

US polls and Pakistan

By Shahid M. Amin

Daw 9/10/04
Pak. F. Farahi

IT SEEMS that a wave of anti-Americanism is sweeping across Pakistan. The leftist lobby here was always anti-US but, in the last few years, the rightist religious parties led by the fire-breathing Mullahs have surpassed the leftists in virulent anti-Americanism. Moreover, since the US attack on Iraq, some moderate circles in Pakistan have also joined in such criticism.

In the immediate context, many Pakistanis are now rooting for the defeat of President George Bush in the US presidential elections next month and his replacement by Senator John Kerry. Judging the matter from the point of view of Pakistan's national interests, we need to consider as to what would be the likely consequences for Pakistan of Kerry's victory in the presidential elections. He is on record as having expressed deep misgivings about Pakistan's nuclear programme and has implied that official circles in Pakistan were involved in the nuclear proliferation activities of Dr. A.Q. Khan over the last few years.

He has indicated that, if elected, he would apply pressure on Pakistan to roll back its nuclear programme. Against this background, Kerry has also advocated a regional leadership role for India. Moreover, Kerry regards the Al Qaeda as the biggest threat to US national interests and has accused Pakistan of harbouring Al-Qaeda and Taliban elements. If elected president, he would presumably increase pressure on Pakistan to "do more" to crush these elements.

The foregoing would suggest that Kerry as president might tighten the screw on Pakistan, leading to serious strains in US-Pakistan relationship. Aid could be curtailed, and even worse could follow. India would be emboldened and its relations with the US would gain — at Pakistan's expense. The US might even accept the Indian

What in fact are the Muslim grievances against the US? The main complaint is American support for Israel. This is really the outcome of the hold of the Zionist lobby in the US, and even in Europe. The US has maintained a strongly pro-Israel policy despite the latter's unashamed aggressive policies against the Palestinians in defiance UN Resolutions and in utter disregard of Arab, Islamic and world opinion on the subject.

At the same time, to blame the US for everything that Israel does is also erroneous. It must be remembered that whatever concessions Israel has made to the Arabs over the years were largely the result of American pressure or persuasion. Israel was forced to vacate Arab territories after the 1956 War; the Sinai was returned to Egypt in the 1970's; and the PLO regained control of the West Bank and Gaza in the 1990s, all because of US pressures on Israel.

Under the so-called roadmap, on peace, even if it is now sidelined, President Bush has committed the US, for the first time, to the concept of an independent Palestinian state. Logic suggests that, at some stage, the US would have to adopt a more even-handed policy on the Palestinian issue, so that its national interests in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world are not further damaged. In any event, the Islamic world must realize that neither Europe nor anyone else has been able to do anything con-

women's schools, and banning of all kinds of entertainment — in fact greatly damaged the image of Islam all over the world.

The third case is the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent fighting in Iraq against the US military occupation. Here, the US was guilty of acting without UN sanction. Moreover, it failed to substantiate its claim that the Saddam regime was in actual possession of WMDs or was supporting the Al Qaeda. World opinion has been rightly critical of the US on this score.

However, the fact was that Saddam was a tyrant who had been guilty of the killing of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis over a period of 35 years of Baathist rule in Iraq. Mass graves have since been discovered in which thousands of Iraqis were buried. Saddam singled out the majority Shias as well as the Kurdish minority for the worst treatment. He launched invasions of Iran and Kuwait in which nearly a million Muslims perished.

Saddam used chemical weapons against Iran as well as the Kurds. He was in possession of the WMDs at one stage even if none were found after the US invasion in 2003. The removal of the Saddam regime was as justifiable as the removal of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia by Vietnam following its invasion in 1970s. Incidentally, the brother of President Khatami of Iran had greeted the fall of Saddam as the

"best news" for Iran.

Finally, how about the validity of some specific Pakistani grievances against the US? No doubt, Pakistani opinion was embittered when the US did not support Pakistan during the two wars with India in 1965 and 1971. However, any objective reading of the US obligations under the two military pacts (Cento and Seato) would show that the US help to Pakistan could only come in the event of Communist aggression against Pakistan. It was inconceivable that US soldiers would join Pakistan in fighting against India. Any illusions in Pakistan on this score were unfounded.

In fact, the US military aid to

Kerry has indicated that, if elected, he would apply pressure on Pakistan to roll back its nuclear programme. Against this background, he has also advocated a regional leadership role for India. Moreover, Kerry regards the Al Qaeda as the biggest threat to US national interests and has accused Pakistan of harbouring Al-Qaeda and Taliban elements. If elected president, he would presumably increase pressure on Pakistan to "do more" to crush these elements.

might even accept the Indian argument to dub Kashmiri militants as terrorists. In fact, over the years, there has been a pattern that the Democrats in the US have shown a preference for India over Pakistan, whereas the Republican Party has been relatively more favourable towards Pakistan.

The Democrats have also been more keen on promoting democracy. It might be recalled that President Clinton was even unwilling to be photographed with General Musharraf when he paid his reluctant, five-hour visit to Pakistan in 2000. Clinton had spent five days in India on the same tour.

On the other hand, President Pervez Musharraf has established a close rapport with President Bush. This has been a prime reason for Pakistan emerging as a key player on the world stage, more so since 9/11. Pakistan has as a result reaped strong diplomatic and financial dividends. The A.Q. Khan episode could have had highly injurious consequences for Pakistan but for the special relationship existing between Bush and Musharraf.

No doubt, there is a certain continuity in foreign policy of the US and other countries, dictated by national interests. Pakistan is a nuclear state and has a geostrategic importance that would have to be recognised by Kerry or any other American president. Pakistan is also viewed as a key moderate Muslim country at a time when Islamic extremism is becoming the bugbear of the West. But in the light of the public positions taken by Bush and Kerry respectively, it is likely that the replacement of Bush by Kerry would cause a setback to Pakistan's relations with the US.

On the issue of US support for Israel, which is probably the most important reason for the rising anti-Americanism in Pakistan and the Islamic world, it is clear that President Kerry would not dilute the strong American backing for the Zionist state. Indeed, the Democrats in the US have always been a step ahead of the Republicans in blind support for Israel.

Kerry had also supported the US attack on Iraq in 2003. Though as the presidential candidate, he has been critical of Bush, but he has given no indication of an immediate American pullout from that country. His main focus has been on stepping up the "global war against terrorism" and the Al Qaeda. This could result in more drastic policies in Afghanistan and elsewhere that could further antagonize Muslim opinion.

On the broader question of anti-Americanism, there is a need to take a realistic rather than an emotional view of the situation.

crete to restrain Israel. The US alone seems to be in a position to influence the Zionist state.

The traditional criticism of the leftist lobby against the US was that it was an imperialist power, which was opposed to progressive causes, including democratic rights of peoples in various parts of the world. In some instances, this criticism was partially valid. But the leftist lobby was altogether blind to the policies of the Soviet Union. The Soviet regime was as bad a dictatorship as any seen in the world. Millions were killed during the Stalinist purges and even greater numbers, including Muslims of Crimea and Caucasus, forcibly expelled from their homelands.

The "command and control" system continued until Gorbachev ended it in the late 1980s, which soon thereafter led to the collapse of this system based on oppression and torture. The Soviet Union also had an iron grip on several states in East Europe, apart from Mongolia, all of which had been really turned into puppets. This was the worst kind of imperialism. In opposing this cruel system, which is now in the dustbin of history, the US and its allies were morally right.

It is also worth recalling that, as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, six Muslim states have regained independence. Moreover, in the last decade, two Muslim peoples (Bosnia and Kosovo) were liberated as a result of direct US military and political pressure on Serbia, former Yugoslavia. The Muslim world itself was a mere spectator as the Serbs subjected Muslims in these areas to "ethnic cleansing."

In the more recent past, Islamic opinion has been angered by what is seen by some as the targeting of Muslim countries one by one. Let us examine three specific cases. Firstly, the US-led military action against Iraq in 1990. This was undertaken when Kuwait, a Muslim and Arab state, was attacked and occupied by Saddam Hussein. In expelling Iraq from Kuwait, the US had overwhelming world support, including that by nearly all Muslim states. Egypt, Syria and Pakistan even sent troops to join the war against Iraq.

Secondly, the US military action against the Taliban regime in 2001, which was undertaken shortly after the Al Qaeda suicide bombers hit New York and Washington on 9/11, was supported by nearly all countries in the world, including Russia, China and most Muslim governments. The Taliban regime was opposed by most states, including their Muslim neighbours such as Iran. The obscurantist version of Islam practised by the Taliban — shutting down of

on this score were unfounded. In fact, the US military aid to Pakistan in the 1950s and 1960s was given to fight Communist invasion. Instead, Pakistan used these weapons against India. Similar was the case of the US weapons given to India after the Sino-Indian war of 1962: India instead used them against Pakistan. It could be said that both India and Pakistan took the US for a ride in securing massive military aid, ostensibly to fight Communism, whereas they really intended to use this weaponry against each other.

The historical record also shows that after Pakistan's defeat in the 1971 war, it was US pressure that deterred India from attacking West Pakistan. In the more recent past, it was the US that dissuaded India from launching a military adventure against Pakistan in 1999 and in 2002.

It is also a fact that the US has been the largest source of economic and military aid to Pakistan in the last fifty years. There was no doubt a quid pro quo from Pakistan, which supported the US during the cold war. But this did not stop Pakistan from befriending Communist China even though the US regarded it as an enemy until 1971. Pakistan also went to war with India in 1965 and 1971 in disregard of US opinion. During the early 1980s, the US and Pakistan came close together because of their opposition to the Soviet military occupation of Afghanistan.

But this did not stop Pakistan from going ahead with the acquisition of nuclear capability despite US opposition. This indicates that even when Pakistan had become a military ally of the US, it had defied US wishes on key issues and continued to follow, by and large, an independent foreign policy. Similarly, despite Pakistan's close cooperation with the US after 9/11, it has refused to send troops to Iraq.

The historical record shows that there are no permanent friends or enemies in international relations. When we get close to the US, this is in pursuit of our national interests. That is also the basis of US friendship with Pakistan. Our strategic doctrine has been based on the premise of a mortal threat from India to our security.

It has been our endeavour not to allow a situation to develop in which the US would make a common front with India against Pakistan. However, unbridled anti-Americanism in Pakistan, which has already led to the growth of extremism and even support for the Al Qaeda type terrorism, has the potential of pushing the US towards India, thereby jeopardizing our national security.

The writer is a former ambassador.