

Bush: the test ahead

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USA

THE emphatic vote given by the American electorate on November 2 in favour of President Bush and his Republican Party has surprised analysts in many countries, including Pakistan. The election results have also evidently disappointed a great many people in the Islamic world, in Europe and beyond.

Actually, most opinion polls taken right up to Election Day, had shown a tiny but continuing lead for Bush. This included polls taken by Reuters, Gallup, CNN, ABC, and *Wall Street Journal*. And yet, analysts in the leading world news media (including BBC), as also in Pakistan, kept minimizing or ignoring these opinion trends. It seemed that their dislike for Bush had overcome their sense of reality. Hence, their surprise and disappointment at the outcome of the election.

Bush not only secured the 270 plus majority in the electoral college, but also had a massive 3.5 million lead in the popular vote. Moreover, his party increased its majority in both houses of Congress. He has clearly improved his performance over the 2000 election when he had just barely squeezed through a tight election where his opponent had actually got more popular votes.

Conventional wisdom took a beating in this election in more than one area. It was thought that a larger turnout in voting helped the Democrats and that the greater number of young voters would secure victory for Kerry. The turnout was greater than in the past, and yet the result went in favour of Bush. Actually, support for Kerry was confined to the coastal areas and his native New England, whereas the south, mid-America and much of the west voted solidly for Bush.

So, how should one explain these election results? Firstly, the US has been and remains, basically, a conservative country with traditional values. It seems that the majority of American voters still distrust "liberals", and this prejudice seems to have swayed them against Kerry. In more specific terms, the still widespread opposition to abortion, gay marriages etc. was capitalized by Bush who stood for traditional Christian values. He came across as the average American: a family man, folksy, church-going, talking straight — unlike Kerry who had a patrician, professorial look, a certain dryness and aloofness, apart from being a Catholic with a split marriage. Bush was also helped by the popularity enjoyed by Laura Bush as against Teresa Kerry.

Kerry was supported by the liberal news media — the *New York Times* has been supporting losers since the days of Adlai Stevenson in 1952 — but rural America is hardly swayed by this media. The show-biz personalities, the blacks, the Hispanics (with the exception of Cubans in Florida) and the Muslims did support Kerry, but they were outnumbered by the traditional Christians, the majority whites, the Protestants, the Evangelicals, and probably the Zionist lobby as well, who supported Bush.

The second decisive factor in Bush's victory was the security factor. The American voter still carries — or is perhaps even obsessed by — the memories of 9/11 and the fear of terrorism. Bush was able to convince the greater majority of voters that, as compared to Kerry, he was a more determined warrior against terrorism. No doubt, Kerry had made the fight against terrorism the main plank of his policies but he was dogged by his "flip-flop" image. The fact is that Kerry has changed his stance on key issues over the years.

It needs to be recalled that following the US success against the Taliban, Bush was enjoying a record popularity. He lost much of this popularity because of the Iraq war, particularly in the last one year when American body losses in Iraq started to increase. But Kerry was unable to fully

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exploit this to his advantage. The fact is that Kerry had voted in favour of the US invasion of Iraq. Later on, he became highly critical of Bush's conduct of the Iraq war but, during the election campaign, Kerry did not give a time frame for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

After all, Bush also wants the US troops to return from Iraq as soon as there is a stable Iraqi government on the ground. It, therefore, seemed that Kerry did not materially differ from the Bush policy on Iraq. No doubt, he talked about building a new international understanding on Iraq, but he could not really succeed in this endeavour without coming forward with a clear-cut indication of an early or immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq.

It is also a little hard to understand as to why many people in Pakistan were rooting for Kerry against Bush. In several pronouncements during the election campaign, Kerry had been critical of Pakistan on the issue of nuclear proliferation, and had implied that Pakistan had not done enough, or might even have connived, to give sanctuary to Al Qaeda and Taliban elements in Pakistan. He had shown a clear preference for India over Pakistan and had criticized the Bush administration for giving a non-Nato major ally status to Pakistan.

He seemed sympathetic to India on the issue of alleged cross-border infiltration in Kashmir. Moreover, over the years, successive Democratic administrations in the US (Kennedy, Carter, Clinton) have been pro-India whereas the Republicans have been relatively favourable to Pakistan. It is also

clear that President Bush has a close equation with President Musharraf, as a result of which Pakistan has secured solid diplomatic and financial advantages, particularly since 9/11.

No doubt, Pakistan's geostrategic importance would have probably obliged Kerry, if elected president, to maintain a good relationship with Pakistan but it is doubtful if Kerry would have had a similar warm and close equation with Musharraf. Clearly, Pakistan's national interests lay more with Bush than with Kerry.

Similarly, one could question the basis of support for Kerry as against Bush in many sections of opinion in the Islamic world, including that by the outspoken ex-prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad who publicly called for the defeat of Bush in the election. The big grievance of the

Muslims against the US has been its blind support for Israel. But Kerry has been even more assertive in his expressions of support for Israel. As against this, Bush is perhaps the first American president to come out unequivocally in favour of an independent Palestinian state. Even on Iraq, as stated above, Kerry did vote in favour of the US invasion of that country.

However, the fact remains that some of Bush's policies have offended Muslims in many parts of the world. He has reinforced the impression that the US has been targeting one Muslim country after another.

It can be argued that this impression is not altogether justified since the US-led invasions of Iraq in 1990 and against the Taliban in 2001 enjoyed overwhelming support of governments of Muslim countries (though not that of Muslim public opinion). However, his invasion of Iraq was rightly seen as illegal and unjustified. The resistance to US occupation of Iraq has grown and strengthened the hold of Islamic extremists in that country. This is rather ironic since the ostensible motivation for the US attack on Iraq was to curb the terrorists.

If anything, the world and the US itself are less safe now than before the Iraqi adventure. Moreover, the US has lost friends, and even allies as a result of its unilateralist policies. It could not be in the US national interest to alienate the Islamic world on a long-term basis.

Hence, there is a strong case for a review of existing policies by President Bush in his second term of office. A bold new initiative in the Middle East could greatly reduce Muslim grievances. The US must take concrete steps to restrain Israel and secure a just solution of the Palestinian issue.

Secondly, the US must make an early exit from Iraq. Its presence there is a daily provocation for Arab and Muslim opinion. It should work overtime to build up a credible Iraqi security force so that the Iraqi interim government should handle the local opposition, which reportedly includes Islamic terrorists like Al-Zarqawi who has declared loyalty to Al Qaeda. Lastly, no more unilateralist actions should be undertaken by the United States, whether against Iran or any other country.