

# The question of image

By S.M. Naseem Dawn 25/6/05

Human Rights

THE way the Pakistani government has handled the case of the gang-rape victim Mukhtaran Mai reflects the gulf between high-sounding aims and ground realities. It also highlights the devious ways the government employs to keep itself in the saddle at all cost. The government's credibility has reached a new low since the president's announcement last December that he would not give up his uniform, despite his previously avowed intention to do so.

Even the government's foreign friends are beginning to doubt the veracity of its statements with regard to security, surveillance and nuclear proliferation. At home, people are beginning to question the claims of an economic turnaround that appears not only to have surpassed all previous growth records but also to have overtaken

Asian economies. By manipulating statistics and employing dubious research methodologies, the government has tried to show that poverty is falling, while all other indicators point to the contrary. A government which fudges rather than faces the facts must sooner or later forfeit the confidence of both those whom it rules and those on whom it depends to perpetuate its rule.

Meanwhile, the supposedly original, though pussyfooted and fuzzy doctrine of "enlightened moderation", with which the government hopes to combat religious extremism, remains undistinguished. It is unwise to expect that General Ziaul Haq's decade-long

by the government and should make it a rallying point of gender and social oppression and exclusion in Pakistan.

The women's struggle must be seen as part of a wider struggle against the civil and military elite, and in solidarity with the poor and the excluded. This is the only way that the women's movement can shed the image of being elitist. The government's fight against radical elements with whom it has a strategic political alliance in order to perpetuate its rule is a limited and tactical one. It is dictated by its need to convince its allies that it is doing enough to keep the fundamentalist spectre from raising its head and threatening its interests in this sensitive region. It is a mistake on the part of women's rights groups to give legitimacy to the military-led regime by endorsing the doctrine of "enlightened moderation" which does nothing to weaken the forces of obscurantism and reaction.

The government's attitude against the rising number of reported social crimes such as

worst elements of society that it does not dare take such a route. It fell to the lot of some well-meaning Pakistani expatriates and NGOs abroad and a *New York Times* columnist to give publicity to her case and to promote the cause of women's emancipation in Pakistan, by inviting her to the US.

It seems that Pakistan's ambassador in the US, a former army man, got wind of Mukhtaran's impending visit. He advised the government to prevent the brave woman from leaving Pakistan to visit the US, where she would have been welcomed with more fanfare than General Musharraf himself. This was not the kind of script that Pakistani rulers had in mind when they prepared an ambitious image-building programme costing millions of dollars.

A commotion followed in the capital and the whereabouts of Mukhtaran Mai became a mystery as she was cut off from her family and friends and was held in some kind of a benign house arrest. The adviser to the prime minister on women development claimed that Mukhtaran had come to Islamabad to discuss a PC-1 form about a project in her area. She was persuaded to withdraw her application for a visa to visit the US, which the embassy of that country was more than eager to issue her, sparing her the many formalities and indignities that ordinary Pakistani applicants face on a daily basis.

The curtain was lowered on the drama when the prime minister, after severe prodding by members of his own party and the opposition, agreed to request the interior minister to withdraw her name from the Exit Control List. The US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, Christina Rocca, expressed displeasure on

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itary as the vanguard of Islamic jihad can be obliterated in less than half that period of General Musharraf's politically spineless regime which takes two stealthy steps back for every step forward. Nowhere has this been demonstrated more clearly than in the case of women's rights issues, which one would have expected to be the centre-piece of any "enlightened" programme of social reform.

General Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" is more a euphemism for weakness and capitulation to the religious reactionaries than about social progress. Thus while by making cosmetic gestures and enacting perfunctory legislation intended to improve the status of women, it provokes diehard religious elements into attacking women in the name of violating Islamic codes of conduct, leaving women to defend themselves. Instead of protecting a protest rally of women against the fundamentalist backlash, it lets loose the police on the demonstrators with instructions to "teach a lesson" to the doyen of Pakistani women's struggle Asma Jahangir. It is a game which the regime has played time and again and it can now deceive only the most naive. It is about time that women's rights activists in Pakistan challenged this six-year old regime. They do not need the helping hand of the government to fight the more radical religious elements. They, however, need to concentrate on the more basic issues of women's rights, such as education, employment, housing and access to public resources. They should not allow the Mukhtaran case to be hijacked

rape, karo kari, the misuse of the Hudood ordinance, police brutality, bonded labour and the commercialization of social services, including education and health, is bordering on the cavalier. It seems to deny their existence and lacks the political will required to deal with them, except in a rather formal manner.

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The Mukhtaran Mai case and that of the rape of a doctor in Balochistan are two high profile events for which the government has engaged in aggressive "image management" to save its own face while the victims continue to suffer indignity. In the case of the latter, the president himself publicly exonerated the principal accused (a military man).

Mukhtaran Mai's case is even more bizarre. This was a case, which, if the government was sincere and local NGOs sufficiently pro-active, could have turned into the flagship of a crusade against rape and other brutal practices against women involving feudal structures that threaten the liberation of women, not only in Meerwala but all over Pakistan. Her courage and determination should have been celebrated all over the country to inspire other women against gender and class oppression. Unfortunately, the present regime is so hamstrung by the need to seek the support of the

government's action, and this was perhaps a strong catalyst in getting the earlier decision reversed.

While this episode has ended and will go off the radar screens of the media for some time, its long-term consequences remain uncertain. It is difficult to imagine that ordinary women in the rural areas of Pakistan will become more aware after the high-handed treatment meted out to the two high profile victims who reported the cases to the police and sought judicial relief. It will depend, of course, on how, if at all, the stories of these and other lesser known victims will reach women and their families living in rural areas and the way in which their conscience is aroused.

Unfortunately, the media focuses on such events only as isolated incidents of violence and discrimination. The systemic aspects of these events remain unexplored and unattended. The present Pakistani government is unlikely to support such an effort, much less to implement the findings of the cases, since this may lead to the demand for vigilance of its own activities. As pointed out by MNA Sherry Rehman in a recent article carried by this newspaper, the subject of the military, particularly its budget, has "become inured from public debate and exempt from any parliamentary accountability". Indeed, the military would be unwilling for checks on its activities to be carried out by independent bodies. The "core" issue of Pakistani polity is the existence of the military as a state within a state, which is an unacceptable situation in a democracy.