

OPPOSITION, FOR THE SAKE OF WHAT?

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There is a political opposition in every democratic country and it confines its activities to opposing the policies of the ruling party on important internal issues and how the day-to-day government should proceed for the good of the people. Generally it does not voice its difference of opinion with the ruling party on sensitive aspects of foreign policy, specially so on matters that concern the stability and integrity of the country. Looking at our political scene of today, it seems that our opposition parties do not believe in these noble principles. One wonders which country of the world they are following as an example.

It could not be India where, on questions of foreign policy and on preserving the sanctity and sovereignty of parliament, the ruling congress and the opposition BJP are one. A study of leading Indian newspapers shows that they give the impression of a single mind and single voice on these questions. Particular understanding is witnessed in the matter of Kashmir that for India is a political matter. With us, in Pakistan, Kashmir is always described as a matter of life and death, but the opposition parties to beat the government with always use it. They are never satisfied with what is being done for it internationally.

For example, look at the recent statement of President Pervez Musharraf about Kashmir that was more of loud thinking than a statement of policy on behalf of the government in power. Without deviating one whit from Pakistan's principled stand on Kashmir it voiced certain options and considerations which could be kept in mind by the contending countries in the present atmosphere of accommodation between them. But the reaction of the opposition was as if he had handed over Kashmir to India on a platter. Mind you there was no comment, as one would expect from an intelligent opposition, on the pros and cons of the options, which could show that the matter had been carefully studied. There was only a loud outcry. That's all, Opposition for the sake of opposition.

It is moments like this that serve as a testing time for the opposition's political sagacity. Nobody doubts the fact that the people elected members of the opposition parties. However, experience shows that it is not necessary that their voters also endorse the politics that they practice. In advanced democratic countries, members of parliament frequently go back to the people to gauge their opinion on contentious issues. Here, in Pakistan, we do not see them doing so. They do address public rallies, but that is a different matter, a one-sided affair. In any case, the masses in this country go to these rallies to enjoy the fun, the raunaq mela, particularly if the speaker has the reputation of being hard-hitting!

The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal has threatened to launch a movement against the government by the end of this month. Just to keep in tandem, so that they are not taken to be inactive the ARD parties have announced that they too will throw in their lot. Let us see what form this movement takes. If they think that the people will turn out on the streets in lakhs they are sadly mistaken. For what cause should they turn out? Whether the President should wear a uniform or not? The people are more concerned with the present state of prices of everyday commodities than anything else. Will the opposition leaders tell them that as soon as the President takes off his uniform the prices will come down? Actually the people should ask them this question. But how can they say that they are opposing the government for the sake of opposition?

The opposition parties claim stridently that all their activities are aimed at strengthening parliament. By which of their acts do they try to prove that contention? By walking out every day and hindering the

process of legislation? Statistics can show that our political parties have walked out of parliament more often than all the opposition parties in all the democratic countries of the world put together. In fact in some advanced countries there has never been a walkout in living memory. This is so because everywhere except in Pakistan, opposition parties feel that they can achieve more in parliament by participating in the proceedings than by walking out and leaving the field open to the ruling party.

The trouble is that our opposition parties want parliament to be run the way they want and that is why they are constantly after the Speaker's blood. The parliamentary form of government means that the ruling party has the upper hand in the elected house by virtue of its majority. How is it possible that the Speaker should ignore the will of the majority and conduct the house in keeping with the whims of the opposition minority? That would be a spectacle the world of parliamentary government has never seen. This too falls under the heading of opposition for the sake of opposition.

There are other issues too, in which the opposition parties find themselves on a weak wicket but refuse to see reality. Offhand one can cite an aspect of terrorism. There is unanimity in Pakistan that terrorist activities are the greatest danger to the common people and constitute the most vicious threat to their peace and safety. While condemning terrorism the opposition parties want to make an exception of Waziristan where certain foreign nationals are engaged in terrorism ostensibly in Afghanistan. These parties want the government to leave these foreigners to do their dirty work just because they are Muslims. One of the most shocking things heard in this connection was the shameful admission by a Mehsud renegade that he and his companions had also been responsible for some acts of terrorism within Pakistan. Who was killed in those acts? Only Pakistani Muslims and certainly not Jews or foreign non-Muslims. No one from the opposition condemned him for this heinous claim.

The voters sent up members of the opposition parties to the National Assembly to do something for the good of the masses. The only way for these members to do so is to participate wholeheartedly in the proceedings of the house and to influence government policies by their sincerity and vision. They have both in plenty but somehow both are being misdirected towards issues that find no echo in the hearts and minds of the people. Unfortunately for Pakistan, a tradition has been set in the past that the opposition exists only for criticizing and berating the party in power and that this is the only reason for its existence. In the interest of the parliamentary form of government the sooner the opposition parties get rid of this wrong notion the better it will be for the country.

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