

Letter from New Delhi

Why is Musharraf in a hurry?

By Kuldip Nayar

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WITHOUT mentioning the names of former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, I asked President General Pervez Musharraf why he did not allow leaders living abroad to participate in the affairs of Pakistan and its development. This was during a meeting with him at Islamabad last month. He was visibly upset and ended the conversation with a counter-question: Would their participation be in the interest of development?

I am broaching the subject at this time because the Pakistan government is in the midst of making concrete proposals on Kashmir and expecting India to respond to them. Musharraf is in such a hurry that there is a threat practically every day to go back to square one. Kashmir is an important matter. The concurrence of the two leaders is essential.

No doubt, the military is in full control and there is no challenge to Musharraf's authority. But he should not forget that both Benazir and Sharif command a large following even in their wilderness. In a freer atmosphere, they may register a much larger support. They are a reality which Musharraf cannot wish away. With the release of Asif Zardari, Benazir's husband, from prison after eight years, the scenario may change. There can be an increasing support for civilian rule. Musharraf may face tough opposition, particularly when his move to retain the uniform is gathering storm.

What Musharraf says on Kashmir is his point of view and that of the military in Pakistan. Political leaders like Benazir and Sharif do not agree with him. Nor do most of the people. A referendum, if held on this point, may surprise Musharraf. But then the referendum is not his way to determine things in Pakistan. The rigged refer-

endum in favour of his presidency is too recent to be forgotten. I wish Islamabad had torn a leaf out of New Delhi's book. The Janata Dal government kept both the Congress and the BJP informed about what transpired between prime ministers Inder Gujral and Sharif at Male. Subsequent governments have taken the opposition into confidence on their talks with Pakistan. In matters like Kashmir, the whole of Pakistan should be involved and, as such, a bipartisan policy is necessary.

Foreign Minister Kurshid Kasuri is right when he says that nobody can take the credit away from former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for initiating the "peace process." In the same way, no Pakistan government can minimize the role of Sharif in pushing forward the peace process. He invited Vajpayee to Lahore and signed a joint declaration. Similarly, the Benazir-Rajiv Gandhi accord was a step towards India-Pakistan detente.

Reports are that both Benazir and Sharif have not reacted favourably to Musharraf's proposal. In the face of opposition from main political parties, what does New Delhi do? Sharif told me at Jeddah last year that they would not accept any solution on Kashmir that the military regime had brokered. Moves to separate Shabaz Sharif from his brother Nawaz Sharif, even if successful, do not mean much. The real question is to involve political parties. The Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif) is not at Shabbaz's command.

The Musharraf government is banking on the Muslim League (Quaid), the King's Party, for endorsement of the Kashmir solution in the Pakistan National Assembly and the Senate. But it has only a wafer-thin majority. Whatever is decided has to have the consensus, both the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League (Nawaz Sharif) agreeing to it.

It is strange that Musharraf says with a flourish that all Kashmiris, whatever their views, should participate in the talks. But this should hold good for Pakistan as well. All shades of opinion should be associated with the proposals that Musharraf is making or the ones which India may be offering at some stage. The military-led government in Islamabad does not represent the Pakistani opinion. Ultimately, civil society has to accept it.

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The US papers, now made public, tell that John K. Galbraith, US envoy in the early sixties, had warned Washington that "Kashmir is not soluble in territorial terms but by holding up the example of the way in which France and Germany had moved to soften their antagonism by the common market."

Galbraith had also done what he called a Harvard Exercise (named after the university where he taught). He had suggested the reopening of the road between Islamabad and Srinagar through Baramulla, Uri and Murree and the resumption of trade and tourist traffic, emphasizing that India's military rights in the vale of Kashmir should remain intact.

This was more or less the proposal that Sheikh Abdullah discussed with me in 1969. His argument was that the border should be 'soft' so that the Pakistanis had an easy access to the valley. Strangely enough, late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto repeated the same thing during an interview with me in March 1972 at Rawalpindi. He said: "We can make the ceasefire line as the line of peace and let people come and go between the two Kashmiris. After all, why should they suffer? Let there be some free movement between them. Then one thing can lead to another."

Realism is thought and action based on realities. It is strange that the reality of political situation in Pakistan does not dawn on Musharraf. There is no doubt that he is the monarch of all that he surveys. But it is also true that the military control has suppressed the real voice of people.

Recent contacts at different levels have revived emotional ties which both sides have had before partition. Left to the people, they would like to have free travel and free trade.

They are sick and tired of the never-ending confrontation. They want to live in peace as neighbours.

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