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Standing in line

By Ayaz Amir

AMERICA may be the new imperial power (actually it's been one for a long time) and neo-con ambitions be the driving force behind American policy but, by God, the Americans have a visa policy that if not a humbling is certainly a learning experience for inflated egos not used to waiting for their turn and standing in line.

Know what Pakistan's three major problems are? The inability of every Pakistani, especially those up the pecking order, to stand in line; the plastic shopping bag, which will yet ruin us and be the only thing archaeologists will discover when, in a thousand years, they dig up the republic's foundations; and, to crown everything, military democracy.

Tackling these problems is asking for the moon. Pakistanis of any social standing would rather die than stand in line. The nation as a whole is in love with the plastic shopping

bag. As for military democracy, it is not going anywhere in a hurry.

To visit the American embassy for a visa — which I was seeking because of an invitation for Houston, Texas — you have to catch the shuttle at the Convention Centre. That's where your education begins because there's nothing like boarding a bus to dent the standard overgrown Pakistani ego.

Outside the consular section one is frisked and then one has to stand in line, no special favours doled out to anyone, no getting ahead, no breaking of the line. The line, however, is not static. It moves pretty fast, the visa processing being done in a cool and professional manner. And because of that — and because, I daresay, the Yanks wouldn't stand for it — there is no jostling, no loud talk, everyone, especially applicants, on their best behaviour.

Interviews take place the same day. The only thing to be endured is the wait. Ordinary Pakistanis used to waiting all their lives have no problem with that. For the well-heeled not used to waiting, the experience can be wrenching. But the beauty of it is the learning process is amazingly fast, necessity not only being the mother of invention but, when put to the test, also of humility.

We all know the Pakistani problem: the mania for short-cuts, trying to race ahead, breaking every queue in sight, peddling influence. Under this onslaught the system simply breaks down. In fact, there is no system at all with the powerful able to push ahead while the powerless curse their luck or shell out a few rupees (actually a lot of rupees) to get some attention. So far gone is this phenomenon that abiding by the rules is the worst torture you can inflict on anyone in Pakistan. People at the top break the big rules, taking that to be their entitlement. People down below, incapable of higher lawlessness, break the small rules. This is equitable anarchy, breaking the law, violating the rules, according to one's social standing.

We know the first commandment: no taking off of uniform. The second: that the Constitution, that most ill-used of covenants, is the hand-maiden of military power. Third: grab what you can. Fourth: never retire. Fifth: if you must retire get another job. Sixth: if you are head of Fauji Foundation you are not answerable to anything as silly as a Senate standing committee. Seventh: that even though we are mending fences with India, Lt Gen Qazi (real charge education, not defence) must stand up in the National Assembly to paint an alarming picture of the military threat from India in order to justify the military's unending thirst for resources and hardware.

This being the prevailing culture, why blame Chaudhry Moonis Elahi, gifted son of the Punjab chief minister, for reportedly showing exceptional talent for the real estate business in Lahore? You don't succeed in this business just like that and what's the fun of being son to the chief minister if you can't pull a few strings?

Which prompts the question, how much wealth does a man require? To judge by appearances, limitless wealth and no taxes, please, we're Pakistani. What's the magic frontier reaching which you can say, enough is enough? Yet to be discovered.

What kind of a deal does anyone require? Ah, the travails of the Bhuttos. She was getting a good enough deal after the 2002 elections but wanting more — the old problem of over-reach — she let slip from her fingers what was on offer. Now she is apparently willing to settle for lesser terms but time has moved on, the sword of the Swiss courts hangs over her head, and her bargaining position is weaker than before.

One of life's minor tragedies: to remain rooted to a single spot as events move on.

Some of this misery is attributable to the famous manufacturing defect of the Bhuttos: not being able to trust anyone except outright scamps and rascals. If Benazir could have reconciled herself to an Amin Fahim premiership in 2002, things would have been different, for her, for the generalissimo, and even the country.

There would have been some kind of balance in national politics with Shujaat Hussain and Pervaiz Elahi not the outsized figures they have become. Benazir Bhutto has a lot to answer for. She missed the bus herself and gave us the Chaudhries, now not just the political but the cultural czars of Pakistan, the setters of trends, the creators of new bench-marks.

Pity the Muslim League, the ready plaything of every dictator: the party of the Quaid, led by the Quaid, after so many mutations now the party of Gujrat, led by the Chaudhries. From the Quaid to the Chaudhries is a tale by itself.

Confronting the army? Challenging the military's stranglehold on politics? Forget it. Let's not give ourselves over to pipedreams. No political party has the stomach or talent for it. Collaboration is the only game in town. The PPP would have played it as the frontrunner if it had any sense. The MQM is playing it and to remarkable effect, with party supremo, Altaf Hussain, remote-controlling the organization from London even as the world's most famous welfare recipient, Governor Ishratul Ebad, runs the show in Karachi and Sindh. The high priests of the MMA are playing it, and very shrewdly too, spewing defiance even while enjoying power in the Frontier and Balochistan.

Nothing, however, more vividly illustrates the governmental flair for black comedy than the latest episode in the case of that brave woman, Mukhtaran Mai. There she is invited to the US by the Asian-American Network Against Abuse of Women and here the government of Pakistan, determined to make an ass of itself, virtually abducts her and forbids her to travel abroad, fearing that her appearance in the US would damage Pakistan's 'soft image'. This at a time when the generalissimo is on an Australian tour giving impassioned lectures on — you've guessed it — “enlightened moderation”.

A Hollywood script writer couldn't have written a better disaster. Nor could anyone have dreamt up the follow-up charade: Mukhtaran paraded at a press conference under the hawk-eye gaze of Neelofar Bakhtiyar. Seeing her pictures in the papers, it's hard to shake the impression that Guantanamo Bay would be an easier proposition than tackling her. Mai stood no chance against her.

Every time she wanted to say something Bakhtiyar, with a fixed smile on her lips but a set look in her eyes, would butt in and declare she was a free agent who was not going to America of her own free will. Even the prime minister was sucked into the farce, telephoning Mukhtaran and telling her that her name was no longer on the exit control list.

But not before the damage was done, Pakistan's 'soft image' taking a battering it would take some time to recover from. Not before Christina Rocca expressed her (dismay) “...at the treatment being meted out to a courageous woman...who is herself the victim of a horrendous crime and is being denied the right to travel and to tell her story. We will pursue this matter during the course of the day.” Not before the New York Times chastized both the American and Pakistani governments: “It makes no sense for the United States to accept the kind of behaviour from friends that it would not tolerate from

enemies.”

All in all, a great moment for “enlightened moderation”. Truly, whom the gods wish to humble they first make ridiculous.

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