

Nuclear issue and domestic

THE ON-GOING DEBATE IN PAKISTAN on the nuclear scientists issue is highly polemical and contentious, reflecting the non-accommodative and non-consensual nature of Pakistani politics. Despite the sensitivity of the issue, the government and the opposition are locked in their highly partisan positions, not making any effort to bridge the gap between their perspectives in order to evolve a shared approach.

The government is pursuing the nuclear issue secretly, sharing as little information as possible with the opposition and the ordinary people. This has made the government vulnerable to the charge that it has given in too much to international pressure. The opposition's disposition lacks the appreciation of the dynamics of the current international context of a highly skewed power structure and the deep concern of the international community about weapons of mass destruction. They have attempted to avail of the issue to pressurise the Musharraf-Jamali government for pulling it down.

The polemical exchanges between the government and the opposition gave rise to conspiracy theories and shocked and confused the information-starved ordinary people. To the good luck of the government, the opposition parties have not been able to overcome their mutual differences while addressing the nuclear scientist issue, which has partly compromised their ability to pressure the government.

The management of the nuclear scientists issue shows that policy making and

management continues to be dominated by a centralised, narrow-based and military-intelligence dominated establishment. They are self-assured of their ability to best understand the national interest and protect it adequately. It is not therefore surprising that the prime minister and his cabinet had little to do with the management of the present crisis. The key policy managers expect the political-civilian elements and the leaders of public opinion not to raise controversies because it diverts their attention from dealing with the security and diplomatic fall out of the nuclear issue.

Pakistan's official circles released very little information on their own; the top army official of the Strategic Plans Division gave briefings to a small number of selected press people to avoid difficult questions. The president's meeting with the press came very late. The Pakistani version of the nuclear controversy came out mainly in response to news reporting and comments by the western press and statements of the official spokespersons of US Department of State or the White House or the International Atomic Energy Agency. This gave rise to speculations in Pakistan, enabling the opposition to resort to emotional appeals for rousing the people against the government.

The opposition leaders are accusing the government, especially General Pervez Musharraf, of a 'sell out' under US pressure; some leaders with conservative Islamic orientations have gone to the extent of suggesting that Pakistan should have

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refused to undertake investigations and that there is nothing wrong in providing nuclear technology to Islamic countries. The western countries are involved in nuclear proliferation but Pakistan is being targeted because it is the only Islamic country pos-

sessing nuclear weapons, it is argued.

Other opposition comments emphasise that the present investigation is the beginning of the end of Pakistan's nuclear programme; first Pakistan would be asked to allow inspections of its nuclear programme and then it would be forced to give up nuclear weapons. The most repeated charge is that a national hero has been disgraced to save the army and intelligence personnel who could be involved in the illicit nuclear transactions.

However, the opposition parties have not been able to present a unified stand against the government. The Jamaat-e-Islami-led one-day strike on February 6 in the name of the MMA produced a lukewarm response in the country. Other MMA parties, including the MMA government in NWFP, did not take part in the strike. The ARD parties stayed away, although they bitterly criticised President Musharraf on the handling of the nuclear issue. The ARD has started a week-long anti-Musharraf protest on February 13 but it is expected to be a limited and sporadic affair; the MMA has not joined the strike.

One inescapable conclusion is that there is a lack of consensus not only between the government and the opposition but also within the opposition ranks. The divided and fragmented nature of the opposition has been highlighted during these days. The opposition parties need to give more attention to serious and in-depth study of the issues they wish to highlight. The statement of their leaders and their party

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position must be backed up with hard and credible data. There is hardly any statement of the opposition leaders that reflected any understanding of the sensitivity of the present crisis and an understanding of international dynamics. None of the statements provided alternative policy options, although criticism of the government's handling of the nuclear issues was quite sharp. It would be a service to the country if the opposition parties were to establish research infrastructures for producing studies on national and international issues that met academic standards. This would help make the statements and the positions of the opposition leaders credible.

The government should also take steps to encourage informed debate on national issues. Hence it should increase civilian-political input to the military-intelligence dominated decision making on key policy issues. Some internal and external difficulties currently being faced by Pakistan can be traced back to narrow military-dominated perspectives that shaped Pakistan's security related choices in the 1980s and the 1990s.

In the case of the present nuclear crisis, the prime minister should have summoned a meeting of the heads of the political parties represented in the Parliament, consulting them on the issue before the scientists were publicly accused of illicit nuclear transactions. The prime minister could have asked the opposition leaders for their cooperation on such a sensitive issue.

The government should disseminate information about the institutional arrange-

ments for the management of Pakistan's nuclear assets and policies. Some information on the National Command Authority (NCA) was released when it was set up in February 2000 and some data on it is available on the Internet.

Recently, a brigadier from the Strategic Plans Division made an informed presentation on the NCA in a seminar organised by the Pakistan National Forum in Lahore. Perhaps this was the first public presentation of the institutional arrangement for the nuclear programme by an official which was appreciated by the participants of the seminar.

The Ministry of Defence and especially the NCA should make more efforts to inform the people about the nuclear policy and its management in order to encourage an informed dialogue. This will also contribute to building trust between the policy managers and the people.

The government needs to consider the above suggestions because the nuclear controversy will not end soon. The IAEA and the major global actors, especially the US, would pressurise Pakistan to secure information gathered from the scientists and others. They would also demand iron-clad guarantees for ensuring that such incidents did not happen again. These pressures would be coupled with the doubts of west-based nuclear watch groups about Pakistan's official story on nuclear proliferation.

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