

# Musharraf's moment of truth

By Karamatullah K. Ghorī

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**G**ENERAL Musharraf could be said to have had a great year in 2003. He achieved a number of goals both at home and abroad that should add feathers to his cap. He chalked up some truly spectacular milestones that seemed distant and forlorn at the beginning of last year.

Musharraf's achievements at home, especially in the twilight of the year, were remarkable for the ease with which they were pulled off in the face of seemingly heavy odds. The extent of his 'victory' over his vocal and voluble adversaries and nemeses in the parliament was truly stunning. The MMA agitation had held the centre stage all through the year. The maulvi backlash against the general had begun with a bang and kept the entire parliamentary system hostage to their antics. In the end, however, it also fizzled out like a damp squib. The MMA agitation ended with a whimper so feeble that only a seismic recorder could have picked it up.

What forced the maulvis to throw in the towel is still a mystery wrapped in an enigma. Obviously a mixture of stick and carrot was administered to them and did the trick in the end. The JUI component of the alliance was worked upon with greater intent and eventually came unstuck with surprising ease. Maulana Fazlur Rehman was unhinged by fear of history repeating itself in his case. He must have been unnerved by the spectre of getting the thick end of the stick the way his late father, Maulana Mufti Mehmood, was browbeaten and hounded out of office of NWFP's chief minister in 1973.

Be that as it may, Gen Musharraf is now, as a result of his engineered constitutional coup, the most powerful head of state in Pakistan's history. He has accomplished all that he had set his heart upon from the day he got locked into a tussle with the opposition after the elections of October, 2002. In the process, he has also managed to cause a serious breach in the opposition's camp which stands deeply divided. With the maulvis now ensconced in his corner, the opposition has lost much of its vigour and voice. It is, now, bereft like a rudderless ship.

The general also ended the year with an enhanced image in the outside world.

Notwithstanding the skull-duggery and cloak-and-dagger machinations of his minions that preceded his new status as a 'constitutionally elected' leader of his country, he has for all intents and purposes wiped off the stigma of a self-anointed leader. The Commonwealth that shunned Pakistan's request for readmission into the 'club' will now have a hard time justifying its action in the light of what has transpired since its last summit in Nigeria.

But most crucial and decisive from the general's point of view, he ended the year with his mentor, George W. Bush, still standing four-squares behind him. Their one-on-one conclave at Camp David in the middle of the year had put Bush's seal of approval for the general's leadership of Pakistan. Bush also leavened the pie for his Pakistani surrogate with a \$3 billion economic and military assistance package spread over the next five years.

The icing on the 2003 cake for Musharraf has been furnished by the success of the long-awaited SAARC

summit in Islamabad. Which has also, unexpectedly, unveiled the prospects for a new chapter of understanding between Pakistan and India over Kashmir. Vajpayee's meeting with Musharraf was in itself a diplomatic coup but its facade has been given a major uplift by India agreeing to begin a comprehensive dialogue with Pakistan on the totality of their relations, or lack of them, including the tangled issue of Kashmir.

So Musharraf stands taller than ever before at this early dawn of 2004. This could easily be described, without fear of a hyperbole, as his finest hour. He has come a long long way from year 2000 — only four years ago — when he was disdained as a pariah in much of the outside world, so much so that Bill Clinton refused to shake his hand, or be photographed with him, during his four-hour sojourn in Islamabad. For a Pakistani Bonaparte this is a truly spectacular achievement, paling, by comparison, the records of Generals Ayub and Zia in their much longer — 11 years in each case — stints at Pakistan's helm.

There is no way of telling how the dialogue between India and Pakistan would proceed. But what is certain is that Gen Musharraf will have a hard time in keeping the MMA in check, or behind him, on Kashmir. Pakistan's religious parties and factions have been feeding Kashmiri resistance with great fanfare and fervour. Much against the official stance that Islamabad has had nothing to do with the 'indigenous' Kashmiri resistance, the religious factions have made no bones about their role in keeping the resistance well oiled. They will, as sure as hell, cry foul and accuse the general of a 'sell-out' at the first indication of a deal with India on Kashmir.

But this finest hour could prove to be as deceptive as an Indian summer. It could carry the seeds in its womb of the general's greatest testing and trial.

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The general has the unenviable task of serving two different masters with expectations and demands poles apart from each other.

The common man's reaction in Pakistan — especially of those in thrall to the maulvis — will be negative to any 'deal' with India over Kashmir if it smacks of a compromise on what have thus far been perceived as its 'fundamentals.' Those who have paved General Musharraf's passage into a de jure president, duly 'elected' by constitutional process, have the capacity to light brush fires under his feet. Their nuisance value should never be underestimated.

But, the general is under great pressure from his mentors in Washington to come to a deal with India over Kashmir, the soonest possible. George Bush is in a hurry because of the ticking election clock at his home. He wants as many problems bottled up as pos-

sible before he stands before the American electorates. Afghanistan, Iraq and Kashmir all figure prominently on his check list of problems that he would love to see simmering down before his D-Day at the polls. He would expect his Pakistani protege to help him on all these counts, but more pointedly on Kashmir. How does the general square these concentric circles on Kashmir would test his new statesmanship to the hilt.

Curiously, however, whilst the Americans are all cock-a-hoop on the thaw between India and Pakistan and eager that Musharraf must wrap up a deal on the long-festering Kashmir imbroglio, they are feeling very uncomfortable over his deal with MMA. Editorial and opinion comments have expressed fear that in return for their nod on his own legality, Musharraf may have given a carte blanche to the Islamic fundamentalists to implement their own domestic agenda in Pakistan's sensitive border region.

*The New York Times*, that redoubtable voice of the conservatives hogging the Bush administration, has taken upon itself the task of washing all of Musharraf's dirty linen in its pages with impunity. Starting with a tart editorial the day after the second attempt on the general's life in Rawalpindi, the paper has kept a steady barrage of anti-Pakistan reportage on its front page, questioning the general's motives and intents and brashly asking if his loyalty to Bush's 'war on terrorism' could be taken for granted.

The *Times*' own motive is crystal clear and unambiguous.

The American establishment press, of which the NY Times is a linchpin, has unabashedly joined forces with the Bush neocons' agenda since the cataclysm of 9/11. Bush is their best hope to carry on with their agenda for another four years, at least. But his re-election will be hinged, to a very great extent, on how the trouble spots, like Afghanistan, play out between now and the election day in November.

Therefore, in the run up to the elections, it is ineluctable to keep U.S. on top of the situation, be that Afghanistan or Iraq. In the former case, success or failure would be greatly influenced by General Musharraf's role in the Bush war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. So Musharraf must be kept in tow behind whatever Bush does in Afghanistan or, to be more precise, in areas close to Pakistan's border with Afghanistan where the remnants of the two are suspected to be hiding.

There is no wiggle room for Musharraf in this tight scenario, no matter how the general's compromising role may increase the chances of a flash-point with the MMA government in NWFP.

So bluff, bluster and even outright blackmail of Musharraf is all fair in the repertoire of the likes of NYT. Which explains a series of front page 'scoops' in the past few days naming Pakistan as the source that supplied centrifuge technology to Iran, North Korea and Libya. The blame game is on with fervour.

For better or worse, and whether he likes it or not, General Musharraf's fate will be tied for the rest of 2004 with that of George Bush. His finest moment may already be behind the general. Don't blame him if he feels nostalgic about 2003. ■