

Dangers to detente

*Pak. F. & India
Drush*
7.12.03
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AS India and Pakistan are engaged in a flurry of good-neighbourly declarations, a thought that keeps haunting is whether the extremists on both sides would let this convivial atmosphere last. Adding to the anxiety are the impending political changes in both countries through elections or alliances. The two sides, therefore, have to proceed with speed and grace to implement the agreed measures.

In Pakistan some elements in the opposition are already accusing President Musharraf of being obsequious to Mr Vajpayee and doing what he wants without India agreeing even to talk about Kashmir. Among the accusers, not unsurprisingly, are clerics speaking on their own or for their schools. But surprising is the criticism coming from the ARD of which the PPP and Nawaz Muslim League are the chief components. Surprising because both these parties in their own times claimed to have all but settled the Kashmir dispute and complained that the army commanders intervened to scuttle it.

Vajpayee riding a bus to Lahore and Musharraf, at the time, climbing up the Kargil peaks was then made out by Nawaz Sharif as a betrayal of the Kashmir cause and still is. Musharraf, too, attributes his midnight dash out of Agra to the hawks in the Indian government who stopped Vajpayee from signing the agreed draft.

The differences between India and Pakistan on Kashmir may be forbidding and the obstacles to a

and warmongers to promote their own creeds. The mainstream political forces like the PPP and Muslim League, whether in government or in opposition, should not become their collaborators for a passing political gain. It is for the first time that bellicose commanders are seeking peace. By opposing them the politicians will be defying the public opinion they have been elected to articulate.

The moderate politician has turned up as an unexpected joker in the pack. It is the extremists who pose a threat to normalization. It is equally true of India but the extremists there are a part of the power structure hence they can be persuaded to go along with the government. Secondly, the Indian extremists may, and do, torment their own people especially the Muslims but do not carry their militancy abroad. Yet, as the recent state elections have shown, they are on the ascendancy. L.K. Advani and Murli Manohar Joshi alone are capable of undermining the India-Pakistan talks more than our MMA lot put together.

The extremists of Pakistan are viewed as terrorists abroad. Their parent organizations openly vow to fight with arms against the oppression of the Muslims wherever it might occur and their partisan papers routinely gloat over dispatching the non-Muslims to hell in occupied Kashmir. Yet they are keen to support Musharraf only if he were to agree to relinquish the army command by a specified date.

Prime Minister Jamali frequently holds out the hope of a "good news" which is MMA collaborating with the government. It may be a good news for his shaky government but wholly inauspicious for a settlement with India. Pakistan has lost

solution many and awesome, but the area of agreement was narrowed down and defined by Benazir Bhutto in her talks with Rajiv Gandhi and by Nawaz Sharif and Pervez Musharraf in their respective meetings with Vajpayee, or so at least all three claim. It should be, thus, possible for the parties to go back to either of the three past trysts to move further ahead.

Every passing day of jingoism has shown that a fresh start could be made only in an atmosphere of peace and mutual trust with the common people, and not the cynics or fanatics or arm-chair ideologues, at the back of their negotiating leaders. Every passing year has also shown that while India can grow economically and also keep functioning as a democracy with 15 per cent of its budget going to defence, Pakistan cannot with 25 per cent.

The common people in both countries and in Kashmir, undoubtedly, stand to gain by an end to confrontation. The ceasefire in Kashmir would prevent death and injury on the Line of Control. The status of martyrdom, or its denial, is reduced to a mere rhetoric when the people dying on either side of the Line are all innocent non-combatants and kins in faith and blood. The relief and cheer it has brought to the residents of the firing zone is real and unmistakable.

The point to make is that leaving the intractable Kashmir dispute aside for a moment, the normalization of relations with India brings its own dividends to the people of all the three lands which must not be denied to them. The Kashmiris should not continue to die or suffer privations, the long parted family and clan members should be able to see each other and the unwary fishermen straying into the wrong territorial waters should not rot in jails for years together. Pakistan would get its share in the Asian tourism by making the land border crossing free for foreigners.

Only free trade and industrial joint ventures could be linked with the progress in negotiations on Kashmir. Tension and hostility spread over half a century have only hardened India's stand. The fears that peace and amity might put off a solution are conjured up only by bigots

international goodwill in its differences with India, especially on Kashmir, because of the jihad doctrine. The world would be wary of backing an Islamic cum military Pakistan against a secular, democratic India when the patron-saints and practitioners of armed jihad occupy pivotal positions in Pakistan's power structure.

India despite the presence of militants at the heart of its government has been gaining ground in Kashmir first by holding elections there and then by drawing majority of the Hurriyyat Conference to negotiations without conditions. Mirwaiz Umer Farooq, the hereditary spiritual leader of the Valley, Abbas Ansari, Ghani Bhatt, Shabbir Shah, Sajjad Lone have all gone over while Pakistan is left holding the "extremist" Syed Ali Geelani and none else worth naming.

With the odds so heavily stacked against Pakistan, it needs cool deliberation whether a government consisting of defectors backed by diverse religious elements (who got together only to force Musharraf out) will act reasonably and in unison in negotiating with India.

The inescapable conclusion is to call general elections and conduct them fairly and open to all. A coalition with the mainstream parties or a national government of talent with representative credentials (as proposed recently by Mr Mumtaz Bhutto) could be poorer alternatives to general elections yet much better than a conglomerate of defectors and extremists.

The extremists were mentioned at the beginning of this column as a potential threat to detente with India. An executive order that besides the president and prime minister only the foreign minister would speak on this subject should minimize this threat.

With the historically rigid official stands on Kashmir, the men of goodwill and reason in the two countries should assemble to show the dogmatic, nervous politicians a way out of this 56-year-old bloody impasse. A group of Palestinians and Israelis working together have shown the way. Their "Geneva Initiative" may succeed where bush's roadmap has failed. Kashmir deserves a similar initiative.