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The Intelligentsia's Self-Inflicted Dilemma: A response to Ejaz Haider

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No one with any common-sense, much less someone who has lived under military rule in Pakistan, will quibble with Ejaz Haider's passionate but principled critique of it (*The Friday Times*, May 3rd). In particular, his challenge to civil society to "rise and stake a claim to political space" and to the intelligentsia "to shed its lethargy and play its role," is likely to resonate deeply with all those who are concerned about the future of Pakistani politics. At the same time, however, I am not sure that Haider correctly interprets my position on the subject, or even the broader issue of national culture and consciousness that I believe must be addressed in any discussion of civilian and military rule.

Haider suggests that we should not rationalize military rule just because civilians "have been corrupt and could not deliver for a whole decade," a justification the generals themselves give for their forays out of the barracks and into the presidency. This is, he says, an unacceptable excuse but one that the intelligentsia nonetheless accepts, and he cites as evidence of this some questions I raised with him in private correspondence.

One of the questions I asked was whether we should always focus on the form of a regime (whether it is civilian or military) rather than on its content (the kinds of political programs and policies it pursues). I asked this question because civilian and military regimes have not been that different from one another inasmuch as both equally have perverted the rule of law, undermined the Constitution, impeded institution-building, and engaged in a politics of intimidation, a point I also make in my book, *Democracy, Nationalism and Communalism: The Colonial Legacy in South Asia* (Westview Press, 1995. By an odd twist of fate, all 300 copies of the book bought by Pak Book Co. were destroyed in a flood—or so I was told—and not one made it into the Pakistani market).

Further, I asked why it should matter if the person who moves the country towards representative democracy is not a civilian. This question assumes, of course, that such a democracy is the goal and that General Musharraf is committed to it. It certainly does not amount to believing that "the military *can be* accorded, or it *can accord itself*, such a role [in politics] and, by extension, that this role *can be* accepted as legitimate or, at the least, may not be challenged on that basis," as Haider says.

I am not one to call for a suspension of criticism of military rule, but I did urge Haider to provide a more reasoned defense of civilian rule than the tautology that civilian rule is democratic because it is civilian, a claim that flies in the face of reality (if we are to continue talking about what is empirically true or not). And I believe that he has in fact offered such a defense in his argument that the military *structurally* is incapable of performing certain tasks and that democracy will only "begin to work when constitutional liberalism, which provides democracy its soul and which evolved quite independently of its formal trappings, will take root." However, as he also says, this is unlikely to happen

as long as we do not resolve “the basic issue of democracy itself. *If a system keeps grappling with the question of whether or not civilians have the absolute right to rule, then it is unlikely to move forward*” (his emphasis).

I couldn't agree with Haider more, though I doubt that an odd individual like myself constitutes “the intelligentsia” or “the system.” But, here's the rub: if “constitutional liberalism ...evolved quite independently” of the formal trappings of democracy, then why are the formal trappings of democracy necessary, especially when civilians can't maintain them? That is the point I was trying to make, albeit from a different angle.

Of course, given the noxious legacy of the Zia regime, this may be a cynical and even dangerous question to ask, and I can see why it should rile the critics of military rule. Yet, the point of asking it is not to disparage democracy but to complicate our discussion of the political malaise in Pakistan beyond just criticizing the military. After all, militaries don't operate in a vacuum; they are embedded in a larger social structure and we must inquire into the nature of this structure to see what other impediments there may be to the development of constitutional liberalism.

There are those who argue that a weak and dependent political economy has produced a politically inept and fragmented middle class incapable of playing the kind of progressive role that is necessary for the development of constitutional liberalism, like the European industrial bourgeoisie did. (It needs to be borne in mind, however, that even as the European middle class was heralding democracy at home, it was bringing slavery, exploitation, and racism to the colonies of Latin America, Africa, and Asia.)

Amongst others, Frantz Fanon (*The Wretched of the Earth*, New York: Grove Press, 1963) has criticized the middle class of postcolonial societies for being narcissistic, lazy, lacking links with the people, cowardly, chauvinistic, and “cynically bourgeois.”

“In underdeveloped countries, we have seen that no true bourgeoisie exists; there is only a sort of little greedy caste, avid and voracious, with the mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that the former colonial power hands out to it. This get-rich-quick middle class shows itself incapable of great ideas or inventiveness. It remembers what it has read in European textbooks and imperceptibly it becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature” (175).

Given the nature of this class—and who does not recognize it in Pakistan—“National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people, will be in any case only an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been” (148).

Even if Fanon's analysis is not immediately helpful in contending with the realities of military rule in Pakistan, it opens up to interrogation a broad range of issues that those interested not just in theoretical niceties, but also in the future of the country, might productively debate. It is not only by means of principled objections to military rule that

we will one day, hopefully, find our way out of our present (self-inflicted) dilemmas but also through a willingness to question our own political understanding and commitments. Meanwhile, raising questions from the safety of an armchair (and from overseas, at that) may not be the best way to effect change, but that does not make one lazy or an apologist for military rule.

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