

Thus spake Secretary

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USA Nation
29.6.05

When President George W. Bush named Dr Condoleezza Rice as the new Secretary of State, he told the press that she was America's new face to the world. Before there were three faces of America in the world – the face of Peace Corps, the face of multi-nationals and the face of US military power. The balance has gone wrong lately. And the only face of America the world sees now is the one of military power.

Today America presents an alarming spectacle. It is no more symbolised in the Statue of Liberty but with the naked black hooded Iraqi man connected with wires for electrocution set up on a box by his American perpetrators. Today in the eyes of millions of Muslims, America is identified with Abu Ghraib where detainees were handcuffed naked and forced to crawl on their stomachs as US soldiers urinated and spat on them; later they were sodomised. In some cases, US military personnel held an un-muzzled dog within inches of two naked and screaming teenage Iraqis and discussed among themselves whether the prisoners could be terrified into losing control of their bowels. To cap it all, the desecration of the Holy Quran simply to cause psychological torment to the incarcerated Muslims in Guantanamo Bay makes it quite clear what this administration thinks of Muslims.

Against this background, Secretary Rice, swept through the Middle East last week to urge democratic change in the Middle East and improve America's image. In her keynote address at the American university in Cairo, she told 600 scholars and students, tongue-in-cheek: "We are supporting the democratic aspirations of all people"! When Nihal Saad asked her on Nile TV if she found it difficult, "touring the Middle East, touring Arab countries, with that image problem, it is difficult, more difficult, to push for a reform agenda that talks about democracy and human rights", Secretary Rice did not deny that Abu Ghraib was a stain on the US and admitted that, "bad things do happen even in democracies". "But democracy guarantees that they will be openly debated", she said. When told, "the people do not trust US about democracy in Iraq because many Egyptians who work in Iraq and have seen bloodshed in the streets, say this is no democracy. For 60 years before you supported dictatorship regime. What is the guarantee you will support a free democratic regime"? In her reply, Secretary Rice said, "for 60 years the United States pursued stability at the expense of democracy in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now we are taking a different course"! Not in Pakistan as Secretary Rice knows very well. Here America is staying the course, unashamedly supporting a thinly disguised military regime.

Secretary Rice countered claims that freedom and democracy lead to civil unrest, violence and the erosion of moral standards, describing both as "the only ideas powerful enough to overcome hatred, division, and violence". She went on to say, "millions of people are demanding freedom for themselves and democracies for their countries. To these courageous men and women, I say today: all free nations will stand with you as you secure the blessing of your own liberty". "There was a time", she said, "not long

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ago, after all, when liberty was threatened by slavery. There was a time, even more recently, when liberty was threatened by colonialism. It was believed that certain peoples required foreign masters to rule their lands and run their lives. Today liberty is threatened by undemocratic governments. Some believe this is a permanent fact of life. But there are others who know better. Throughout the Middle East, the fear of free choices can no longer justify the denial of liberties. It is time to abandon the excuses that are made to avoid the hard work of democracy"! "In Iran", she said, "People are losing patience with an oppressive regime that denied them their liberty and their rights. The time has come for the unelected few to release their grip on the aspirations of the proud people of Iran". The proud people of Iran have since spoken loud and clear. They turned out in large numbers and elected Ahmadinejad, a simple, religious man, a friend of the poor, the son of an iron-monger, as their President!

"A hopeful future", Secretary Rice said, is within the reach of every citizen in the (Islamic world). The choice is yours to make. But you are not alone. All free nations are your allies. So, together, let us choose liberty and democracy – for our nations, for our children and for our shared future"! A brilliant performance by any standard. A more powerful case for democracy in the Islamic world could not have been made out. But Secretary Rice's words sound so hollow, so hypocritical, so devoid of meaning, so unconvincing, so jarring. No wonder, her address left the people cold and impressed nobody. "We were shocked at the statements made", Hany Enan, one of the founders of an Egyptian movement, demanded that President Hosnie Mubarak to step down in response to Ms Rice's remarks.

"For a nation that honours democracy and freedom", the New York Times wrote in its editorial, "the United States has a nasty habit of embracing foreign dictators when they seem to serve US interest. It is one of the least appealing traits of US foreign policy. Like his predecessors, Bush is falling for the illusion that tyrants make good allies. When Washington preaches democracy, while tolerating the tyranny of allies, America looks double-faced".

It is now abundantly clear that America has never cared about democracy in Pakistan and prefers to do

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business with cooperative military dictators. A string of secret and confidential despatches to the State Department from the US embassy in Karachi in 1958 suggests that the US administration did little to deter the Ayub-Mirza junta from stabbing Pakistan's fledgling democracy in the back. Infact, it backed the military and gave it the green signal to topple the civilian government at a time when the country was getting ready for the long-awaited elections under the 1956 Constitution.

As early as 1957, President Eisenhower was telling the National Security Council that the US had made a 'terrible error', keeping Pakistan as a military ally while 'doing practically nothing' for its people. But having bet on the military and the bureaucracy in Pakistan, it was now impossible to avoid facing up to the consequences. Suggestions by American diplomats in Pakistan that Washington try and steer Mirza away from his authoritarian tendencies were countered by the argument that this would defeat US purposes by reviving the old slogan 'the real Prime Minister (of Pakistan) is named Hildreth'! The American foreign and defence establishments, however, were agreed on one thing. They would back the military and bureaucratic combination most capable of restoring a semblance of stability in a country in which they had invested so much for so little! This policy persists till today.

Why is Pakistan, under military rule for the fourth time in its life, largely immune to the winds of democracy that have blown everywhere else in the world? That is a pretty good question. And why is it avoided in the United States?

So, where does America stand today? The American diplomat, Richard Holbrooke once pondered this problem on the eve of the September 1996 elections in Bosnia, which were meant to restore civic life to that ravaged country. "Suppose the election was free and fair", he said, "those elected are racists, fascists, separatists (or anti-American). That is the American dilemma". Indeed it is, not just in Egypt, Algeria, Iran or Pakistan but in the entire Islamic world. No wonder, while Secretary Rice spent about an hour meeting with some opposition leaders in Cairo, she drew the line at meeting with representatives of Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Opposition Party that has been banned from political activity for five decades. "The Egyptian Government", she said, "has outlawed Islamic parties and she would respect the laws of Egypt"!

After the stunning landslide victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the Presidential election in Iran, America will never promote free, fair or impartial elections anywhere in the Islamic world. And it will never accept the result of a free and fair election held, anywhere in the Islamic world, because it will almost certainly be anti-American. Thomas Jefferson once said that, "freedom, not stability, is the essence of democracy". Unfortunately, the Bush administration has a different agenda and a different set of priorities in the Islamic world. It cannot afford to "release its grip on the aspirations of the people" in the Islamic world and will, therefore, continue to support corrupt, unaccountable and authoritarian rulers.