

Significance of Rice's visit

*Prof. F. Iqbal
Dawn
15/3/05*

By Tariq Fatemi

THE forthcoming visit of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Pakistan is a matter of great satisfaction for the political leadership. In fact, a visit by any senior American official is an occasion for the government to claim that it amounts to fresh evidence of the appreciation with which the United States views it.

That the newly appointed secretary of state, who is also a confidant of the US president, should choose to visit this region and, more importantly, Pakistan, so very early in her tenure, is certainly an event that needs great preparation and deep introspection by our foreign policy establishment, for no visit of this nature is ever without a well thought-out purpose.

True, the Bush administration has been publicly and forcefully supportive of General Musharraf, ever since the Pakistani president conducted a major strategic switch after the 9/11 events. Since then, the administration has introduced legislation in Congress to waive the many sanctions imposed on Pakistan, both on account of the nuclear tests of 1998, as well as the military takeover in October 1999. It has also approved large, multi-year aid packages for Pakistan, making Islamabad one of the major recipients of US largesse.

The passage of time has not diluted the administration's continuing appreciation of the 'good work' being performed by the Pakistan government. In fact, recent pronouncements by both President

Bush and his senior officials have been that Pakistan is a partner in the fight against terrorism, and that the US is committed to a long-term relationship with Pakistan.

Appreciation, approbation, accolade are all for the moment, very transient and very ephemeral. Once the task is done, an objective achieved, the past is gone, leaving nothing more than a pleasant, distant memory. The Americans are genuinely surprised and somewhat amused when the Pakistani leaders speak of disappointment and allege betrayal, as we did publicly and vociferously after October 1990, when George Bush (senior) imposed sanctions on all forms of assistance to Pakistan, on the plea that we had violated the provisions of the Pressler Amendment. We, as naive as ever, could not figure how this was happening, since we knew that the Americans

region on the road to durable peace and meaningful cooperation. But this will be accompanied by a gentle reminder that this policy can be sustained only by ensuring that the commitment made in January 2004 on the issue of cross-border terrorism continues to be respected by us.

Having thus stroked our egos, Ms Rice can then reveal the true purpose of her mission — ensuring our assistance and cooperation on Iran. Having announced our neutrality in any confrontation between the US and Iran, we have already made ourselves open to American pressure. Ms Rice is likely to claim that in the struggle between good and evil, there can be no neutrals and thus we cannot absolve ourselves of the task the Americans have earmarked for us. This is not mere conjecture.

Enough has already been revealed by well-known journalists in the US media about efforts to infiltrate agents into Iran from neighbouring countries to tell us both the advanced state of American preparations and the expected role that the Americans envisage for their friends in the region. It will need all our skill and resolve to disabuse the Americans of any expectation of involvement by us in US designs. In fact, we should have no hesitation in conveying to Ms Rice how we view the American plans to bring about a regime change in Iran and its likely impact not only on the region, but on American interests as well.

On the non-proliferation issue, the Bush Administration appears to have given us only temporary respite. There has been no dilution of America's fundamental opposition to Pakistan

Americans have a more ambitious agenda in store for us. This is especially in the context of what they refer to as the Greater Middle East. The region, which now includes Pakistan, must embrace liberal democracy, accept market economy, abandon any pretensions of wanting to possess weapons of mass destruction, and more importantly, never pursue policies that the United States perceives as inimical to American interests.

Pakistan government in fact, recent pronouncements by both President

Bush and his senior officials has only added to the impression that President Musharraf is now among those few world leaders whose policies, as well as personalities are upheld as examples for other world leaders, especially from the Islamic world, to emulate. Only a couple of days ago, Bush referred to Pakistan's contribution as having made the United States "more secure".

Even the Congressional Research Service (CRS), an influential body that advises Congress and writes policy briefs for many of the important congressional committees, has been generous in praise of the critical role that the Pakistan president has performed in the US-led war on terrorism. It brushes aside concerns that the civilian democratic institutions have been weakened by the president's decision to retain both the office of the chief of staff and head of state, by asserting that the president remains the "best hope" for stability for both Pakistan and Afghanistan. It further recommends the provision of long-term and comprehensive support to Pakistan, but with an important proviso — so long as we remained faithful to the war on terror, which will be defined by the US alone. Of course, as regards Pakistan's request for advance weapon systems, the CRS recommended that the administration set fresh, highly stringent non-proliferation terms for Pakistan before the consideration of any such proposal.

Given the current state of Pakistan-US relations, and especially in view of the recent public pronouncements by senior administration officials, it would appear that Ms Rice's visit would be a love-fest. But given the history of our ties with Washington, the ideological orientation of the president and, in particular, of his key counsellors, we need to be extremely cautious.

First of all, we must not forget the well known dictum that all unequal relations are, by their very nature, inherently unstable and volatile. Secondly, American policy makers take a hard-headed, objective, no-nonsense approach to foreign policy

to American interests.

knew what we had been doing for years. It was quite some time before the penny finally dropped — that the withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union meant the ushering in of a new world order where there was simply no need for our services.

Now, on to more current times. True, we are the toast of the American capital. But the administration has made it clear that this current dalliance is dependent on Pakistan continuing to play the role that the US has earmarked for us. If that were indeed the case, there would be no losing sleep over the matter. But there have been enough stories floating around Washington to cause us worry that the Americans have a more ambitious agenda in store for us. This is especially in the context of what the Americans refer to as the Greater Middle East. The region, which now includes Pakistan, must embrace liberal democracy, accept market economy, abandon any pretensions of wanting to possess weapons of mass destruction, and more importantly, never pursue policies that the United States perceives as inimical to American interests. When viewed from this perspective test, the destruction of the Saddam regime in Iraq appears inevitable, the policy of threats against Syria understandable and the need for a regime change in Iran essential.

Closer to home, what will Ms Rice be telling us? Thrice in one week alone, senior administration officials have voiced their praise of Pakistan's policies. Thus we can expect Ms Rice to be generous in her praise of the president's enlightened moderation. This is the new mantra that will eliminate extremism from Islamic societies and ensure greater appreciation of all the good things the Americans have been doing for the Islamic world.

Secondly, there will be a very positive appraisal of Pakistan's role against the war on terror. We will also be hearing pleasant things about how our many initiatives towards India has set the

America's fundamental opposition to Pakistan being in possession of nuclear weapons. We, in turn, have not helped our cause. We can thus expect renewed pressure on this score, especially in light of the statements some of our own people have come out with. These damage both our credibility and image.

It would do us good if we could persuade our politicians that the issue is too sensitive and too dangerous to be treated in a cavalier fashion and extreme caution and restraint are essential, at least until such time that we have weathered the storm. Ms Rice is not likely to be satisfied by renewed commitments of good and responsible behaviour by us. There may be no truth to claims that in early 2002, US agents had succeeded in getting into our nuclear facilities in order to take an inventory of what there was and to examine records of what ought to be there. (as claimed by George Friedman in his book, *America's Secret War*) But there are likely to be fresh demands for access to our scientists and some kind of technical monitoring of our facilities. This has to be firmly rejected, for any concession on this score would place us on a slippery, self-destructive course.

The other item that may cause momentary anxiety to her interlocutors would be Secretary Rice's likely remarks on democracy. But these would be merely for the record. True, President Bush's inaugural address and comments in past weeks by officials in Washington may have led to speculation in opposition circles in Pakistan.

But this would be a mistake on their part and the government need have no real worry. An objective analysis of President Bush's national priorities should disabuse anyone of such expectations. Pakistan's performance in the war on terror has been exemplary and the expectation of meaningful contribution by us on other important American interests, are much too great, for such fanciful ideas as democracy to disturb America's larger goals.

The writer is a former ambassador.