

5 years in retrospect

BY AYLEA ZAIDI AND SIRAJUDDIN AZIZ

Pak. Politics The Nation
12/2/01

His country is fortunate to have the services of a man of his undeniable qualities, quoted a report on a young military officer when he attended the Royal College of Defence Studies, United Kingdom.

President Pervez Musharraf's appointment as the Chief Executive of Pakistan after a coup in October 1999 may have been bloodless but it very nearly was not since more than two hundred lives, many of them school children returning from a field trip to Sri Lanka, were forced to continue flying overhead as the fuel gauge of their aircraft steadily approached 'empty'. What ensued was nothing short of a nerve-wrecking suspenseful drama.

These tumultuous beginnings of the General's political career seem to have set a precedence for turmoil and controversy for the President. Never has a Pakistani President had to contend with the range of issues that President Pervez Musharraf has had to face. Suddenly he found himself at the helm of a 'failed rogue state', complete with political mayhem, a dwindling national exchequer and abysmal economic indicators that had sent the political pundits running from pillar to post, begging for relief from the benevolent West. The only saving grace perhaps was that Pakistan at least had the honour of being the IMF's pet project.

As if trying to climb out of the political and economic mire at home was not a sticky proposition (no pun intended) for the new President, the September 11 incident set the entire global community into a tailspin. An attack on the sovereignty of the undisputed superpower was an incomprehensible notion. Clearly the rules of the game had changed forever. There was calm before the storm while the wounded bald eagle flexed its muscles, hurt and vengeful the rest waited watchful, uneasy and insecure. As was expected it unleashed its fury, sweeping the entire planet in its new mission. The now near overdone, clichéd 'War on Terror' demanded absolute and unconditional submission from whomever it called upon to become its 'allies'. The USA's stance was simple: 'Either with us or our sworn enemy'. There were no grey areas.

As has been Pakistan's legacy of geopolitical notoriety since 1947, it was no surprise that it was thrust smack in the middle of it all while General Musharraf was still busy trying to establish his credentials at home. The politicians were angry because 'democracy', Pakistani style, had been wrested away from them and the mullahs' religion was in danger. What other choice would a tiny Muslim state struggling for survival have in front of a wrathful superpower? So while Pakistan 'enthusiastically' jumped the starry striped anti-terrorist bandwagon, tempers at home surged a notch further.

The road since then has not been easy but the President along with his able team has treaded it admirably, stumbling at times but that is forgivable. He has exhibited a sense of practical vision in touch with the harsh realities that have plagued Pakistan since its inception. Enlisting the services of technocrats to deal with issues of the state has been one of his most sagacious decisions that have translated into immense payoffs.

These technocrats, not hardened politicians have

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been able to keep the interests of the country paramount rather than furthering their own political agenda. The results shout out loud and clear. Admirable progress has been made on the government's economic revival programme announced in December 2000. Under Mr Aziz's masterful economic management Forex reserves are now at an all time historic high of more than USD 12 billion whereas in 1999 they were under USD 600 million. Where at one time Pakistan was severely crippled under debt servicing pressures at the tragic and almost criminal cost of social and infrastructural development, the Government of Pakistan just ended its 15-year old love-hate relationship with the IMF, one of the first developing nations to escape its 'benevolent' poverty reduction and growth fund.

Five years ago the very notion was incomprehensible! Dr Ishrat Hussain's able tuning of the monetary policy spurred the financial sector, bringing interest rates to an all time low, rejuvenating other avenues of investment including the then almost forgotten Karachi Stock Exchange whose index has now grown exponentially to become the 'best performing stock exchange in the world'. Privatisation and deregulation have cemented investors', local and foreigners' confidence in the country who are now eager to wield their commercial interests in the country. Consequently improved fiscal management, greater transparency and sagacious governance reforms have enhanced Pakistan's credit rating hitherto a hopeless dream.

An ardent admirer of Kamal Ataturk, Musharraf has always aspired to be a secular General. He remains firmly convinced that Islam must not be used as a tool for facilitating military rule as was done freely in the 1980s. In the 80s jihad was exploited to further personal political agendas as well as foreign policy interests. This era saw the birth of the dreaded Talibans, the madrassahs and the influential mullahs.

Since the 2002 elections the MMA has remained resilient and is a deterrent to the General's regime. MMA remains descriptively vocal on exactly what it thinks of the 'War on Terror' and its sentiments have struck a cord with most Pakistanis. Though MMA and the General's government seem to have come to a truce of sorts, it remains tempered with distrust and disdain on both sides. But both realize that they need to cooperate to survive. Consequently Jinnah's liberal and moderate Islam will remain an elusive dream for Musharraf. At least

for now.

Examples of Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and our true friend and ally China show times a benevolent despot is just what a country needs. The runaway success stories of these countries were not fuelled by democracy but by the rule of one or few. We still remember when an American President visited us for a few hours in not so distant past and refused to be even photographed with our then President Musharraf. However since then President Musharraf has come a long way.

He has proved time and again since then that he knows what he is doing. President Bush is bashful nor scant in his praise for General Musharraf and makes the warmth that exists between the two leaders evident at every relevant media opportunity. Relations with India have made important headways for the first time in many years, especially after the 10-month standoff which again General handled very well. The President has been clear that he seeks 'strategic stability' with India and has called for a 'peaceful and satisfactory solution' for the Kashmir issue.

Addressing the 59th session of the UN Security Assembly, the President was vocal in his call for an Islamic Renaissance, urging the West to be more receptive to Muslim sentiments. His ringing words on the most pressing issues today, his alliance with the Muslim world notwithstanding what his relations with the US might be, "We will never accept further usurpation of Palestinian rights. Israel has no right to erect its separation wall beyond its 1967 boundaries and Pakistan calls on Israel to withdraw the wall from all occupied Palestinian lands and stop daily atrocities against the Palestinians".

Goaded by sycophants and following in the precedent set by General Zia, the President went ahead with his referendum which as was expected a resounding result in the General's favour, especially that is. However this was not a very wise decision since all it invited was harsh criticism and marred his image as a forthright individual. But in the end it really doesn't matter since the president till 2007 which is imperative since political uncertainty continues and Pakistan's continuity in its reforms, policies and governance more than ever. A change of guard at this time can be devastating for Pakistan's sovereignty.

However the President's work is far from over. The pillars of the state need to be strengthened. The Judiciary's independence needs to be re-established which is essential for the smooth functioning of any civil society. The President's economic policies too need to be furthered while a systematic approach of disengagement of the military from government is required. However one feels a sense of hope especially in the wake of the election of Shaukat Aziz as Prime Minister.

Known for his 'technocratic' way of governing, the new Prime Minister has said to create a stir in cabinet meetings. But that is a good thing since it seems to be reaping results and a new way of doing things never did anything for the country. So one wishes the General good luck. Once unfairly labelled as the 'tin pot dictator', he has proved that he is made of a different and extraordinary mettle (no pun intended).

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