that mindset, President Musharraf tops the Unfavorable Rating ladder and Nawaz Sharif tops the Favorable Rating ladder. A national sample was shown a round card with names of key national leaders and asked whether they considered their current performance as ‘Good’, ‘Bad’, or ‘Tolerable’. On the Unfavorable ladder (Bad rating) President Musharraf stands on the top at 59 % followed closely by Maulana Fazal ur Rehman and Altaf Hussian both at 53 %, Asif Ali Zardari at some distance at 26 %, Yusuf Raza Gilani at 17 % and Nawaz Sharif at 13 %. The Favorability ladder is exactly in reverse order. The analysis of these data show that popular views on performance or favorability ratings cut across party lines, indicating the possibility of realignment of political landscape in the foreseeable future; but that is a subject I wish to take up separately.

Time seems to have run out for President Musharraf to quit honorably, but several other actors have picked up the blame to sustain him in power without merit. Thus when asked: “Some people believe that President Musharraf continues to exercise power in the country. In your view, which of the following factors, shown on a round card, is the most important source of his power?” of the four options on the round card, 47 % opted for ‘the United States’, 26 % opted for ‘the Armed Forces’, 8 % opted for ‘the people of Pakistan’, 14 % opted to choose ‘He has no power any longer’ and the remaining 5% did not answer.

President Musharraf ignored the counsel of millions of Pakistanis, as expressed through the ballot on February 18 and opinion polls both before and after that date. One is unsure whether he or those who are seen to sustain him in power are now listening to popular sentiments.

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