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The Pakistani language of terror

A hundred beats  
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We have spoken before of the lexicon of terror employed by the world's powers -- using words like 'terrorist' or 'insurgent' to qualify those that fight in the non-Al Qaeda led resistance in Iraq and taking comfort in the cold semantics of 'collateral damage' and 'friendly fire' -- but now it seems especially relevant to discuss the loaded buzzwords used in our own country by hapless politicians and military men. They are perfectly coated in deceit and spin and simply reading in between the lines is no longer good enough, we must begin to decode the various ways in which the Pakistani status quo speaks to the people at large. This is excruciating, be warned.

Let's start with some simple examples. There are the charming 'development projects'. This commonly denotes bridges, flyovers, underpasses, and the like, but more often than not these are disaster projects. Take the collapse of the Northern Bypass Bridge last week. It was inaugurated by the Presi-General just a few months back and it was hailed as a wondrous feat of engineering. And then, out of the blue, it fell. It collapsed and killed commuters, drivers, bystanders, motorcyclists, and cyclists.

Another example of a 'development project' is the gargantuan Ibn Qasim Park in Clifton. The largest park in Asia they exclaimed, it is so special that watts and watts of electricity are diverted so that it can be lit up in all its glory while the majority of Karachi's citizens are left to enjoy hours of load shedding. It is also worth pointing out that gallons of water are procured daily for the park's upkeep, something that most Karachiites would consider a luxury. These so called 'development projects' are not only brain dead from their inception, but they are also misnomers (maybe we should rename them 'large scale corruption projects'. Think about it). Real development projects would include the creation of free schools and hospitals and would further agricultural and economic goals. It's incredibly shortsighted to make 'development' stand for the building of roads alone.

'Enlightened moderation' has also been the butt of many jokes (moderate enlightenment) but it's a euphemism for incompetent and violent rule. It's probably the most popular slogan of the Dictator Lite diet we live under. Another one is the term 'patriot' which has now come to mean a) a raging fundamentalist or b) an anti-Indian bigot. Then there's the way in which the country's police forces twist language to suit their aims. Take the oft used 'operation'. This means massacre. The Lal Masjid 'operation' was not medical, it was macabre. Think of how many times the caption 'police work to disperse a crowd' is put under a photograph of a police officer beating the bejesus out of someone. 'Disperse' is a polite way of saying thrash/lathi charge/or bludgeon, take your pick.

We could go on and on forever, but I'd like to touch upon two of my favorite Establishment slang catchphrases. The first is 'independent judiciary': breathe slowly, this one is twisted. The now reinstated Chief Justice raised hellfire and brimstone for most of the year to protest his unceremonious dismissal. He spoke of how the independence of the judiciary hung solely on his reinstatement until he was blue in the face. People went out into the streets and

were 'dispersed' and 'operated upon'. May 12 happened and blood was spilt. However, there are a few problems with this 'independent' business.

First of all, the Hon. Iftikhar Chaudry swore an oath to the military regime and gave his allegiance to a General in uniform. That automatically cancels out his independence. Nasir Aslam Zahid, a noble and brave judge, did not take the same oath and he was retired. He is an independent judge, but he is also a judge without a job. Secondly, the Chief Justice's campaign for reinstatement was anything but independent. It was wholly dependent. PML and PPP flags marked any chair he sat on and any vehicle that carried him. The screaming crowds were supplied by the two above parties, along with various other political groups all jumping aboard the bandwagon. Finally, by the grace of the almighty, the Chief Justice was restored to his throne. And what was his first act of business? To chair a bench deciding whether Nawaz Sharif – interesting fact, he's the chairperson of PML – could legally return the country. And in a move of unquestionable and unparalleled independence, the Chief Justice said yes. Wow! What amazing luck! To have the person you sponsored and funded overturn rulings and announce that your period of hairy (no pun) exile was to come to an end, imagine that...

My second favorite is 'democracy'. How loosely we throw that word around. It can exclusively mean the holding of elections while promising no other real sustainable freedoms or it can simply mean taking off one's uniform. That sounds a bit dirty to me, so let's not digress. Currently, 'democracy' entails bringing back two corrupt and politically unviable ex prime ministers. One of the two has had the good fortune of benefiting from an 'independent judiciary' while the other languishes in London, breathlessly waiting with an empty handbag for the moment when the multiple corruption cases against her will be shelved leading the way to a third round of money laundering, extra judicial lawlessness, and military appeasement.

Ah, those were the days. Big Ben is fighting for democratic ideals, you see. She's championing the cause of 'democracy' by suggesting that she and her now frenemy (translation: friend/enemy) Mr Sharif engage in a civilized bout of power sharing whereby they each take turns at assaulting the country with their person and by recommending that a two term limit for the prime ministership be dropped. When a self proclaimed 'democrat' suggests that power should not have its limits, you better watch out. Nowhere is there any mention of true democracy, no signs of interest in freedom of expression, of choice, or of the right to live peacefully and without fear of discrimination or repression.

Mr Sharif and Mrs Zardari are not democrats, they are demodictators -- sheeps in designer wolves clothing. Tonight, while you ponder the excitement of all this latest deal making and 'democracy', do me a favour -- do a Google search or a newspaper archive search of the years 1988-1999 and tell me if that's the 'democracy' and the 'leaders' you want to return to. We are a nation 165 million people strong; we have more than three choices.