

Divided states of America

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THREE presidents have received confirmations of a renewed term of office during last fortnight — President George W. Bush of the United States, and flowing from his authority, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan.

To those who watched the 2004 US presidential election results being collated, it became obvious that the United States remains as divided in the election year 2004 as it had been at the same time four years ago. As each state gradually revealed its true colours, the map of America resettled into the earlier pattern of a broad swathe of Republican red with fringes of Democrat blue on its East and the West coasts.

In physical terms, the features of modern America remained substantially unchanged — a reddening face with blue ears on either side, one cocked eastwards and the other westwards.

It is perhaps not accidental that the states that voted Democrats are closest to a world across the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, or that the message of the party's candidate John Kerry emphasized the need for America not simply to lead the rest of the world but to be a part of it, and to use those ears to listen to it. It is certainly not accidental that the states that voted for George W. Bush belong to middle America, an America that prefers and now clearly intends to look inwards, to listen only to itself.

The inherent flaw in any democratic process of selection, such as the one in the United States, is that there can be only one victor, no matter how fractured or equivocal his mandate may be. Once victory has been conceded, the authority of the victor is absolute and binding

cy, should boast a turnout of eight million voters. They cast their votes from an electorate that encroached across soft borders into Pakistan and Iran.

It is a tribute to the managerial skills of Hamid Karzai that he was able, after only two years in power, to hold elections and then obtain 55.4 per cent of the votes cast. Miracles can happen, and nowadays the modern Lourdes is not a grotto in France but a war-torn Afghanistan.

In India, on Musharraf's right, the general election resulted in the defeat of the incumbent BJP. The Indian system showed that it could hold an election that could muster, as peacefully as the passions of subcontinentals will permit, a community of voters (387 million) more numerous than the entire population of the United States (293 million).

To understand the magnitude of this achievement, one needs to remind oneself that the total number of registered voters in Afghanistan was less than those who voted this year in the Indian state of Haryana, and that the total number of votes cast in the Bush/Kerry elections (113.7 million) was slightly more than all those cast in Uttar Pradesh. Interestingly, another parallel is that the minimum number of seats needed to secure victory in the US elections is 270, and in India 272. On such slender margins does the fate of the world hang. With the season of elections in Afghanistan and India having passed, can an electoral spring in Pakistan be far behind?

For the moment, President Musharraf's concern would appear to be more with ensuring that the Indian Kashmir exercises its right of self-determination than that a Pakistani electorate does its own. The Jammu and Kashmir question remains Pakistan's tryst with 1947

on all, including those who opposed him. It no longer matters whether Kerry secured 48 per cent of the popular vote or garnered 55 million votes.

After 100 million voters had spoken, it was the modest voice of Ohio state that decided who would lead America. As a consequence, George W. Bush is the next US president, the president of a Divided States of America, and a divided state of the world.

Bush's victory contains multiple layers of significance. Domestically, he has been given a resounding endorsement of his controversial rightist policies that could be described as Christian fundamentalist. Outside America, he has been authorized to intervene anywhere in the world, whenever and wherever he perceives US interests need protection. He has been given a strengthened licence to wage his war against terror, a crusade in which the enemy remains amorphous and the casualties all too tangible, as innocent Afghani and Iraqi civilians die for their country without understanding why they have to fight at all.

On a personal level, President George W. Bush has wiped away the smear of his father's defeat in 1992 at the grubby hands of Saddam Hussein. Now that he has Saddam Hussein in his hand, he has nothing to fear from any number of Osama bin Ladens in the bush.

For Bush's acolytes, Presidents Hamid Karzai and Pervez Musharraf, one Bush in the hand is worth any number of airborne Kerrys. Following his re-election, they can look forward to the continuity of a patronage that has supported them and will continue to do so as long as their personal interests coincide with those of the United States.

Of the two, President Musharraf is the more vulnerable, and not just physically. Musharraf's vulnerability is more from the democratic example that has been demonstrated on either side of his borders, in his geo-political geography the equivalent of the Pacific and the Atlantic.

It must be one of the miracles of the 21st century that a country as shell-shocked as Afghanistan, after years of suppression under the Taliban, despite a barren drought in education that lasted almost a generation, and with abysmal levels of adult male and female litera-

— distant in time, distant in space and distant in fulfilment.

When President Musharraf applies his telescope closer home, he does so to a Nelsonian eye. His domestic form of peg-leg democracy hobbles on the solitary leg of the acquiescent Pakistan Muslim League, accompanied but not balanced by the wooden National Assembly. He needs the counterweight of an opposition to give his assembly plausibility. And the only party that would seem to be able to provide this at the national level would be Pakistan People's Party, with its absentee head Benazir Bhutto. Sagacity has not been a forte of the PPP, nor probity. What it does possess is an explicable durability that its opponents, the army and ISI have not been able to erase.

Supporters of Ms Benazir Bhutto must lament as she does the inaccessibility of her vote bank in Pakistan and her bank accounts in Switzerland. With the death of her mentor, the avuncular Sheikh Zayed of Abu Dhabi, she must be re-assessing her own position, and that might explain her readiness to negotiate her husband's release from prison and her own escape from exile.

How and on what terms she will consider a re-entry into the political atmosphere remains a matter of conjecture. What is clear is that those politicians residing outside Pakistan and those living within realize that too much is simmering and has been left unattended for too long. The rumblings of discontent amongst the Balochs, the situation in Wana, the elephantine dominance of Punjab over the other provinces, the half-complete devolution, the explosion in our population, the lamentable deterioration in our educational standards, and the need to have a representative and accountable government are the growing concern of every Pakistani.

The Afghans have converted themselves from a monarchy into a cobbled democracy. The Indians have transformed themselves from three hundred monarchies into a nation. We are still struggling to keep our four divided provinces together in one federation. Perhaps we should look not to our political left or to our right, but to what happens on our left and on our right. Democracy is more often than not the first step towards unity.