
Pakistan

Little Substance in Musharraf's U.S. Visit

by William Jones

Considerable to-do was made, of the visit of Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf to Washington. Having brooked heavy domestic opposition for assisting U.S. military operations in Afghanistan, he was given red carpet treatment at the White House on Feb. 13. Pakistan was treated as a pariah after its 1998 nuclear weapons tests and Musharraf's 1999 coup; now, its President was greeted as something of a hero. How much he will gain—or lose—from his efforts to remain among the Bush Administration's allies, remains to be seen. And what price he will pay for his domestic crackdown, under U.S. pressure, on groups allegedly connected to al-Qaeda, is uncertain.

Musharraf is seeking a complete normalization of relations with the United States. While the United States, during Carter National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's "proxy war" against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, built up, together with Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, the Afghan mujahideen to fight the Soviet forces, the subsequent Soviet withdrawal led to a simultaneous withdrawal of U.S. support. With no Soviet enemy to fight, the various groups began to fight amongst themselves, and Afghanistan was again plunged into a nightmare of warfare and destruction. Much of this spilled over into Pakistan, creating a cauldron of instability also in that country.

With the United States now claiming "victory" over al-Qaeda, many of whose members have escaped over the border to Pakistan, President Musharraf is asking that the United States pay Pakistan's considerable costs for the Afghanistan war, and give economic aid in addition.

The Bush Administration, which is concerned to maintain Pakistan's alliance, has not been slow in showing its gratitude. President George Bush heaped praise on the Pakistani leader: "President Musharraf is a leader with great courage and vision, and his nation is a key partner in the global coalition against terror," Bush said. "Pakistan's continuing support of Operation Enduring Freedom has been critical to our success so far in toppling the Taliban and routing out the al-Qaeda network." Musharraf also received a clear commitment that the United States is with Pakistan for the long haul. "The President made a tough decision and a strong decision," Bush said. "It's not only a decision about fighting terror, it's a decision for the direction of his country. And we support that strongly. And so I can understand why, you know, some in

Pakistan are saying, well, this is just a short-term dance. But so long as we share the same ideals and values and common objectives, we'll work with Pakistan."

Commitment to Some Basic Changes

Congress agreed last year to give Pakistan \$600 million in aid to cover the costs it bore in the "war on terrorism," although only \$100 million of this has, as yet, been released. Musharraf, in return, committed to some basic changes in Pakistan. In addition to the crack-down on groups allegedly linked to al-Qaeda, he also committed to far-reaching changes in the Pakistani educational system. He will attempt to transform the religious schools, the *madrassas*, putting emphasis on science, mathematics, reading, English, and Pakistani history, instead of their stress solely on religious instruction.

He has also promised to hold elections in October. What the outcome of these will be, in a situation of growing outrage over the U.S. bombings in Afghanistan and Musharraf's cooperation in this, is anyone's guess. At any rate, the United States is keen on pumping enough money into Pakistan to keep a lid on social discontent.

During his visit, Musharraf received promises of aid on several fronts: \$1 billion in debt relief in FY 2003; \$2 million for "logistical support" in the upcoming elections; \$34 million in educational support for teacher training and information technology programs for the schools; and promises of cooperation in science and technology and in space research. The two Presidents also agreed to support increased market access for \$142 million in Pakistani apparel exports. This measure may never get off the ground, however, as the economic collapse in the United States has stiffened the resistance to lowering tariffs, especially in an industry such as textiles, in which U.S. workers' wages are already at rock bottom.

The Bush Administration, to reestablish close military ties with Pakistan, will also allocate \$1 million for the International Military and Education Training program, and will give \$300 million for refurbishment for whatever expenditure was incurred after Sept. 11 in support of operations in Afghanistan. Sanctions on military equipment and spare parts have also been lifted, although the earlier deal to deliver F-16s remains on ice. Rumsfeld did give Musharraf the benefit of characterizing U.S.-Pakistani ties as a "strategic relationship."

Musharraf also made the usual plea for U.S. mediation in the "Kashmir issue"—which India rejects. While Bush said that he is willing to "facilitate" discussions between India and Pakistan, the United States has no interest in playing a more formal role.

Whether the promised aid will be enough to overcome Pakistani qualms about playing marcher-lord for the "New Roman Empire" crowd, is doubtful. Asked about possible U.S. military action against Iraq, Musharraf said that he has too much to do in Pakistan, to worry about problems elsewhere in the world. Any new United States attack on Iraq would trigger new problems in Muslim Pakistan.