

The SMS Mess
By: Ayesha Ijaz Khan

At a gathering of Pakistani students at Oxford University in late May of this year, someone in the crowd asked the students from Lahore what the level of President Zardari's popularity in Punjab was. "Zero," said one.

"Negative," said another. I had spoken to the students earlier about citizen empowerment as an antidote to Pakistan's rising extremism and had also touched upon the need for democratic processes as well as institutions to evolve and standardize. Derailing the Zardari government was not in Pakistan's interest, I noted.

"But we entirely agree," the student who had claimed zero popularity spoke up, "just because we say he is not popular doesn't mean we want the government derailed. The present government should have their full five years. That is the only way for democracy to take root in Pakistan."

In recent conversations with Pakistanis across political affiliations, I have by and large noted an ardent desire for democracy to succeed this time around. This is true even for those who previously had no faith in civilian governments in Pakistan. As such, the current government finds itself in an almost enviable position with respect to the agreeability of the military, civilian opponents and the populace at large on trying them out for the full duration of their term.

Yet tolerance wanes when miseries abound and government functionaries are unresponsive. There is little doubt that the present government inherited a mess. But amends must be made, or seen to be made. In other democracies, it is the elected government which sometimes takes populist measures that are subsequently reviewed and struck down by the court on legalities. In our country, ironically, it is the other way round.

With prolonged power outages in the summer heat, rampant inflation, indirect as opposed to direct taxation, substantial loss of earnings in certain parts of the country affected by protracted violence and curfews, as well as global recessionary pressures, and security concerns, people are justifiably upset. The one thing Pakistan has always had going for it was its ability to laugh and make jokes in spite of abysmal conditions. This freedom to express and vent has historically been taken for granted, more particularly during PPP times. The late Benazir Bhutto's tolerance for criticism and willingness to allow the press laxity had become one of the hallmarks of a PPP-run government.

And yet, fresh on the heels of an unpopular, if necessary (if international obligations are to be immediately met and no constructive plans for direct taxation exist), petroleum levy, the people have been informed of the draconian ramifications of a vague and overbroad Cyber Crime Act. When I first heard about it, I imagined the person describing it to me was misinterpreting and attributed it to the anti-Zardari rumour mill. I rationalized it to myself.

Pakistan was at war and some regulation was necessary. Our soldiers were laying down their lives, and the civilian government had taken the difficult but necessary decision to take on the terrorists. Yet, in the past weeks, I had seen emails floating around that twisted the facts, made heroes out of the terrorists, and demons out of our military. Gruesome pictures were circulated, hate-mongering and divisive remarks made about those belonging to minority religious sects, not to mention, abusive and misogynist language used for female members of government.

When I first heard about the new law that was being circulated in offices and otherwise, I thought it was to be directed against this spread of hate, not against harmless jokes about those in public office, for the latter is common practice in any democratic society. It was thus with great interest then that I listened as Nusrat Javed and Mushtaq Minhas quizzed Fauzia Wahab on Bolta Pakistan. If not "the most moronic voice in the PPP" (as Babar Sattar had written in one of his articles), Ms. Wahab comes pretty darn close!

Her entire focus was on the sms and emails that were being circulated jesting President Zardari. She made no mention of any of the more pressing concerns of national interest I had in mind, of the prevention of the spread of hate. In her mind it was justifiable to pass such draconian regulation just so one person would no longer be the subject of benign banter. She went on to further buttress her position by citing the example of the west, as most politicians in Pakistan (from all parties) regularly do and often incorrectly.

May I remind her that both Tony Blair, and in particular, George Bush were the subjects of many derisory jokes that were regularly circulated on email. Tony Blair was also often referred to as “Bush’s poodle”. Yet no law was ever passed in the US or the UK to curb this ridicule. Furthermore, in Pakistan, the personal lives of politicians, such as their extra-marital affairs or second or third marriages, often simply remain the subject of hushed gossip. Yet, in western democracies, particularly in the US and UK (examples of which our politicians so keenly quote) not only is it fair game for the press and internet communication media to dwell on these matters, but it also often means political consequences.

Paddy Ashdown, an important British politician and diplomat, was famously dubbed “Paddy Pantsdown” when caught having an affair with his secretary. Two years ago, I was in the US for a few months when Larry Craig, the Senator from Ohio, was caught soliciting a homosexual encounter in a public toilet. Although Senator Craig resigned, the press, including the very respectable New Yorker Magazine, had a field day drawing all sorts of insulting caricatures.

The likes of Barack Obama escape jest and mockery because they are respected among the people and cautious about their conduct. Public figures can only ensure respect if they act accordingly. The PPP must be mindful that even those who mock its leadership for a few innocuous jokes, as they look up to a ceiling fan that does not have the electricity to run on a sweltering day, do not wish to see its government dismissed before term.

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