**Saudi Crown Prince-Pakistan’s Ambassador to KSA**

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Prince Mohammad bin Salman, on his maiden visit to Islamabad, paid the ultimate compliment to his hosts, when he declared that he should be considered as ‘Pakistan’s Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.’ The camaraderie was evident from the moment the Royal Dreamliner Boeing 787 carrying the Crown Prince entered Pakistani airspace and was escorted by Pakistan’s Air Force F-16s and JF-17 Thunder fighter aircrafts.

A red carpet was rolled out for the Crown Prince but the icing on the cake was when Prime Minister Imran Khan personally drove the Crown Prince to the Prime Minister House. Rumour has it that when Imran Khan visited Riyadh on his maiden visit to KSA as Prime Minister, he was driven by the Crown Prince himself.

This reminded me of a childhood joke which was that the US President John F. Kennedy was visiting New Delhi. After the day’s official proceedings were over, Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru decided to take JFK for a drive. They saw an Indian relieving himself by the roadside. JFK sneered at the sight, so an embarrassed Nehru pulled out his revolver and shot the offender. A few months later, Nehru was visiting the US. In the evening JFK invited Nehru for a drive around DC. Lo, and Behold! The duo saw someone urinating on the roadside. It was Nehru’s turn to point out the offender. An embarrassed JFK pulled out his revolver and shot the wrongdoer. The banner headlines the next day said, ‘Indian Ambassador to Washington DC shot dead.’

That was on the lighter side of it, but the Royal visit should be considered a roaring success, not only for the 20 Billion dollars worth of MOUs signed between the two brotherly countries but the humane gesture displayed by the visiting Royal. Formalities aside, during the Royal banquet, Imran Khan made two requests from his visitor. He asked that the 3000 Pakistanis suffering incarceration in the Kingdom, be freed. Majority of them hailed from very poor families, were from rural backgrounds and were the sole supporters of their households. Most were apprehended for petty or inadvertently committed crimes. In a magnanimous gesture, the Crown Prince acceded to the immediate release of 2107, prisoners and to review the cases against the remaining. The Prime Minister also asked his Royal Guest to consider the Hajis from Pakistan proceeding for pilgrimage to have their immigration done in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad before departure. Imran’s rationale was that most pilgrims from Pakistan are old people, who save all their lives to go on Hajj. When they arrive at Jeddah, they have to wait for hours waiting for immigration. Prince Mohammad bin Salman generously agreed to the second request as well.

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He must have been amazed that most heads of states while visiting KSA or hosting Royal visitors, seek concessions for themselves or their families but here two requests came for the poor and the downtrodden people of Pakistan.

The opposition was seething with anger that its leadership was not extended invitations to the Royal Banquet, ignoring the fact that the Senate delegation comprised of members from both sides of the bench. Scathing comments from some members of the opposition bench were tantamount to calling Imran Khan a ‘beggar’ and suggested that the Prime Minister House be renamed to ‘Beggar House’. Ironically the visiting Saudi Foreign Minister was cognizant of the derisive comments and in his joint Press Conference with his Pakistani counterpart, declared that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was investing in Pakistan because of its development potential and that they believed in Pakistan’s leadership.

Full marks to the fledgling PTI government in its execution of foreign policy. The difficulties and challenges facing Pakistan were numerous when it took up the cudgel to govern Pakistan. The treasury was empty, corruption was rampant, and terrorism was prevalent. Moreover, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) was in the process of placing Pakistan on the Gray List while there was also the threat of the country being placed on the Black list, which hung like the sword of Damocles over the government’s head. Foreign debt had peaked to unprecedented heights. Indeed, the PTI government committed a faux-pas initially but is making amends now. Reaching out to its traditional friends, China, KSA, UAE, Turkey and Malaysia was an important step. They all did their part, and thus Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves soared higher as the coffers started to fill.

The usual belligerence and jingoistic attitude of India, especially on the eve of the Saudi Crown Prince’s visit to Islamabad through the false flag operation at Pulwama and blaming it on Pakistan was a heinous act. The government remained calm but once the royal visit was over, a befitting response was meted out. Modi tried to eke out a condemnation from the Saudi Crown Prince in New Delhi but because of the absence of credible intelligence, he refused to oblige.

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