

# Rethinking plebiscite

By Pervez Hoodbhoy

BY declaring that "we have left aside" the United Nations Security Council resolutions for a solution to Kashmir, General Pervez Musharraf shattered a long-held taboo.

While the general had given some confusing hints during his 2001 visit to India and spoken of the need "to move away from stated positions", never before had a Pakistani head of state made an explicit public admission that Pakistan cannot realistically hope for a plebiscite to end the Kashmir dispute and, therefore, is willing to explore other ways.

Subsequent attempts by Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri, to dilute Musharraf's remarks have been insufficient to control outrage and accusations of treason from those in the Pakistani military, political, and jihadist establishment who remain convinced that Kashmir can someday be liberated by force.

Interestingly Pakistan Television, which slavishly follows rulers around, did not cover the general's comments. Mr. Kasuri need not apologize for the General, nor go overboard to placate those who insist on the impossible.

It is true that plebiscite was indeed the solution mutually agreed upon in 1948 and that India had reneged on a solemn commitment. But the passage of five decades, and drastically changed geo-political circumstances, demand a reappraisal. Today, plebiscite is no longer the obvious way of determining the wishes of the people of Jammu and Kashmir. For example, it clearly excludes a major section of Kashmiris that would opt for independence today but which, in 1948, may not have wanted it.

More frightening is the likelihood of a plebiscite igniting communal passions leading to horrific Gujarat-style bloodbaths across the subcontinent. Moreover, at a practical level there is no agency, including the UN, that is capable and willing to implement a task that all nations (except Pakistan) see as impossibly difficult. Therefore to insist on plebiscite is the surest way of guaranteeing that a bloody stand-off continues.

Why the change? Unfortunately, much of Pakistan's conspiracy-obsessed intelligentsia appears eager to believe that the general is merely obeying march-

ing orders received from George W. Bush. But the simplistic world view that everything comes from Washington disallows an appreciation of some critically important, but unpleasant, facts about Pakistan's failed Kashmir policy. One hopes that these considerations, rather than external pressure, have influenced the general. First, there has been an alarming decline in international support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir. Even at the level of passing resolutions, Muslim states and the Organization of Islamic Conference have been lukewarm. More importantly, their trade with India is many times greater than with Pakistan.

Today Indian workers, particularly skilled ones, are still welcome in the Middle East while Pakistanis are finding it harder and harder. It goes without saying that Europe does not agree with Pakistan's actions in Kashmir. But more significantly, even Pakistan's immediate neighbours — Iran and China — are extremely wary of liberating Kashmir through jihad. As if to send a signal, both countries have had joint military exercises with India during the current year. Afghanistan, which Pakistani generals long regarded as no more than their backyard, now has hostile relations with Pakistan.

While acknowledging that India is winning the propaganda war, Pakistani hardliners continue to insist that it is merely the failure of Pakistan's diplomatic missions. This is nonsense — many Pakistani diplomats and embassy officials have tried valiantly but they could not

In an age of television cameras and instant communication, nobody believed Pakistan's denials of aiding and arming militants. Pakistan's diplomats therefore had an impossible task, especially after September 11, 2001, when jihad became the most notorious word in political lexicon.

Second, the recent split in the Hurriyat Conference, originally set up with Pakistani help to mediate disputes between different anti-Indian Kashmiri organizations has sharply reduced Pakistan's influence on the Kashmiri freedom movement. Kashmiris have realized that their interests are by no means identical to Pakistan's. In a clever move, after having stubbornly resisted talking to the Kashmiri leaders for years, the Indian establishment — including the hawkish L.K. Advani and N.N. Vohra — now has had direct talks with Maulana Abbas Ansari's majority faction of the Hurriyat. Pakistan is now left isolated with the small Geelani faction. Moreover, by fencing off the LOC, acquiring high-tech surveillance and night-vision equipment from Israel, and increasing pressure on Pakistan to limit infiltration, India is likely to further decrease Pakistani influence in Kashmiri domestic politics.

Third — and most important — is the inescapable fact that India,

By dropping its insistence on plebiscite, Pakistan

has now put the ball in the Indian court. If Vajpayee is the man of peace that he says he is, he must respond to a move that is breathtakingly bold.

with its hugely abundant scientific and high-tech manpower, is set to emerge as one of the world's largest economies while Pakistan's educational and scientific institutions continue their decline. India has penetrated into America's industrial core, providing it with scientists and engineers, and even drawing work away from US companies into India. Income from just one source — outsourcing and IT services — is expected to swell to an annual export industry of \$57 billion by 2008. This far exceeds Pakistan's GNP, current and projected. The outline of an emerging US-India strategic partnership is beginning to emerge. The recently concluded agreement on space and nuclear cooperation is one indication of things to come.

It is clear that the US no longer regards Pakistan as being in the same league as India. Therefore any expectation of equal treatment would be a delusion. Time is running out for Pakistan. Rather than perform another Afghanistan-style U-turn, it should seek practicable ways of settling Kashmir before a solution is forced upon it.

In effect this could mean a preparatory stage in which inflamed nerves are soothed and the high-pitched decades-old rhetoric is toned down. Subsequently, the Pakistani side of Kashmir and the Northern Areas should be formally absorbed into Pakistan. Negotiations should be conducted with India on an LoC-plus solution that allows for some territorial adjustments and soft borders, and possibly a 10-mile deep demilitarized zone.

While the division of Kashmir is unfortunate, it is better to accept this reality rather than live with endless suffering that has consumed nearly 90,000 lives since 1987. By dropping its insistence on plebiscite, Pakistan has now put the ball in the Indian court. If Mr Vajpayee is the man of peace that he says he is, he must respond to a move that is breathtakingly bold.

The move carries additional personal risk for General Musharraf, whose narrow escape from two assassination attempts shows the dangers of the line he has taken. The forthcoming Saarc summit provides an opportunity that India should seize upon.

The writer teaches at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

Pak. F. Rel. - India  
Dawn  
29/12