

# Bush Left with Little Choice on Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

President Bush's welcoming gesture to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf at Camp David on June 24, made it evident that he would like to strengthen the Pakistani President's hand, particularly in light of the rise of anti-U.S. and anti-Musharraf forces within Pakistan.

At this point, U.S. policy centers around how to extract maximum support from Islamabad to destroy the nest of al-Qaeda and Taliban terrorists who live within Pakistan and Afghanistan. When the U.S. Special Forces landed in northern Afghanistan in late October 2001 to uproot the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban regime from Kabul, hopes were running high in Washington that the United States would not only make Afghanistan an Islamic terrorist-free nation, but would also accomplish the same objective in Pakistan. Washington's neo-conservative hawks, who were goading the Bush Administration to "take out" corruption-and terrorist-laden Islamic regimes and impose clean and healthy ones that befit the image of the U.S. republic, were even telling India—a victim of the Afghan and Pakistani terrorism in the past—that that is what the United States would achieve, to strengthen its "friendship" with New Delhi.

Almost 20 months later, after two highly profitable poppy-growing seasons in Afghanistan, and with two of Pakistan's provinces bordering Afghanistan now under the mulahs' control by popular choice, President Bush seemed to have come to the conclusion that Pakistan is highly unstable, and that he has little choice but to back President Musharraf and get whatever help the Pakistani leader can still offer.

## Stamp of Approval

What this means is, that Washington has accepted the fact that too much tinkering with Pakistan would be dangerous. In the case of Afghanistan, the United States' policy did not quite match that. Although Washington spent billions to prop up a puppet regime in Kabul by bending as many rules as it made, some forces within the United States started working against the U.S.-backed puppet regime of Hamid Karzai, by arming and strengthening the poppy-growing warlords who maintain their private militias, and who often battle the American-backed forces from Kabul. The Bush Administration strategists will tell you that all this was done to expedite the "reconstruction process of Afghanistan."

In the case of Pakistan, Washington had been much more circumspect and tolerant—and that is good. While most of

the neo-conservatives in the Bush Administration may not like such a laid-back policy, there are also others in the foreign policy establishment, such as "Asia hand" Selig Harrison, who do not approve of trusting Pakistan. In a commentary published in *USA Today* on June 24, he urged President Bush to attach strings to his largesse to Pakistan. Harrison pointed out that in the 21 months since 9/11, the United States has poured \$600 million in cash, \$350 million in military aid, and \$3.6 billion in U.S. and International Monetary Fund credits into Pakistan, not to mention postponing payments of \$12.5 billion in Pakistani debt to a U.S.-led consortium of countries giving aid to Islamabad. A new five-year aid package of \$3 billion was promised at Camp David. This means a sixfold rise in annual aid.

Surprisingly, Harrison says, the United States has provided these sums without making them conditional on Pakistani concessions essential to U.S. interests. The United States has not asked for nuclear inspection arrangements to prevent further nuclear transfers like the one to North Korea that began in 1998, which U.S. intelligence confirmed last October. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that General Musharraf, who has made himself Pakistan's President till 2007 and Chief of Army Staff for the next three years, has cooperated on the ground with the Bush Administration to capture almost 500 al-Qaeda operatives and scores of Taliban fighters. Although supreme al-Qaeda commander Osama bin Laden and the Taliban supreme Mullah Mohammad are at-large and possibly ensconced in Pakistan, it must be said that President Musharraf, and Pakistan, has bent over backwards to accommodate the demands of the Bush Administration. But, for a Pakistani, the most important question is: Does all this lead Pakistan in the right direction?

## A Hard Question

Pakistan is too divided as of now to give a decisive answer to that question.

Since the death of Pakistan's founder and first head of state, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, in September 1948—a year after Pakistan was born—Pakistan's political system began to crack up. In 1958, a pro-American military coup established the Pakistani Army as the most important "political institution." Over the years, power players have changed often, but the system has remained virtually unchanged.

A definite shift was in sight in the early 1970s. In 1971, following the separation of East Pakistan from its western wing to form an independent Bangladesh, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his political party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) took over power. Bhutto was removed in a military coup in 1977, and was hanged two years later, following a sham trial convicting him of murder. The military dictator Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who had deposed Bhutto, worked closely with Washington and helped the Afghan Islamic fundamentalist groups to defeat the Soviet Army in Afghanistan. When the defeated Soviet Army was about to leave, Zia ul-Haq



*Presidents Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan and George W. Bush hold a June 24 press conference at Camp David. New military and economic aid for Pakistan was announced, but what is the future of this strange “U.S.-Pakistan alliance against terrorism”?*

died, in a mysterious airplane blow-up in mid-air.

The period following Zia’s death was also controlled by the Pakistani Army and Washington. The democratic governments in the 1990s under Mrs. Benazir Bhutto and Mian Nawaz Sharif came to power, but were collapsed by the Army chiefs, and enjoyed only limited control over Pakistan’s foreign and domestic policies.

The decade of Army rule under Zia ul-Haq, and the Afghan War, had set in motion a progressive rot of the nation’s polity. The Army became fully politicized; a large number of Islamic zealots were recruited into it; and opium and heroin permeated every level of society. As a result, Pakistan’s economy was shattered, and social chaos grew, providing fodder to the Islamic radicals.

As long as a sham of a democratic system existed, the middle class was hopeful. But the 1999 takeover by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, and his subsequent tinkering with the Pakistani Constitution to make himself the supreme power, have diminished their hopes; they are keen to point out that the country is travelling downhill fast. The American money that has come in recent days may slow down the descent, but will not altogether halt the momentum, they argue. One faction, pledging an undying loyalty to the Pakistani flag, claims that President Musharraf is not fighting the war against terrorism, but rather is fighting a war to stay in power. In this, support from the Bush Administration is a key ingredient, and Musharraf has played the “U.S. card” successfully so far.

On June 23, in a commentary in the news daily *The Nation* of Islamabad, analyst A.H. Amin claims that the Bush Administration has used Musharraf to start Pakistan’s denuclearization. He says: “Pakistan’s denuclearization started once Shaukat Aziz [Pakistan’s Finance Minister], the U.S. citizen and VVIP status American agent, visited Kahuta [Pakistan’s nuclear lab]. He went there, saw it and is now

proceeding to D.C. to report *sab accha sahib*, [everything is okay, master].” Similar statements were issued by Lt. Gen. Hameed Gul (ret.), Pakistan’s former ISI intelligence chief and a den-mother of the Taliban militia in Afghanistan. According to Gul, America is a friend of Musharraf, but not a friend of Pakistan.

On the other end of the spectrum are those who see President Musharraf as a scheming “mullah” who has played a major role in bringing the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the mullah-dominated six-party Islamic coalition, to power in Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan—two Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan and Iran.

Some, like Tarique Niazi of *South Asia Tribune*, claim that Musharraf is the reason why the MMA has emerged as the third-largest in the national parliament, a majority party in NWFP, and the single largest party in Baluchistan. The allegation is not altogether a fantasy. Musharraf had “be-headed” the mainstream political parties—the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PML)—by sending their leaders into exile, jailing their second-tier leadership, and banning them from political activities.

Later, Musharraf made a college degree a primary eligibility requirement for candidates contesting the general elections. This criterion was carefully calibrated to lop off scores of PPP and PML leaders, and swung open the doors for MMA candidates, who were declared eligible even with *madrasah* (Islamic school) degrees. As many as 30 MMA candidates with *madrasah* degrees were elected. Seventy other candidates, mostly from Musharraf’s new political party Quaid-e-Azam Muslim League (QML), were also elected. So, about 100 members in the national parliament are now with *madrasah* degrees as their academic credentials. In addition, while scores of candidates belonging to the PPP and the PML, among other political party candidates, were forced out of the

elections on corruption charges, MMA candidates, even those charged with terrorism, were allowed to contest elections. Even after the elections, Musharraf ordered two MMA members who were convicted of terrorism in Baluchistan released, in exchange for MMA's support to the QML to form its government there.

The growth of the MMA, the alliance of Islamic fundamentalist political parties, is not a sudden development. Its genesis is the proliferation of *madrassahs*. Today, there could be as many as 45,000 such schools within Pakistan, ranging in size from a few students to several thousands. These new schools tend to teach a more extreme version of Islam than what had been propagated before. They combine a mix of Wahabism (a puritanical version of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia) with Deobandism (a strand from the Indian subcontinent that claims that the West is the source of corruption in contemporary Islamic states, and thus that the laws of the state are not legitimate).

The *madrassah* students from the more militant schools have become the primary soldiers in the increasingly violent sectarian conflicts. Rather than acting as religious centers of cooperation, the leaders of various schools have issued edicts against other groups, giving an *imprimatur* to violence. For example, within Northwest Frontier Province, Sindh, and Baluchistan, their statements have played a key role in turning localized disputes between the Shia and Sunni Islamic religious currents, into a real threat to the nation as a whole.

Those who accuse Musharraf of being a "closet mullah" point out these developments, which have accelerated during his three year-plus rule. They claim that prior to his grab of absolute power in October 1999, Musharraf, as the Chief of Army Staff, had been cleverly deflecting the U.S. pressure to stop the Taliban from turning Afghanistan into a haven of terrorists. Tarique Niazi pointed out in *South Asia Tribune* of June 8, 2003, that Washington virtually keeps mum about Musharraf's role in the recruitment of Afghan terrorists as "sacrificial lambs" in the Kargil operation against India in the Summer of 1999, which brought the two nations to a military showdown.

## The Real Crisis

Setting aside the discontent about Musharraf expressed by many Pakistani citizens, what becomes evident is that the MMA rule in NWFP, and the MMA-backed rule in Baluchistan, are providing a new momentum to the terrorist groups. It has been well established by now that most of the anti-American terrorists trying to get back to power in Afghanistan, operate from the Pakistan side of Afghanistan. The terrain is extremely mountainous, and therefore difficult to clear out, and it provides an effective operational base for the terrorists. In addition, the MMA not only is supportive of the terrorists, but also sings hosannas for Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. In fact, it is widely accepted in Islamabad, as well as in Washington, that the politically most active ingredient within the MMA, the Jamaat-e-Islami, is the single most im-

portant protector of al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

On June 26, the leader of one of the major Islamic parties which constitute the MMA, pledged the provincial government's support to the tribal uprising against the joint U.S.-Pakistan military efforts to nab the Taliban and al-Qaeda members hiding in the province. The uprising occurred in the Mohmand tribal agency straddling the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The support of the NWFP government, and the ferociously anarchist character of these tribes, makes the situation ripe for a full-fledged civil war, at least one Pakistani analyst believes.

Mahir Ali, an analyst with *The Dawn*, pointed out on June 12 that the MMA, often referred to as the "Military-Mullah Alliance," became the third-largest party in the national parliament by winning popular votes as the Taliban proxy. Regardless of whether it is true that the MMA landslide in NWFP, and a significant showing in Baluchistan, were facilitated by Army intelligence, it is widely accepted by most Pakistanis that Musharraf's QML's primary choice to form a coalition government at the Center, was the MMA.

According to some others, the folly of bringing the MMA to power in NWFP has begun to affect the nation. The MMA has adopted the Shariat Act through a vote in the provincial assembly on May 30, 2003. The Shariat Act calls for citizens to follow Islamic laws as their way of life. This ascendancy of Islamists in democratic elections, only 18 months after the Taliban was driven out of power, is a worrying development for American policy in the region. "Talibanization is creeping into our society slowly, steadily, and very consistently," said Afrasiab Khattak, who heads Pakistan's Human Rights Commission. "The way it devastated Afghan society, it will do the same to our society."

Despite the controversy of the Shariat Act, the MMA in NWFP is now planning to get the Hizba Act passed in the provincial assembly. The Hizba Act will allow formation of the Hizba Force, which would spearhead the campaign to promote "virtue" and prevent "vice." It is feared that such a force would be largely unaccountable, and would become a parallel religious police with excessive powers.

But it is not simply the bringing of a radical version of Islam to the political forefront that poses danger; it is the propensity of these forces to defy law and order that threatens the society. Pakistani media have pointed out that a record amount of land has been brought under poppy cultivation in Pakistan's Baluchistan and Northwest Frontier Province this year. According to *The Friday Times*, a weekly published from Islamabad, the illicit crop has been cultivated on a total of 3,000 hectares of land in the Frontier province, while in Baluchistan, it has been cultivated on 2,000 hectares of land. These figures, provided by the Pakistan government to the United Nations Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), are much higher than the record-breaking 950 hectares cultivated in 1998. What makes matters worse, is that the MMA in NWFP Assembly has also backed farmers' bid in the Kohistan district to grow poppy.