

Who is conspiring against Shujaat?

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As Senate's winter session comes to an end without doing anything worthwhile, except some animated debates on Balochistan crisis, the proceedings on Friday dragged aimlessly. Yawning senators from both sides of the aisle came to life only when two ministers provoked the opposition to stage a protest walkout.

Outside the house, two significant events, Nawaz-Benazir meeting in Jeddah and Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain's outburst against Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri, remained subject of some animated discussions in the cafeteria and parliamentary lobbies. While lawmakers and the media people hotly debated implications of the Jeddah meeting on national politics, most of them were incensed by Shujaat's violent reaction to Kasuri's written statement in reply to a question.

Though the Foreign Office has regretted the inadvertent omission of Shujaat's claim that he paid part of the expenses from his pocket, the figures given regarding overall expenses on the trip are correct. Of the 134 people who accompanied Shujaat in the trip, 28 were close relatives besides friends, etc. Shujaat paid for the additional expenses of their stay in Saudi Arabia while the government bore the transportation.

The discussion aptly continued in the evening as well in the Parliament House where Senator Mushahid Hussain had hosted a reception for the outgoing foreign secretary Riaz Khokhar. Mushahid described him as one of illustrious sons of Pakistan, a diplomat with a difference, dedication and commitment. As foreign secretary, he walked a tightrope flanked by generals and the politicians. Khokhar was candid enough to acknowledge that the Foreign Office does not make foreign policy but contributes in making it like many others. This is contrary to Agha Shahi's claim that, up to his time, the Foreign Office

played the key role in formulating policy till Zia shifted it to the GHQ, where it has stayed till to date.

Khokhar has retired after 40 years of distinguished service and called the Foreign Office his family (I am the oldest among them, he said). He is passing on the mantle to another able diplomat - a breed that is fast becoming extinct. Riaz Mohammad Khan brings with him a solid background of profound knowledge, experience and poise. He lacks the verve of Khokhar but is staid and sound. Khokhar was considered a hawk, particularly by the Indians, as he recalled in concluding remarks at the dinner. "Do I look like a hawk?" he asked the guests. Some of them still seemed sceptical, at least while considering his sharp looks.

Mushahid is relevant to the continued speculations on Govt-PPP reconciliation, as much of it had originated from his office last year. He followed it up with his famous speech in the Senate calling for a grand national reconciliation, beginning with the release of Zardari, Javed Hashmi and Yousaf Raza Gillani. Zardari has since been released and Raza Rabbani named leader of the opposition in the Senate. This was the roadmap he had predicted. The Jeddah meeting does not appear to have shaken him from the belief that it is intact.

Many believe that Shujaat and some others in the coalition cannot brook a Benazir-Musharraf rapprochement. Nor can MQM or the Patriots who defected from the party and for whom Ms Bhutto has pronounced a 10-year banishment. MQM's periodic clamour of "conspiracy" being hatched against them, is also designed to subvert this process. Shujaat has also vented his strong disapproval of contacts with the PPP in many ways. He is convinced that some underhand deal is in the works. Asked to comment on Jeddah meeting, Shujaat quipped: "They condemn the army in day-time and go to GHQ in the night."

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid, however, played a different mischief which, some say,

was in fact a panic reaction to a clear message Ms Bhutto had given to the government. She had done grand reconciliation - not with Musharraf but with Nawaz Sharif whom she met after 17 years. Rashid, clumsily tried to throw a spanner saying government was still in touch with PPP and a readjustment of seats was possible. He has even gone to the extent of saying that the real case against BB is being fought in Geneva. "If she escapes punishment there, cases in Pakistan will also vanish."

Shujaat's friends, however, are not convinced. To soothe them, Musharraf aides contend that all that is being promised to Benazir is a level playing field in elections and acceptance of the results. If she wins, she can form the government. What General Musharraf wants is assurance for his future beyond 2007.

While these political moves keep Shujaat on edge, he is worried also by Musharraf's meetings with his inveterate foe, Pir of Pagaro. The Pir has also made inroads in the inner circles of the Presidency which was once on the side of Shujaat. Then there are reports of financial misdeemeanour and administrative irregularities against Shujaat from this circle. In one such instance, Shujaat was accused of keeping a very expensive official bulletproof Mercedes for last one year without entitlement. Its maintenance and other expenses continue to be met by the government.

Shujaat has yet to deny this report. He is, however, convinced that a certain influential circle is after him. He has bracketed the report on Umra with the same conspiracy and rubbish Kasuri for being part of the conspiracy. Those who know Kasuri, vouch for his innocence. He is not a conspirator type and has so far conducted himself with respect, dignity and integrity, remaining pretty aloof from domestic politics.

Shujaat was certainly being jittery when promising disciplinary action, not only against a minister of the coalition, but of his own PML. Last year, he indulged in similar diatribe against another minister, Faisal Saleh Hayat.

