
Interview: Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg

Land-bridge, India are key for Pakistan

General Beg (ret.), former Chief of Staff of the Pakistani Army, is chairman of the Foundation for Research on National Development and Security (Friends), based in Islamabad. He founded a political party, Amar mi qadat (Party of the People's Representation), one and a half years ago, which fielded candidates in the Feb. 3 Pakistan general elections.

The interview was conducted by telephone by our Wiesbaden bureau on Feb. 4, and is excerpted here. In the full discussion, General Beg explained that, in the Pakistani system, when the President and the "administration" support a candidate, there are various practices which have a significant impact on the electoral outcome. President Farooq Leghari, Beg said, "was totally in favor of [new Prime Minister] Nawaz Sharif. He promulgated various amendments in the electoral laws which favored him."

EIR: What were the results of your party overall?

Beg: We did not win a single seat. Imran Khan [Sir James Goldsmith's son-in-law and former cricket star], who had fielded 171 candidates, has not got a single seat. I have no regrets. There were two or three seats where we were cheated, because we were not ready; our candidates were not strong enough, the preparations were not complete, so we lost it. But we have gained a lot of experience, which will help when we go to the polls again. But where Imran Khan has lost, with all the publicity and media that he had—that was a dismal performance.

EIR: Can you explain who stands behind the administration?

Beg: The institutions, very powerful institutions, which have their own British legacy, because it was through this administration that people were selected who rendered superior services. They owed their loyalty to the Crown, and we are still following the same system. Today, they owe their loyalty to the "crown," the head of state, in this case, the President; so, unwittingly, they act in a manner which shows their loyalty to the man on top.

Unfortunately, during the last 10 years or so, each elected member of the National Assembly and Provincial Assembly would always try his best, first, to have the man of his tribe posted in his constituency, as the deputy commissioner, the assistant commissioner, the superintendent of police, and other government officials, so that he would control the administration in his area. Through the control of the administra-

tion, he controls the masses, the people. For redressing grievances, for any work they have to get done, they approach him. And this is a practice which has changed the character of the administration completely. It is no longer responsible to the common people, it is only responsible to the people in power.

That's why the common man here suffers. If any injustice is done—if a man is murdered, or some offense is committed against a poor man, and he goes to the police, he goes to the administration, his report will not be accepted, unless there is a recommendation from somebody from the top. That is what has done maximum damage to politics in the country, and to the administration at the grass roots level. Social evils have taken on a new proportion, because the administrative agencies are not performing their duty.

EIR: The new Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, was quoted as saying that one of his top priorities was to negotiate a solution to Kashmir with India, and establish sane relations with India.

Beg: He will face a lot of difficulties. This had been said in the past. It had been said that India is a very big, powerful country, that Pakistan should accept Indian hegemony, that India would underwrite Pakistan's security, and then there would be no problem. It was said, we will forget about Kashmir. We will forget about our nuclear capability. We will cut down our Armed Forces. But, this is something that Pakistanis are not going to accept. One must understand the Pakistani mind and the way they think.

I think the first step that Nawaz Sharif has to take, is to find an answer to the Kashmir problem. That issue has to be settled, and it is a very live issue. The kinds of sacrifices that the people of Kashmir have made—more than 50,000 dead—cannot be bypassed. That's what the Americans and the Indians had been saying: "Let Kashmir be put aside, and then we'll talk, and negotiate, and have a free flow of trade and commerce between the two countries—there will be prosperity between the two countries." But how can you forget about the blood flowing, for a cause which is part of the agenda of partition of the subcontinent? You cannot forget this reality. If Nawaz Sharif says that he wants to start talking with the Indians, of trade and commerce, he can do that, but it will lead him nowhere, unless he settles the real issue, which is Kashmir. . . .

EIR: Regarding the economic perspective for the whole region, it is important to see that certain institutions in India have expressed support for the Eurasian Land-Bridge project. The newspaper, *The Hindu* carried an article on this in December, specifically saying that India was interested in cooperating with Pakistan on the southern route of the rail network from China to Europe. This is the route you talked about in a conference in Beijing in September. Do you see Nawaz Sharif thinking in those terms of regional economic cooperation?

Beg: . . . This was the idea that I floated from my platform in 1992, when I held a regional conference with all the Central

Asian states—India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and everybody else. I said that this is the most important aspect that we have to look at. The only bottleneck that I found, was between India and Pakistan. The bottleneck was Kashmir, and I said in 1992, we cannot move an inch unless we solve this problem. So if we go for the Eurasian Land-Bridge, it is something which has to be done, but it cannot be unless this bottleneck is removed. We have a wonderful network of communication between India and Pakistan, but the borders have remained closed for the last half-century, which I call a geopolitical absurdity. It is the population on both sides of the border which suffers. I think if the Kashmir problem is solved, the border will be opened, and you see the benefits it will bring to the people in the subcontinent.

EIR: And what about the International Monetary Fund policy? We've seen the IMF role in the caretaker government, which was dominant. What are the perspectives for the new government?

Beg: On the IMF, I think, if Nawaz Sharif has the support of the people of Pakistan, he can follow a more independent policy, independent from American influence. Because all the governments which came—Benazir Bhutto in 1988, Nawaz Sharif 1990, Benazir again in 1993—were looking over their shoulders, seeking support to remain in power, and under those conditions, you can't have a government. This is not the case with Nawaz Sharif; he has got a majority, and I think he should follow a more independent policy; not to confront the Americans, but a more independent policy with regard to what we can do with our neighbors. We must have the best relations with Iran, but the Americans have come in the way, and have not allowed it. We must have the best of relations with China, but the Americans have come in the way, and have not allowed the countries to come close.

Vis-à-vis the IMF, Nawaz Sharif could follow a very tough policy. He could say, "Sorry, we are not going to ask you for any more loans," and I'm sure, as a businessman, he can mobilize the business community in Pakistan to increase the level of production in Pakistan, to revive thousands of industries, to invite Pakistanis abroad to invest. The one basic requirement is that he must bring peace in all of Pakistan, and that is the most difficult challenge he is going to face.

If you study the political divide which has taken place in Pakistan, it is more or less the same as it was in the 1970s elections, when in East Pakistan there was the Awami League, and West Pakistan had the [Pakistan] People's Party. Today, Punjab and Northwest Frontier [provinces] have the Muslim League [ML] and the People's Party has retreated to its base in Sindh. It has only one seat in Punjab. This is a very clear political divide. Within the divide there is another divide: within the province of Sindh, and that is between the PPP and the MQM [Mohajir Qaum Movement]. There is not



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only a political divide, but a deep-rooted hatred between the two ethnic groups, because of what she [Bhutto] had done in the last three years, and before that, Nawaz Sharif.

The logical thing would be that, if he wants peace in Sindh, there has to be an understanding between the People's Party and MQM; logically, this is what Nawaz Sharif should allow to happen. If not, the Sindhis will be alienated, and that will be the cause of friction. At the national level, there is a political divide, and at the provincial level, there is a political and ethnic divide. I don't think that Nawaz Sharif is that far-sighted and intelligent to understand the problem and solve it the way it should be solved.

For the sake of peace in the province, there should be an understanding between the PPP and MQM, and they should form the government. Any other arrangement—ML has fairly large number of seats in Sindh province, 27; MQM has 48—they could form the government, no doubt, but that would be the beginning of the end of peace in Sindh province. It has been the problem for the last 15 years.

It is a very difficult period; I don't credit Nawaz Sharif with the wisdom required to handle the problems the way they should be. Unfortunately, neither Benazir nor Nawaz Sharif developed the mechanism for evolving such policy, leading to decisions in the best interest of the country. They don't refer the matters to the institutions who study the problems, to groups of scholars, or intellectuals. Actually, they keep a distance from such institutions, and that is where we have gone wrong. The decision-making process is very faulty.