

Bowing to the mighty Ayatollah



FAREED ZAKARIA

writes from America

WITH both its authority and its transition plans in jeopardy, the administration has decided the United Nations has some legitimacy after all.

There really should be no contest. On one side is history's most important superpower, victorious in war, ruling Iraq with 150,000 troops and funding its reconstruction to the tune of \$20 billion this year. On the other side is an aging cleric with no formal authority, no troops, little money, who is unwilling to even speak in public. Yet last June, when Ayatollah Sistani made it known that he didn't like the American plan to transfer power to Iraqis, the plan collapsed. And last week, when Sistani announced that he is still unhappy with the new American proposal, Paul Bremer rushed to Washington for consultations. What does this man have that the United States doesn't?

Legitimacy. Sistani is regarded by Iraqi Shiites as the most learned cleric in the country. He is also seen as having been uncorrupted by Saddam Hussein's reign. "During the Iran-Iraq War, Sistani managed to demonstrate that he could be controlled neither by Saddam nor by his fellow ayatollahs in Iran, which has given him enormous

American policymakers made two grave mistakes after the war. The first was to occupy the country with too few troops, creating a security vacuum. This image of weakness was reinforced when Washington caved in to Sistani's objections last June, junked its original transition plan and sped things up to coincide with the American elections. The second mistake was to dismiss from the start the need for allies and international institutions.

credibility," says Yitzhak Nakash, the leading authority on Iraqi Shiites.

The United States fears that he will brand them as colonialists and the new transition government as a puppet regime. American officials know these few words could well derail their plans. The occupation can survive an insurgency, but it cannot survive 10 countrywide protest marches with thousands chanting 'Colonialists go home!'

From the start, the Pentagon planners (or nonplanners) believed the United States would have no legitimacy problems in Iraq. "We will be greeted as liberators," Vice President Cheney famously predicted. When urged after the war to transfer some authority to the United Nations to gain legitimacy, administration officials were dismissive in public and scathing in private. "We have far more legitimacy than the UN," one senior official told me last June. To discredit the idea of internationalisation, Defence Department officials kept insisting that their goal was to transfer power not to the United Nations but to the Iraqis. "No foreigners can be in charge of (determining how elections will be held)," said Paul Wolfowitz.

Well, the Iraqis heard these speeches, too. The Governing Council, many of whose members have little chance of winning an election, said, "Transfer power to us now!" The Shiite leaders said,

"Hold elections now!" knowing that they were the only politically organised force in the country. So the administration has decided that the United Nations has legitimacy after all. Along with its allies on the Governing Council, Washington is now asking Kofi Annan to give the United Nations' blessings to its plan, explain that

elections cannot be held precipitously and get involved in the entire political process. The columnist William Safire, who has long ridiculed the need for a UN role, is now sheepishly asking if Annan could do us a favour, please. The foreigners are being invited in. It might be too little, too late.

A power struggle has begun in Iraq, as could have been predicted - indeed was predicted. Sistani is becoming more vocal and political because he faces a challenge to his leadership from the more activist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. "Al-Sadr does not have Sistani's reputation or training as a scholar and thus presents himself as a populist



Shiite demonstrators in Najaf (inset: Sistani)

leader who will look after Shia political interests," says Nakash. It's turning into a contest to see who can stand up to the Americans more vociferously and appeal to Shiite fears. The Iraqi Shiites are deeply suspicious that the United States will betray them, as it did in 1992 after the Gulf War, or that it will foist favoured exiles like Ahmad Chalabi upon them. Sistani recently told Iraq's tribal leaders that they should take power, not "those who came from abroad."

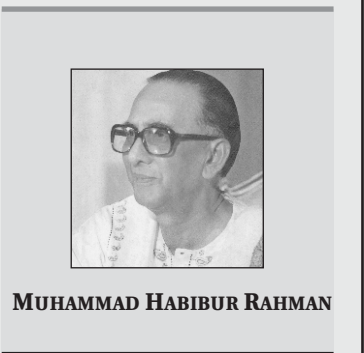
The tragedy is that while Sistani's fears are understandable, Washington's phased transition makes great sense. It allows for time to build institutions, form political parties and reform the agencies of government. An immediate transfer will ensure that the political contest will overwhelm all this institutional reform. But Washington lacks the basic tool it needs to negotiate with the locals: legitimacy. Belatedly it now recognises that the United Nations can arbitrate political problems without being accused of being a coloniser.

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Queries on Cleopatra



MUHAMMAD HABIBUR RAHMAN

She is an avid reader of her hero Julius Caesar. She casually threw the question in the air: "When Caesar was killed where was Cleopatra?" I thought she was Cleo of Petra. I was called a fool and told it was not e but a! Patra. You need not try to further ascertain. Cleo, however, she may amuse you, Is not the muse of Patra, that's certain?

The name Cleopatra had one spelling, but pronounced Differently three different ways By her hopeful lovers who flirted, fretted and flounced

In Caesar and Cleopatra George B. Shaw did the first part of her story. In Caesar and Cleopatra.

William Shakespeare did the last part of her story. I am telling all these after I have aroused the ire Of that avid reader of Julius Caesar

Who casually threw the question in the air: "When Caesar was killed was Cleopatra in Rome?"

She did not ask me the question to answer. I was a fool; I looked up and found the answer In a little Encyclopedia, yes, Cleopatra was in Rome.

She was mad, being deprived of reading a hefty tome On ancient Rome ---- Rome that was Rome. She is a great book-lover.

She loves to read a book cover to cover. She hates skipping.

She hates photocopying.

She hates to deprive the author of his copyright. I must say, she is absolutely right.

I deeply felt sorry for depriving her

Of reading more about Cleopatra and Caesar.

In future I promise I shall never volunteer

Information, even a correct one to clear steer.

I shall keep silence, but still for my affection

For her I may choose to stand by her in attention.

Soon the book-lover casually threw a question,

Though not specifically for my attention:

"One of the two needles of Cleopatra

Is on the Thames Embankment in London.

I wonder where is the other one!"

Did she say it aside or did she soliloquize?

Should I keep quite, and let me be rather wise?

Should I say Cleopatra's Needles couldn't be found?

In the haystacks of the hoary history around

Or in the hefty tome on the ancient Rome

-- Rome that was Rome?

I kept quiet and did not say her to consider

That it was rather a recent story of loot and plunder.

She looked up and feigned searching the ceiling

And repeated the question with a troubled feeling:

"One of the two needles of Cleopatra

Is on the Thames Embankment in London.

I wonder where is the other one!"

I do not know when I involuntarily spoke out, "Hark!

It might be in New York's Central Park."

She never liked the books of easy to find references.

Was she then really within her senses?

When she said rather regally, "Good! Very good!"

Am I to believe that those words she did utter ally,

As I always find it very difficult to understand her?

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America-China war of words over Hong Kong's rights to self-rule

A.H. JAFFOR ULLAH

THE recent episode of harsh diplomatic exchanges between Washington and Beijing over democracy movement in Hong Kong drew the attention of many people. Only a month or so ago the Bush Administration was lambasting Taiwanese President taking China's side over the issue of Taiwan's desire to call for a vote to ask China to dismantle rockets aimed at the island. This time the U.S. was using harsh words against Beijing in favour of Hong Kong's democracy movement. The Sino-American relationship has many faces, after all.

We all know by now that People's Republic of China is the major trading partner of America. The Chinese factories are humming year round to make all kinds of consumer goods found in 'Dollar General Store', even freebies given at McDonald fast-food outlets in kiddy's happy meal box. China's economy is still growing at 8.5 per cent clip, which is unheard of in an emerging nation. The Chinese government should be happy about their GDP growth rate. Nonetheless, why are the Chinese authorities throwing diplomatic volleys at the Bush Administration? Something is amiss here. The Chinese government is very sensitive about Hong Kong especially when the issue is democracy in the recently annexed land.

Diplomatic skirmishes between Washington and Beijing started in the second week of January over the issue of how to govern Hong Kong. The local people wanted a democratically elected government, which the Beijing authority would not approve at this time. The State Department's spokesperson Mr. Richard Boucher used some harsh words to show America's support for the democracy movement that is rife in the island of Hong Kong.

Before getting into the issue of the status of democracy in Hong Kong, some primer about the island is appropriate. Hong Kong used to be a British crown colony until 1997. It is located on the southeast coast of China south-east of Chinese province of Guangzhou. The island and the vicinity was occupied by the British during the Opium War (1839-1842) and ceded to them by the Treaty of Nanjing (1842). Other portions of the colony were acquired in 1860 and in 1898 by a 99-year lease. The colony was reverted to Chinese sovereignty in 1997. Hong Kong's territory is only about 422 square miles. Over five million people call it home. Thus, the population density is one of the highest in the world. Victoria is the capital.

Over five and half years ago at midnight on July 1, 1997, the crown colony of Hong Kong was officially reverted to Chinese sovereignty, ending 156 years of British rule. Steven Levine wrote

A war of words recently broke out between U.S. and China over the issue of democracy in Hong Kong. While America believes that the people of Hong Kong should have a right to choose their leader democratically, the Beijing authorities feel that it is an internal matter of China. They rather would delay the process and in their defence say that the island's political structure must evolve gradually. The bilateral relationship between America and China is not going to change because of the diplomatic skirmishes. This is a sideshow at its best.

in the yearbook in 1998 Encyclopedia Britannica the following: "After a formal handover, the colony became the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of the People's Republic of China. The ceremony culminated a 13-year transition that had been initiated by the Sino-British Joint Declaration on the Question of Hong Kong, signed by the heads of the two governments in December 1984. The agreement stipulated that under Chinese rule the HKSAR would enjoy a high degree of autonomy, except in matters of foreign relations and defence, and that the social and economic systems as well as the lifestyle in Hong Kong would remain unchanged for 50 years after 1997. Many observers, however, expressed considerable skepticism about China's pledge to abide by the "one country, two systems" plan outlined in the agreement. They feared that China would drastically curtail the rights and freedoms of Hong Kong residents."

The prediction made by many Sino-experts came true. The Beijing Government is very tightlipped about the status of democracy in Hong Kong. An appointed person by the name Tung Chee-hwa now governs the island. And this is the bone of contention amongst Hong Kong citizens. They want a participatory democracy as opposed to

governance by an appointed authority. The democracy movement in Hong Kong is alive and well. In July 2003, a protest march in Hong Kong by about 500,000 residents raised an eyebrow amongst Beijing politicians. They did not like the look of it but they chose to remain reticent about it, which is a typical Chinese style. Again, on New Year's Day nearly 100,000 people demonstrated in Hong Kong to demand full democracy. This was the biggest protest in the territory since the July demonstration, which shocked Beijing leaders.

On January 9, 2004, the British Trade Secretary, Ms. Patricia Hewitt said that Hong Kong should follow the wishes of its citizens and move toward greater democracy in line with the constitution agreed before Britain handed the territory back to China in 1997. On the same day, U.S. State Department spokesman Mr. Richard Boucher expressed the United States' "strong support for democracy through electoral reform and universal suffrage in Hong Kong," saying that would stimulate the territory's economic development. Mr. Boucher also added that America believes in democracy and the Hong Kong people and the Hong Kong government need to start addressing the democracy issue. The U.S. government will support

the wishes of the people of Hong Kong. After all, the prosperity and stability of Hong Kong is of interest to America.

This not the first time the U.S. government has criticised the Beijing authorities over the democracy issue both in the mainland and in the island of Hong Kong. The Chinese government has hard time digesting the criticism leveled at them. Beijing administration often insists that such comments are interference in its domestic policies. Kong Quan, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, was quoted by the Xinhua News Agency as responding to Mr. Boucher's comment on Hong Kong's political development. The Chinese spokesperson retorted to U.S. allegation as follows: "Hong Kong affairs (are) an internal issue of China, and the Chinese government firmly opposes any foreign government interference in the affairs of Hong Kong in any form." The Chinese official position is that the island's political structure should evolve in an orderly manner. In other words, Chinese government is in no mood to allow democracy in Hong Kong right away.

As I have mentioned earlier, Hong Kong, a former British colony, reverted to Chinese rule six years ago in 1997. Hong Kong is now a special adminis-

trative region of China governed under a doctrine known as "one country, two systems." Chairman Deng Xiaoping developed the doctrine under which the Chinese government has allowed it to operate semi-independently. Incidentally, Hong Kong runs a thriving stock market whose index "Hang Seng" is a barometer of the economy of the region and is widely followed by the financial analysts all over. The island is one of the financial nerve centers in the Far East only next to Tokyo. Thus, the Chinese authorities did not want to disturb the free market demeanor of Hong Kong.

The China-U.S. relationship -- politically, at least -- is reasonably stable for over two years, though the economic relationship between the two has become strenuous -- grown over a U.S. trade deficit, which is growing month after month. Incidentally, the Bush administration wants that Beijing float its currency.

Many western nations feel that the Chinese government is dragging its feet over the issue of how much democracy they should allow for the folks living in Hong Kong. It should be pointed out that Britain drew up the Basic Law with China before the handover to ensure the territory would have a high degree of autonomy under Chinese rule. Nonetheless, the constitution stipulates that Beijing has the final say over any electoral changes. In his policy address, Mr. Tung Chee-hwa made no mention of a timetable for public consultation on democratic reforms. That has angered many citizens and raising fears that any reforms would be dictated by Beijing. Incidentally, Mr. Boucher's statement was a near verbatim copy of comments made by deputy State Department spokesman Adam Ereli on January 2, 2004, that prompted a protest from the Chinese foreign ministry, which labeled the remarks "interference." Pro-democracy groups in Hong Kong are demanding the government and Beijing commit to a firm timetable for implementing political reforms, including direct elections of the island's next leader by 2007.

In summary, a war of words recently broke out between U.S. and China over the issue of democracy in Hong Kong. While America believes that the people of Hong Kong should have a right to choose their leader democratically, the Beijing authorities feel

that it is an internal matter of China. They rather would delay the process and in their defence say that the island's political structure must evolve gradually. The bilateral relationship between America and China is not going to change because of the diplomatic skirmishes. This is a sideshow at its best. Notwithstanding the difference in views regarding Hong Kong's right to elect a governor democratically, both the U.S. and China need each other for maintaining a status quo in trade and investment. Let us forget, China has become the leading trade partner of America.

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'Greater Israel' through expulsion of Palestinians?

BILLY I AHMED

THE so-called targeted assassinations of Palestinian militants and leaders and the daily repression that has claimed some 3,000 Palestinian lives in three years, are not blueprint primarily for security, but are rather aimed at the systematic expropriation of the Palestinian people. Sharon and his right-wing Zionist allies are determined to sabotage any possibility of creating an independent Palestinian state and remain committed to achieving a "greater Israel" through the expulsion of Palestinians from their land.

The military attacks of neither the Israeli regime nor the pathetic promises of the powerless Palestinian authority to rein in its militants will adjudicate the subjacent political onerousness and social deprivation that have given rise to the trepidation of suicide bombings. These attacks are themselves the product of the intense anger and desperation of a population of 3.5 million Palestinians who have been reduced to the status of mortified prisoners in their own land.

Hanadi Jaradat, was identified as the Haifa suicide bomber. A 29-year-old woman from the West Bank town of Jenin who was studying to be a lawyer saw her own brother and cousin killed by Israeli troops outside their home in June last year, the Israeli military occupied the town, subjecting civilian homes to tank fire and killing or wounding civilians. In the backwash of the Haifa bombing, Israeli tanks moved back into Jenin, imposing a curfew on the population and razing the home of Jaradat's family.

These perpetual repressive measures by the Israeli occupation forces have turned the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip living in torture and agony.

The arrant economic and social impact of the occupation was covered in a 25-page draft report prepared by UN special envoy Jean Ziegler that was recently revealed to the press. It inculcates that Israel's policy of

"collective punishment" has disrupted food production and distribution to the extent that 22 percent of Palestinian children under five suffer severe malnutrition and most families have only one meal a day. It chronicles such conditions as "absurd" given the proven ability of the land to produce an adequate food supply.

"There can be no justification for harsh internal closures that prevent people from having access to food and water, otherwise the imposition of such military measures are amounting to what has been called a 'policy' of starvation," the report added.

Since the October 04 blast that killed 19 people the Sharon regime has accelerated its attack on the Palestinians, exposing a series of drives that threaten a gargantuan extension of Israel's snatching of land in the occupied territories.

Prior to Haifa blast, Israel continued to implant 400,000 settlers with strong-willed auxiliary backup into the West Bank, East Jerusalem. The 4th Geneva Convention unequivocally expounds that it is illegal for the occupying power (Israel) to relocate any of its citizens into these occupied lands. This has brought a scenario in which foundation perhaps of an achievable Palestinian state looks bleak.

Further, the Israeli cabinet revealed plans to construct another 600 residences in three illegal settlements inside the West Bank. While the so-called "roadmap" nourished by Washington as the path to a chattered, two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict demands a pause to new settlement activity, the Bush administration described the expansion merely as "unhelpful." The road map's objective was the establishment of a Palestinian state of undefined powers and uncertain borders alongside the Jordan River and the Mediterranean, but Haifa killing by the Palestinian and retaliation by Israeli bombing in Syria indicate the envisaged roadmap is grounded. And all that is now history.

Sharon's cabinet also disclosed its raison d'être to move ahead with a

"security wall" that cuts deeply into the occupied West Bank, effectively grabbing control of large swathes of Palestinian land. According to the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem, the wall will leave more than 80,000 Palestinians stratagemed either behind the wall or surrounded by security fences on all sides. The effect will be to cruminate these people to a crabbed economic and social limbo, cut off from the rest of the Palestinian population, their work, schools, jobs and family members, while prohibited from entering Israel itself. Fully a quarter of a million Palestinians living in east Jerusalem will also be cut off from the rest of the West Bank.

A further spunk to bolster as a security measure is to extend protective fences around every one of the 170 illegal Israeli settlements scattered across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Each fence is to encompass a 400-meter radius around the settlement, trenchantly seizing control of large areas of land and further disrupting the lives of Palestinians under occupation.

US aggression (Iraq) has fortified Israel to reinforce its brutal crackdown on the Palestinians, and now launch military attacks on neighbouring Arab countries. Defending its action at the UN, Israel accused those condemning its attack on Syria of engaging in a "double standard." The body cannot allow some nations to "protect its citizens against terrorism," while gainsaying the right to others, the Israeli ambassador declared. The statement amounted to using the US war of aggression against Iraq as a paradigm to justify whatever military attacks Israel sees fit -- a ratiocination that the Bush administration embraces.

Washington should bear in mind that out-and-out support for Israel, no matter what crimes it commits against the Palestinian people or neighbouring countries, poses the direct threat that US soldiers will be pushed into another unprovoked war to kill and be killed.

Billy I Ahmed is a researcher.