

KARACHI CHRONICLE: Full of anticipation

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WEEKEND MAGAZINE (January 05, 2013) : It took three decades for the killjoys to finally succeeded in putting a damper on Karachi's New Year Eve tradition of young people riding on noisy motorbikes, heading for the beach or seawall to do some hulla gulla. This time New Year Eve was pretty silent, while the traffic was nothing more than what one normally expects after eleven pm when people start to go home from a party or wedding reception. Of course there were plenty of private celebrations, but the public did not ring in the New Year as they used to do. Public celebration was discouraged last year too, with roadblocks put up to prevent entry towards the seawall and to the beach. This time an element of fear of bomb blasts and Taliban attack was infused weeks before 31st December, and rumour was rife that the cellphones would black out. A year ago, a man in my muhalla had held a special session from eleven pm to 12 midnight to discourage his 'congregation' from celebrating this western custom. This time, he did not bother to address people. Perhaps he knew his followers were dull and submissive. This is altogether a bad sign. If Karachiites have become tractable, it is the end of the spirit of the city. Normally, we rebel against any attempt to curb our effervescent high spirits. In fact, the typical street celebration on New Year Eve originates as an act of rebellion against the closure of hotels and clubs and disco and New Year Eve functions by a band of young fanatics and went around threatening destruction and violence. Hotels and clubs soon caved in while discos disappeared altogether. No commercial institution and the courage to face such threats. One of the most memorable acts of rebellion was the blockade of Clifton Bridge by young dancers who danced their on the bridge where the Allah Tigers could not reach them. Many people stood below the bridge to watch the young dancers. In later years, the motorcycle tradition of young bikers congregating to dance on the beach and the seawall began. And it became very popular, finally becoming a set tradition of Karachi youth. Days before New Year Eve they would be tinkering with the silencers to make them noisy. What a din filled the night. It was often hard to sleep, since the noise continued till one and sometimes two in the morning. What a pitifully dull way to start 2013. However, the public has not entirely given up its right to celebrate. At midnight there was more fireworks and gunfire compared to past New Year Eves. The last time there was so much fireworks was in the 1980s. It seems the public was indicating: you can put a damper on the celebrations but you cannot end them. Since our lives are governed by the Common Era reckoning, it is ridiculous to treat New Year Eve as a western or anti-Islam celebration. It is celebrated throughout the world, so why not in Pakistan? The colour of 2013 will be political. It is in fact an historic year, if elections are held. It marks the completion of a civilian government's, five-year term for the first time. This in itself is very impressive. In five years a consciousness of the importance of democracy has taken firm root. Of course we are a long way from adopting democratic practice in all walks of life, but the tender sampling of democracy has taken firm root. The question in our minds since Justice Fakhruddin was made election commissioner is: will we really have a general election? Things seem to be moving towards it, and then something happens, like bomb blasts or some holier-than-thou fellow like Qadri pontificating in a way that creates serious doubts that the polls will be held. For the majority of voters this will be their first general elections. The average age of voters is 25 years. The first quarter of the year will tell us clearly whether election will be held or not. I am

optimistic, but that is just my personal opinion, or should I say, hope? Among my colleagues, there are some young ones who doubt it and several old political pundits who doubt, too. Their doubts are largely a result of pessimistic interpretation of the ups and downs in politics, social and economic situations. But such doubts have always coloured past general elections, including the last one which gave us a full five-year civilian government. It is no use picking holes in the quality of government of these past five years. The important thing is that for all its faults the government survived the full term. Another popular pessimistic point of view is that the politicians are corrupt. Yes they are, and the next lot in saddle will be no better. We cannot become perfect overnight, so to speak. One serious criticism of the present government, both federal and provincial, is that it failed to listen to people's complaints. Roadblocks were put up to prevent the public from reaching the assemblies, the secretariats and other government offices. But thanks to the numerous television channels public complaints did get through. If the government turned a deaf ear to them they will be paying for it come next elections. Some pessimists see an increase in violence engineered by parties who would like to disrupt the ongoing march to full democracy. Are they so short-sighted as to forget that the last general elections were held in a bloodbath and the death of a popular political figure? The only issue that could be a hurdle is the attempt to gerrymander Karachi's electoral constituencies. I do not foresee the New Year to be full of joy and happiness, but then, which year has been that for us ever? An expat on a visit from Australia said we in Pakistan are always putting the blame for all that is wrong here on foreign interference. He said that when I remarked that we are not a failed state but have been made to fail. His attitude is typical of many expats. They live in nice countries where such travails as we suffer are unknown. They simply cannot empathise with us. They cannot comprehend how hard we have to struggle for things they take for granted, such as democracy.

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