

With Maulana in Delhi

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No private peace mission has ever created such a marvellous impact as has Maulana Fazlur Rehman's good will visit to India, beside usual controversy mostly generated by a section of the press that thrives on distortion and animosity. Quite remarkable is the confidence that the Maulana was able to create and win, despite representing a hawkish religious right. Most importantly, 'The Message' he has brought from Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, in fact for the man who matters, President Pervez Musharraf, if appropriately responded to, can break the impasse over Kashmir and, hopefully, pave the way for an overall thaw between India and Pakistan. How best can Pakistan's interests be served and how should the COAS-President respond?

Maulana was keen to undertake his peace mission soon after getting elected, but he got bogged down with domestic politics and rescheduled it after he did not get the timely clearance for Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Hind's delegation's visit to Pakistan. It was with the mutual arrangement between the two fraternal parties that the Maulana decided to undertake the visit with his own agenda to break the ice between the two countries. Maulana Fazlur Rehman had, of course, the tacit backing of his Mutahida Majlis-i-Amal's partners, including a more hawkish Jamaat-i-Islami. Aware of his national and religious limitations and sensitive to the delicate nature of his mission, the Maulana carefully prepared his mission statement before embarking on this crucial visit that he discussed, among others, with this scribe as well.

The mission statement that he articulated was as follows: One, his is a peace mission that will revolve around creating goodwill and he will avoid entering into polemics/controversies over different issues without, however, questioning the official standpoints or discussing domestic issues, such as on the LFO. Two, as opposed to the popular misconception that the Ulema always favour jihad everywhere and hate the peaceful settlement of disputes at

all times, the Maulana decided to highlight the distance his mainstream Deobandi party has been maintaining from the militants engaged in jihad in Kashmir while emphasising the imperative of a peaceful settlement of the dispute. Three, building support for the revival of a composite and sustainable dialogue between India and Pakistan on all issues without de-emphasising the need to address the conflict over Kashmir.

Accompanying Maulana to some meetings as a journalist, listening to the speeches he made and the interviews he gave, in my assessment the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) chief could not be derailed from the line he had set for himself by a very provocative and an ill-informed sections of the Indian media, except at two occasions. Even on these two occasions (*Aaj Tak* and Indo-Asian News Service), these were the interviewers who forced their words into his mouth about the "permanence of LoC as a solution" and "*Akhand Bharata*". Even in his interview with *Aaj Tak* what Maulana had knowingly said on the LoC carried two critical riders: Acceptance by the government of Pakistan and the Kashmiris, who reject it as a solution. He never entertained the notions of "*Akhand Bharata*". What he had actually emphasised was joining of hands at South Asian (SAARC) level to face the challenges posed by a uni-polar world. Not letting the only super-power (without confronting it or making a common front against it) exploit the cleavages between India and Pakistan, the Maulana's thesis for a greater South Asian cooperation won him laurels across all political divides in India who agree to keep the US at a distance.

His overall performance and most utterances were on the dotted line that overturned the dice set against him by a press that first received and painted him as the godfather of all militants, including quite erroneously his alleged patronage of Harkat-ul-Ansar/Mujahideen or Jaish-i-Mohammed that he had never provided at any point of time. He remained consistent in building bridges for peaceful settlement of disputes without diluting the nature of conflict and disputes between the two countries.

The Maulana did not once ignore the fact that the settlement has to take place between the two governments and, on Kashmir, by addressing the aspirations of the Kashmiri people, while emphatically conveying the message that his party will not be the spoiler if the two establishments took the road for peaceful resolution of the disputes.

Logically, the Maulana's resolve not to let the spoilers have a field day have upset the hawkish elements on both sides and a section of Indian press provided the ammunition, by distorting statements on LoC or amity in the sub-continent, to their Pakistani counterparts who ran mad by picking up those misquotes he immediately denied in India. Since the 'Ulema diplomacy' has staged a coup against the hardliners and the rogue elements who do not want to see the space for negotiated settlement expand, they have gone berserk against the Maulana who has stood by his commitment for peace with India on his journey back home, even after the militants showed their armed dismay and he faced a hostile questioning by a section of the press. By not retracting from the position he took in New Delhi, the Maulana has established the credibility of his stand and statesman like stature across the subcontinent.

The 'Ulema diplomacy' however, made the real breakthrough, after Fazlur Rehman's remarkable address at the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and a luncheon with Mr R K Mishra, when Prime Minister Vajpayee invited the JUI delegation. As both leaders were able to build a good personal chemistry, they did not find much problem in skipping the official positions. The thoughts Mr Vajpayee shared with the Maulana over Kashmir are, being considered by close quarters, markedly different from what is incompatibly insisted by the adversaries at the official level or closer to what General Musharraf says to rule out the options not acceptable to both sides. Indeed, the Maulana confided to this scribe without divulging the details, Prime Minister Vajpayee has sent "The Message" for President Musharraf that, in his view, can set the ball rolling. Both on the resumption of

talks and Mr Vajpayee's participation in the 12th SAARC Summit, Maulana got a positive response from the Indian Prime Minister.

If the statement of Prime Minister Jamali is an indicator, after Maulana Fazlur Rehman took him into confidence about his visit and subsequently after Mr Jamali briefed the President on Ulema's visit, the first official response that "the Maulana's recent visit will help improve relations with New Delhi" is encouraging. The talks, in the words of Mr Vajpayee "*Agra mein bat bante bante bigar gai*", can now be resumed if President Musharraf considers the message in its full implications without misconstruing it as his weakness.

But the problem that remains to be sorted out is that how to proceed and through what channels. The officials' level talks must resume, but they will move at a snail pace and will not make any breakthrough over major contentious issues. On making some substantial progress over the Kashmir dispute, General Musharraf is so keen about, and finding a historical breakthrough, Prime Minister Vajpayee is so eager, both the leaders should have special emissaries who ought to intensively engage to iron out the irritants and find solutions to the intractable issues, side by side the composite official dialogue. The roadmap may only emerge after General Musharraf and Mr Vajpayee nominate their special emissaries. Most difficult is the time factor since Mr Vajpayee is left with little time, if he doesn't win the 2004 elections. The best time to nominate the emissaries will be October this year, after the elections in four states of India.

This is the time that the COAS-President responds and establish personal channel of communication with the Indian Prime Minister. Otherwise, if more time is wasted, General Musharraf may not find a statesman like interlocutor after eight months. If both the leaders found the emissaries of Maulana Fazlur Rehman's stature, one wonders why both sides could not resolve even the most intractable issues and to the satisfaction of all sides.

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