

PAKISTAN

A passion for selling ourselves cheaply

AYAZ AMIR

It is a moot point which crumbled faster: the twin towers of the World Trade Centre or the imposing ramparts of Pakistani pride?

Just a few threatening statements from President Bush and Gen Powell and Pakistan's military government, usually so tough at home, conceded everything the Americans were asking for.

We did not say, as forgivingly we might have, that we would look into the US demands. We did not say that we would consult public opinion before formulating our response. To some extraordinary outbursts of arrogance from Washington we succumbed first and only later was a show made of consulting leaders of public opinion.

We buckled under pressure. Alas, no other construction fits our swift capitulation. Perhaps, as General Musharraf was beaten at pains to explain, we had no other choice. But must we have bent that swiftly? Even if only for form's sake, couldn't we have paused to take breath before agreeing to every last item on America's imperious list of demands?

And, pray, what precisely were we afraid of? That the US in its blind anger would make an example of us, flattening our airfields, destroying our installations, taking out our nuclear strategic assets? These wretched assets were supposed to be our ultimate defence. Now they turn out to be our biggest weakness, useless against the crude blackmail to which we have been subjected.

Sadly, it's all in character. After India's nuclear tests in May 1998, a few threatening statements from that side threw us into a panic and made us carry out our own tests. Restraint would have won us inter-

national kudos and put India in a spot. But out of paranoia we frittered away an historic opportunity. It makes one wonder as to the kind of people we are. Listening to our bombast anyone would take us to be Greeks of the Homeric period. Anyone examining closely our national record would be struck by our pusillanimity. And our ability to shoot ourselves in the foot.

But I bet the Americans who have a fair measure of Pakistan's capacity to withstand stress are not surprised. We have always been eager to serve their interests, often at great cost to ourselves and mostly without getting much in return. Once again we are gearing up for the same role despite bitter experience of having been repeatedly used and repeatedly abandoned.

What handsome revenge for America's debacle in Vietnam was the savaging of the Soviet bear in Afghanistan. A handful of Pakistani generals enriched themselves during that momentous struggle. But what did the country get? Guns, violence, drugs and a sea of refugees. All the glory America's, all the recurring costs Pakistan's. Anyone could be forgiven for thinking that history is being repeated.

Surely, a measure of self-serving calculation is involved in the decision General Musharraf has taken on behalf of the nation: a vision of gratitude dollars pouring in, of our debt burden easing, of India being outsmarted, and of Pakistan being treated as honoured ally instead of a country down on its luck. But what did we get before that we are hoping for the wheel to turn this time?

We don't know what the US eventually decides. Afghanistan is not the easiest of battlefields and sending in ground troops carries enormous risks. But we do know that Pakistani territory and facilities

will be used for any strike on Afghanistan. Such a concession, if at all to be given, should have come at the end of a process of mutual discussion and consultations, not right at the outset as we have done, hoping that the US out of the goodness of its heart will reward us later. We don't even know who'll take care of the refugees pouring into Pakistan. Should we then have pressed the panic button so quickly?

Granted that it was our support for the Taliban which brought us into the focus of American pressure. But who was pushing the support-Taliban policy? The military, the ISI, the national security establishment. The people of Pakistan are now paying the price of this folly.

There was no shortage of voices questioning the wisdom of our Taliban policy: that it was fanning the flames of religious extremism at home and proving a source of disquiet for our friends abroad. The notion of 'strategic depth', so beloved of GHQ, also made no sense because blind support of the Taliban meant not enhanced defence but importing another set of problems into our midst. But the experts remained unfazed. Now under duress we are doing what should have been done long ago: distancing ourselves from the Taliban. At long last the right policy but for the wrong reasons.

We are being told, however, that if we had not acted first India, which was rolling out the red carpet for the US, offering it every last facility, would have stolen a march on us, leaving us out in the cold to face American anger alone.

What nonsense is this? Must we see ourselves in India's mirror always? True, in order to paint Pakistan into a corner, India has tried to pander to American sensibili-

ties (to its chagrin without much success). We had a duty to protect our flanks. But we could have paused for a moment.

From which bases in the Rajasthan desert can a ground assault be mounted on Afghanistan? The key to any land action against Afghanistan is Pakistan and if the Americans are serious about any such action they have the option to use Pakistani facilities. Had our nerve held we could have played for time in order to see what the US was willing to give in return. Admittedly, Pakistan is not Vietnam or Cuba. Our leaders do not take Ho Chi Minh as their model. Still, must we have caved in so quickly?

How would the Lion of Damascus, Hafez Al-Assad, have played his cards in such a crisis? He would have spoken no unnecessary word, would have guarded his silence like the Sphinx and made the paladins of the State Department and the Pentagon come to Islamabad, refusing only to meet the American official (was it Armitage?) who said it was for Pakistan to decide whether it wanted to live in the 21st century or the Stone Age. Credible threats Assad would have weighed carefully. Arrogance he would have treated with contempt. Above all, he would not have displayed his hand prematurely.

This is not a summons to arms or any misplaced arrogance of our own. The winds blowing across our country may be too strong for us to deflect. But there is no reason for us to sully national honour by behaving in too supine a manner. In any case we are confusing two separate issues: support for the Taliban and bowing before American demands. Our Taliban policy was a prescription for folly. Even if we have friendly

feelings for the people of Afghanistan, Pakistan cannot be sacrificed for the sake of any other country. But this is one thing, offering Pakistani territory for use against Afghanistan quite another. Have we carefully pondered the consequences of this move? How will our people take it? And what will be the cost to our already battered pride as a nation?

We are being told to be wise. Wisdom does not lie in acting cravenly. What good is our half-a-million man army and our famous nuclear deterrent if in every crisis we are to crack under the first strain? This does not mean we take on the Americans.

There is no need to tempt the gods or please our enemies by doing that. It only means that we let the Americans know, politely but firmly, that while we are only too ready to do the right thing, preferably under United Nations auspices, we are not willing to be pushed around or sell ourselves cheaply.

Was it a sense of opportunity lost which made General Musharraf look so tense when he addressed the nation? It was not one of his best performances and certainly was a far cry from his conquest of Agra. He asked the nation to trust him. The nation has no choice: he is the captain on deck and it is he who must take the ship of state into safer waters.

It would help, however, if even at this stage he opens the shut portals of his regime a bit to let in some fresh air so that decisions affecting the country's future are taken in a setting slightly broader than the cloistered world of the corps commanders.

This piece first appeared in the Dawn of Pakistan.

INDIA

Will Jayalalitha issue discourage corruption?

ZAGLUL AHMED CHOWDHURY

THE RESIGNATION OF SOUTHERN INDIAN state of Tamil Nadu's chief minister Jayaram Jayalalitha in the wake of the supreme court verdict invalidating her occupation of high office in the state because corruption should come as an eye-opener to the politicians in South Asia and elsewhere.

All eyes were fixed at the court verdict and once the apex court of India disapproved the chief ministership by a person who could not contest elections due to criminal conviction, confusion and debate were set at rest on whether a corrupt politician can hold high public office even after being convicted on moral turpitude.

The landmark judgement would hopefully discourage politicians indulging in corruption taking advantage of people's confidence not only in India but all South Asian nations where morality in public life is a suspect and many politicians are seen as immoral while the few honest are greatly admired. Ms. Jayalalitha, a popular politician and former chief minister of the important Tamil Nadu state, could not contest the recent state assembly elections as her nomination papers were rejected for being convicted in corruption cases.

As chief minister a few years ago, she was well known for her lavish life and often used to be called as "Imelda Marcos of the East", an euphemism of corruption

and high-flying lifestyle of former first lady of the Philippines.

When president Ferdinand Marcos was forced to quit power and leave the country facing a pro-democracy movement led by Corazon Aquino, an appalling picture of the wealth of the fallen president and his family came to the fore. But what was more grueling information the personal belongings of the first which covered several hundred pairs of costly shoes along with similar kind of luxury items including very expensive rings. Obviously, all these were procured at the state expenditures or ill-gotten money.

As chief minister Jayalalitha too was known for her luxurious life. The number of guests and cost of a marriage festival of her adopted son was a matter of talk in India in those days since it was simply unbelievably enormous. She is also easily identifiable for her penchant for costly sarees and other form of luxury. This was one of the factors for the defeat of her party in the elections that followed more than five years ago when rival DMK won. But the DMK and its leader chief minister Karunanidhi over the last five years lost popularity giving way to revival of Jayalalitha's AIADMK party which made a clear sweep in the state polls that took place a few months ago. But the party supremo could not contest the elections because of earlier conviction in the corruption cases. Nevertheless, Jayalalitha did not hesitate to take up the position of the chief minister as the constitution permits a non-

legislator to head the government provided he or she becomes a member of legislature within six months of taking up the position.

But Jayalalitha had little scope to become a member of assembly since her very candidature in any by-election, which could have given her the opportunity to become a legislator, would be unacceptable. The matter went to courts and finally the Supreme Court ruled that she cannot continue as the chief minister without being a member of the state assembly and with the conviction in corruption cases.

Indeed, this had been a momentous judgement which made many politicians in India sit up. While becoming chief minister, Jayalalitha had argued that people had given a massive mandate in favour of the party which she leads and this should be seen as verdict of the people against the conviction that the court had handed down.

This argument finally could not convince the court which found no rationale in the position that a win in the elections or popularity can upset or obviate the conviction on moral ground. Jayalalitha resigned immediately after the verdict. Many eyes brows were raised when was sworn in as the chief minister despite the conviction as it was almost clear that she could not have continued in the position for long. Her own willingness to head the state government was seen by many as something irresistible greed for power.

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tioned her plans at that time.

The decision of the then governor of the state Fatima Bibi to appoint her as the chief minister was also not without controversy. But eventually, Jayalalitha had to go and this was expected. Probity in public life particularly in the democracies is an issue which the politicians should honour and abide by.

Unfortunately, many politicians give a damn to this noble principle in politics. The lust and sheer greed for wealth have landed many notable political figures into trouble. The youthful slain former prime minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, once known as "Mr. Clean", was tainted by allegations of corruption in politics. The lust and sheer greed for wealth have landed many notable political figures into trouble. The youthful slain former prime minister of India Rajiv Gandhi, once known as "Mr. Clean", was tainted by allegations of corruption in politics.

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national elections because of his conviction in corruption cases. Allegations of corruption are there against both the former prime ministers, who are nation's leading politicians, involving purchase of Boeing aircraft, MIG combat planes, frigate etc. Their family members, near and dear ones are also accused to have been benefited financially when they were in power. Many other politicians like former key ministers are not immune of this allegation.

Such corruptions are also galore in the Southeast Asian countries.

The verdict by the Indian supreme court forcing Jayalalitha Jayaram to quit should dampen the keenness of corruption and immorality in public life although it can be safely concluded that the lust for money and wealth is such that very few people can really check this temptation while having the opportunities.

We have politicians in the region whose integrity has set high standard of honesty in politics but their number is very small. It is irony that the corrupt politicians shed tears for the "people" but often enrich their own pockets in the name of these hapless people. A section of officials and others are not excluded from this menace. Hopefully, Jayalalitha's case would serve a notice on the need for corruption-free politics and administration.

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury is Senior Special Correspondent of BSS.

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