

A cause of national confusion?

Ayaz Amir

The News - December 25, 2009

Lamponing presidents, prime ministers and politicians is the very stuff, indeed the soul, of journalism. There is no such thing as positive journalism, a notion put about, mostly in a whining manner, by government information departments. Journalism is at its most responsible when it is explosive and incendiary, shaking people out of accepted modes of thinking. It is at its most irresponsible when it follows the dotted line.

Demagogues and second-rate politicians play to the gallery or dance to the tune of public opinion. The journalist with some respect for his calling looks at the other side of the coin. Priests and other doctors of the cloth may deal in the currency of faith. Indeed, where would they be without it? The journalist treads on less hallowed ground. His primary tool is language for without it he would be like a soldier unskilled in the use of arms. But his highest education is in doubt and cynicism, (which cannot be cultivated without the widest possible reading).

The journalist points the path to no celestial heaven. His Valhalla is in the here and now. Good intentions he leaves to professional charity workers, those in the NGO trade or to politicians contesting elections. For he knows where the best of intentions so often lead.

The world of the hooker and the policeman he understands. Pomposity and self-righteousness, cant and humbug, and all declarations of excessive virtue bring a smile to his lips.

Falstaff, Shakespeare's comic hero, was no journalist although if he had been around, with his jaundiced views on life he would be hailed as the unrivalled prophet of journalism. The high priest of the calling, however, would have to be the American H. L. Mencken (who flourished in the first quarter of the last century) who could make fun of presidents and politicians, and journalists, like no one else. To read Mencken even a century later is to get an education into what journalism, if touched by the gods, can be.

Journalism is flourishing in Pakistan today but of what kind is it? Is it a source of enlightenment or a primary cause of national confusion? Is it deflating pomposity and nailing humbug, or promoting hypocrisy and sanctimonious thinking?

Some idea of what this phenomenon is we can get from some of the knights of the profession. Modesty is not one of their primary failings. They give the impression as if they are somehow possessed of the ultimate truth; that they hold a net of commandments in their hands and are thereby entitled to bestow the titles of virtue and sin, the mantles of heroism and villainy, in whichever direction their unqualified wisdom dictates.

In the hands of these knights a news report is not a news report unless it is laced with editorial opinion of the strongest kind, expressed in language which, more often than not,

leaves much to be desired. We have known many forms of arrogance: military, civilian, and bureaucratic, not to mention the arrogance of self-appointed arbiters of the faith. The arrogance we now face is of a different kind and it comes from what can loosely be called media jihadis, who are as destructive in their own fashion as the Taliban.

Whatever the exalted view that they may have of themselves, what they have helped create is a climate of uncertainty in which the first casualty is democratic stability. They rail against corruption and talk of cleansing the national stables but their real target is President Asif Ali Zardari. We all know that with his colourful past and his familiarity with Swiss bank accounts, Zardari makes for an easy target. But the point lost on our new jihadis is that our national woes did not begin with him and will not end with his departure from the office he holds.

There is another uncomfortable truth to confront. Zardari, whether one likes him or not, is elected President of Pakistan. And he was elected by no process of chicanery but by the freely-expressed wish of a large majority of the presidential electoral college, a choice not forced upon parliament and the provincial assemblies but a choice they freely made. We can regret the choice but we have to live with it.

If anyone, or a combination of any forces, is out to remove him (or get him), there is a path delineated by the Constitution: impeachment. If there are the numbers, and the resolve, to impeach him, this path is there to follow. But if the prerequisites are missing, then good sense and a sense of realism demand that the windmills of conspiracy should take a break and the new jihadis, wiping some of the froth from their mouths, should rein in their ambitions.

Zardari is going to do us no Roman favour. He is not going to fall upon his sword. He is not going to take a helicopter out of the Presidency and catch a plane for Dubai. This is not going to happen. So the temperature of things should come down. And we should return to the working of the Constitution and the logical playing out of the political process.

It would help if Zardari and government were to conduct themselves better and curb the urge, which periodically overtakes them, to shoot themselves in the foot. But even if this tendency is not checked it doesn't mean we cripple or traumatise the political system.

Zardari is no one's idea of an angel. But then what is the strength of angels in the Islamic Republic? Khan Roedad Khan is a friend but when he assumes the mantle of champion of civil liberties even the gods are provoked to laughter. Dr Mubashir Hasan has always been a serious man with the best intentions. We know where they led when he oversaw nationalisation in the 1970s.

Zardari has a past. But who in the current pantheon -- politician, tycoon or even jurisprudential giant -- is without some kind of a past or the other? All their lordships in the Supreme Court once-upon-a-time were counted as PCO judges, taking oath at the altar of Musharraf's first PCO. But no one is saying that because of that they should

commit hara-kiri. On the contrary, the nation is wishing them well and urging them to do their best in the performance of their duties (although, at the same time, earnestly wishing that their lordships would refrain from the temptation of fixing the prices of such things as sugar and petroleum).

There's another thing we shouldn't forget. When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated many political parties thought that there was no point in participating in the elections. Even the PML-N, thinking that an election under Musharraf would be an exercise in futility, was in favour of a boycott. At that juncture the most powerful voice urging everyone to participate was Asif Zardari's. Bizarre as it may seem, if there has to be a father chosen for the Feb 2008 elections it is Zardari.

We should get our history straight. The lawyers' movement weakened Musharraf. But it did not strip Musharraf of his uniform and it did not lead to the restoration of the Musharraf-ousted judiciary. The judges were restored by the political process as exemplified by Nawaz Sharif's leadership of the long march. My lawyer friends may not like it but it was that (Nawaz Sharif's leadership), Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's counselling and the strategic intervention on the part of the army chief, Gen Kayani, which restored the judges.

Politicians have been short-sighted in the past but for the most part they are behaving maturely now. Like every party, the PML-N has its share of hawks who see things in black and white. But the overriding sentiment within the party is that come what may, and whatever the charge sheet against an individual, the country cannot afford another derailment of democracy. The person who has done the most to hold the line is Nawaz Sharif. He may have been anything in the past, and his record may have much that may be open to criticism, but in the afternoon of his years it is hard to deny that he is conducting himself like a statesman.

All this is surely not to the liking of the new jihadis. But then it is their turn to grow up and start behaving maturely.

Email: winlust@yahoo.com