

The Visit

As far back as one can remember all the visits abroad by our various Presidents and Prime Ministers over the years have been very "successful". With the US figuring prominently on everyone's diplomatic screen, that segment has always been "outstanding", this even when Mian Nawaz Sharif was receiving his (Kargil) marching orders in July 1999 from Clinton in extremely tense talks in Blair House (a very deliberate slight, given that Blair House is across the road from the White House). Soon after 9/11 Pervez Musharraf was in sync with the US tune in total contrast to our rather convoluted foreign policy perceptions about Afghanistan. That it suited us is only added comfort, for how else would we have the courage to go after a whole range of terrorists of various kinds that seemed to come out of the wood-work? Hardcore terrorists have even been caught taking refuge with activists of mainline MMA factions. Where does that leave them, rather where does it leave the image of Pakistan in the present international environment? Musharraf was due for accolades in the premier foreign capitals, that he deserves and that he got!

All our military Presidents, selected, "elected" or otherwise, have been outstanding in their individual capacities, their tenures still too near in history to be objectively recorded. Ayub towers over the others in sheer personality and Ziaul Haq was the darling of Muslim countries. His action in support of King Hussain against the Palestinians in Jordan in 1970 in making their "Septembers black" notwithstanding. Without doubt, Yahya Khan was the most brilliant and as is now clear, was not engaged in making his future financially bright, notwithstanding his "extra-curricular activity" during his colourful but tragic reign. Musharraf is clearly the most eloquent among the four, having a more precise and detailed knowledge than any of his predecessors about both internal and world affairs. Moreover he is very decisive. An instructor in good standing in the National Defence College, he is extremely articulate and logical, which helps him speak with authority in front of knowledgeable foreign audiences. Critics come to such events generally skeptical but more often than not go away charmed by his sincerity of purpose to the country. In short, he is no tinpot dictator and he works hard at preserving his support domestically and internationally. Moreover he is extremely decisive. Therefore if he has bowled over leaders and media alike in London, Washington, New York, Los Angeles, Berlin and Paris, it is no surprise, it is also good for Pakistan. To successfully build up an image of a country like Pakistan is not easy, according to senior advocate Mazhar Jafri (and like most lawyers he is generally critical of all military rulers).



BY IKRAM SEHGAL

The US aid package of \$3 billion, half for military supplies, was a major achievement for the President. At least \$1 billion can be used to retire the outstanding debt of \$1.8 billion. This frees revenues for us to look at options other than F-16s, possibly French Mirage 2000-5s.

Musharraf's backtracking somewhat on the recognition of Israel was disappointing but it seems a more of a tactical retreat rather any strategic rethinking. In fact for the first time Pakistan has spelt out that the touchstone of the future relationship will be progress on the "roadmap to peace". Good enough for starters, at least we are talking about it. In fact, if we had a constant dialogue going with Israel we could be helpful in nudging them along on the roadmap. In many seminars and conferences one comes across Israelis and finds they do not have the horns they are supposed to have, in fact one finds them very logical and correct. They make no apologies about their actions in the West Bank, their existence as a nation is threatened and one supposes that is logic enough! One notices that their perceptions about Pakistan is more negative than positive. Having left the field open to a hardcore enemy to exploit, that enemy can hardly be expected to tell any truths about us. What stops us from having dialogue and commerce the way we have with Taiwan? Moreover why not a step-by-step approach that keeps in step with progress on the "roadmap"? Having had the rare privilege of praying at Al-Aqsa Mosque (Islam's third holiest site), outside the Haram Al-Sharif there were Israeli policemen but only Palestinian guards within the Noble Sanctuary (35 beautiful acres of mosques, gardens, etc including the "Dome of the Rock" Mosque). Both the Israelis and the Palestinians were polite in asking whether I was Muslim before I could enter the holy area. One must remember that in Jerusalem, mosques, churches, synagogues are literally within (instead of "at") arm's length of each other. Since September 2000 when the Intifada was militarised, over 2000 Palestinians have been killed. In these three years about 800 Israelis have died. More Muslims died in less than a week in Gujarat in February 2002 during BJP Chief Minister

Modi's pogrom against Muslims, a deliberately cynical act meant as part of the political campaign to win the ensuing elections.

The US aid package of \$3 billion, half for military supplies, was a major achievement for the President. At least \$1 billion can be used to retire the outstanding debt of \$1.8 billion. This frees revenues for us to look at options other than F-16s, possibly French Mirage 2000-5s. We need desperately to augment our air defence capability, as air superiority in the hands of the enemy can paralyse us on the ground and at sea, strategically overwhelming all the bravery and *tactics* our Armed Forces may be able to display, given that at least two critically important Corps Commanders who are planted in harm's way (at least their troops are) can take time out from their myriad "civilian" duties to attend to dire operational necessities.

The MMA is on the defensive after disqualification of one of its MNAs for lack of a graduation degree, the condition being a must for all parliamentarians. If a Sanad is recognised as a due qualification by an authorised university, fulfilling all curriculum conditions and related criteria, then it should be acceptable as a qualification for a member of the Assemblies or the Senate. The MMA has a vested interest in trying to scuttle the LFO, at least 30-35 of the MNAs and about 80 percent of their members of Provincial Assembly get disqualified, there will have to be by-elections to fill their seats. It is an even guess that in such an election they will keep their seats in some areas, if they can get qualified candidates. In any case they will certainly lose their majority. The ANP has already come together and other political parties (PPP and PML mainly) have learnt a serious electoral lesson in being divided at election time.

The Opposition shot themselves in the foot with their failed no-confidence motion brought against the Speaker, and are compounding their mistake by going against the Deputy Speaker. The government has been repeating ad nauseam that the Opposition is not interested in their legislative duties, being simply pawns manipulated by remote control by leaders-in-exile. Their negative parliamentary tactics support the government's stand, most ably articulated by the government's "information streetfighter" Shaikh Rashid. Having fought the elections on the basis of the LFO, it is incongruous that the Opposition, mainly the MMA, are militating against the very law that has brought them to power in one Province and in coalition in another.

Musharraf has had a good trip abroad and may even become a "frequent flyer" if his domestic opposition remains as ham-handed as they have been. The rumours about his losing control, spread far and wide by motivated interests, are "greatly exaggerated" (with apologies to Mark Twain). On the contrary the Opposition is in danger of losing all credibility unless they can get their act together and fight political battles as they should be fought, politically.

E-mail queries and comments to:
ikramsehgal@nation.com.pk