

Overpowered

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Power is all pervasive. The minutest of particles, the most lifeless of organisms, the most insignificant of existence – all have a coefficient of power that can passively, imperceptibly, almost immeasurably, change the course of light. Only power matters – even if abstract: power of an idea; power of imagination; or merely perception of power. Only power plays: it moves; it shakes; it sways; it corrupts; it intoxicates; it infatuates; it does it all. No wonder we are so obsessed with power.

Extracts from my article published in January 1999

In the meantime, we have Google that cites over five thousand quotes on power to dampen this obsession and explode many a myth. *It's not power that corrupts but people who corrupt power* is just one of them; better still, *power attracts the corruptible, but does not allure the pure of mind*. Of course, no one has to tell us that power was neither good nor evil, but its user makes it so. And who would agree that the sole purpose of power is to do some good.

The measure of a man is what he does with power, was fittingly endorsed by Lincoln: *nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power*. To be convinced of its wisdom, we only have to look around and see how people with power from the bully on the block to those in high places act. In exercise of its power, a nation too reflects its character. If an upstart power was the sole possessor of an atom bomb, it was very likely to test this lethal arsenal on live targets. Animals do a little better – a monkey with a blade does more damage to itself.

Charles Colton takes the cake for the most time-tested truth of all times: *power will intoxicate the best hearts, as wine the strongest heads; no man was wise enough, nor good enough to be trusted with unlimited power*. Nature and mythology have taught us the limits of power. Nimrod was killed by a mosquito; an ant creeping up the tusk felled an elephant; and David got the better of Goliath. But those who fall short on Lincoln's scale, if over-empowered, would be too intoxicated to pay any heed. When it became the sole superpower, the US got so infected with imperial hubris that it forgot about imperial overstretch as well as the lessons of history and lost to ragtag militias. Though infatuated with the game, it didn't even bother to learn the absurdity of unrestrained power. A guerrilla drove the golf ball three hundred yards down the line, even though the pin was only a *chip and roll* away.

In Pakistan, the power that has historically expressed itself most starkly, wears a khaki camouflage.

Mao famously said that political power flows from the barrel of the gun, but wisely put the army in its rightful place after using its guns to win political power. Afghanistan in that respect is lucky. It doesn't need an army to fight; the tribesmen do that, or to plant anyone in power, which is the function of a broad-

based consensus – the essence of democracy, if you ask me. And then there are countries where the popular will keeps the military away from politics. Pakistan too is likely to get there soon, not only because of the people's will but also because the military's role has run its course.

The Army's intervention in politics – rightly or wrongly, directly or indirectly – structures around some selected figures in its compulsion both for legitimacy and for outreach. But then it takes a long time rolling back the rot accumulated over the years. In our case even running trains on time, to take a leaf from Mussolini's book, turned out to be a tough call. All the same, since these crossbreeds had to be kept afloat, stratagems like *war on terror*, *national security*, and *hybrid warfare* (when was it not!) are deployed to rein-in those not willing to fall in line.

But then these are merely the more obvious of the glitches. Collateral damage on some other fronts is far more lasting.

Not every COAS used his extraordinary powers to influence the country's politics. But every prime minister has reasons to contend with the possibility. Whenever any of them got the opportunity to exercise his or her constitutional power to pick someone for this formidable post, most went down the merit list to find the man who would spare their throne. Ironically, every army chief who took over political power or did some engineering was selected out of turn. Bad judgment or Divine retribution is a matter of individual belief. But the only consolation one can offer is that all military rules ended with their nemeses bouncing right back: ZAB after Ayub; BB post Zia; and the PML/ PPP combine won the elections when Musharraf was still at the helm.

Most serious to suffer was the sacred temple.

Post intervention loyalty to the Chief counted more than professional competence to rise up in the hierarchy. And in a system where the army commander can take over total power in the country, commandeering the right to hire or fire senior officers was no big deal. And when the COAS became the sole dispenser of the post-retirement perks, stakes for any general to risk all these benefits merely to follow his inner voices became nearly unaffordable.

If these were the effects created by the unbridled powers Colton was warning us about, some sane people indeed got worried and pleaded to restore the checks and balances that prevent a soldier of fortune from running amuck and taking the country down with him. And since in the process the big boss had banned all avenues of free expression, issued white and black lists of who may or may not blabber from public platforms, and assumed total immunity against any criticism; some innovations to convey the message had to be crafted. Maulanas got away by simply naming no names. Others had to be more creative.

One of them suggested that though the man on horseback could reasonably claim to be Khalid-bin-Waleed, he might like to remember that even this most successful of military commanders in Islamic history submitted to civilian

supremacy, and handed over charge in the middle of a war. I think it was also a subtle message to suggest that rationales like security threats need not come in the way of any institutional change of command which if disrupted, could do more harm to the beneficiary who would lose respect within the ranks.

The first time I heard someone, not known to be terribly fond of us, credit the Pakistan Army to have a country – like the Prussian Army under Fredric the Great – it was not to compliment our forces for any conquests or Spartan ways of life. But when only the other day a sympathiser drew the same parallel, I understood it as a refined way to suggest that Pakistan was not a garrison state.

Understating messages is an art and certainly better than shooting with the mouth. The problem is that if one were drunk with power, only rude or crude jostling would have a chance. And that's how the current unrest in the country should be seen. The patience of the people with this never-ending theatre of the absurd may have worn thin, and a grand consensus, such as in neighbouring Afghanistan, may have become crucial in accomplishing the balance of power. It is another time-tested formula for peace and stability. And since the militaries study this subject for their very existence, they know that power in being was more effective than power committed. The best course for the Army is therefore to take a back seat. When and how it will be committed would be a decision made in heaven.

The Wielder of Ultimate Power (s.w.t.) lets His system take its course.