

Musharraf's visit to Australia: Turnaround of political fortune



HARUN UR RASHID

PRESIDENT Musharraf visited Australia in mid June for two days. This is the first visit of any head of state or government of Pakistan to pay an official visit since its independence in 1947. He was cordially received by Prime Minister John Winston Howard and local media coverage was good for an Asian leader. Generally leaders from South Asia do not receive high profile in Australia. Australia's foreign relations in Asia are largely confined to South East and North Asia, partly because it is security and commercially related aspects that are given importance.

With the visit of the Pakistan's military President comes to mind what a difference a couple of years can make in politics. Before 9/11, Pakistan's standing was at rock bottom because General Musharraf seized power in October 1999 in a military coup, dismissing the elected Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif. General Musharraf was ignored by most leaders of Western countries. During the election campaign in 2000, President Bush was unable to recall the name of Pakistan's mili-

itary ruler. (He knows now very well). The 1998 nuclear testing by Pakistan in response to India's had placed Pakistan under economic sanctions by the US, European Union and Australia. Economically, it lurched from debt crisis to debt crisis.

Taking the cue from Washington, Australia's response to Pakistan's nuclear tests was one of the strongest among the Western nations. Australia not only recalled its High Commissioner from Islamabad but also suspended bilateral, defence relations with Pakistan, including the recall of Australia's Defence Adviser stationed in Islamabad.

Furthermore it withdrew its Defence Force personnel training in Pakistan and cancelled its decision to double aid to Pakistan. The visits of Parliamentary delegation, ministerial and senior officials to Pakistan were halted. The Foreign Minister conveyed to the Pakistan High Commission in Canberra its "strong condemnation of Pakistan's action".

When General Musharraf seized power, it was regarded as a pariah state and with the active support of Australia, Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations. Furthermore Pakistan's missile programme which involved technology transfers not only from China but from North Korea as well, Australia made most unhappy about Pakistan.

Rise of Musharraf

Why was the change of attitude of its? It is simply because Washington cordially embraced President Musharraf after 9/11 and President Bush welcomed Musharraf to Camp

BOTTOM LINE

September 11 has transformed the alliance of the US. Those who were friends before 9/11 have distanced from foreign policy of the Bush administration and those that were ignored or deliberately marginalised by the US became friends of the US. Both Britain and Australia look up to the US for their friends.

David in 2002 with the announcement of aid package worth US\$3.5 billion. President Bush said: "President Musharraf is courageous leader and a friend of the United States."

If Washington could make Pakistan a close ally and President Musharraf a friend, how could Australia lag behind as Australia's Prime Minister John Howard is one of the closest allies of President Bush after British Prime Minister Tony Blair. (Howard strongly supported the Iraqi war against the wishes of many people in Australia).

The same Prime Minister John Howard and the same Foreign Minister Alexander Downer received warmly the same President Musharraf with all the protocol needed to impress the President during his two-day visit to Australia on 15-16 June. When the President spoke before them, reportedly he received standing ovation. Such rare treatment for an Asian leader, in particular from South Asia, is unique in this country.

The ceremonial functions held for the President has demonstrated that he is not only welcome in Australia but what an outstanding leader he has been. Both Howard and Downer were all praise for his

vision, determination and above all his 'commitment to democracy.' His role to combat terrorism has been profusely praised.

The General who was marginalised by the West including Australia until 9/11 is being welcomed by the same set of countries. Why? Not for his commitment to democracy because Pakistan is virtually a military dictatorship with a veneer of democratic reforms. The Constitution was changed to empower the President to dismiss the Prime Minister and the Parliament. He wears the uniform of the Army Chief which he promised to relinquish at the end of December 2004 but he changed his mind. This is democracy Pakistani-style.

Yet the US and Australia admire him because he switched his support from the Taliban to the Karzai regime and supported the US on war on terrorism in Afghanistan. Pakistan has been the transiting country for many US troops (Afghanistan being a land-locked country). Many terrorist suspects have been transferred to Washington from Pakistan. He is the key ally of the US on the war on terrorism.

Another plus point for President Musharraf is that Pakistan's geo-strategic location is a significant

factor at a time when its neighbourhood is rocked by militant Islamic movement. Pakistan's neighbours are Iran, Afghanistan and India. China has been a long-standing ally.

There is also another fact that Osama Bin Laden has yet to be captured and Pakistan can play a very important role in the matter. Some analysts say that Osama Bin Laden is not hiding in border areas but is believed to be hiding within urban areas of Pakistan with the

support of Islamic fundamentalists. Many personnel of Pakistan army support Osama Bin Laden and strongly oppose President Musharraf's policies. There have been two attempts on his life and he had to leave the residence of the Army chief in Rawalpindi to safe area in Islamabad's President House.

Why is Pakistan not able to capture Bin Laden? Some say that once Osama Bin Laden is captured,



Musharraf in Australia: It makes a difference now.

Washington may lose interest in Pakistan. President Musharraf knows that Pakistan becomes strategically vital or irrelevant to Washington, depending on super-power's interests in the area. He did not forget how Pakistan and Afghanistan were totally forgotten when the Soviet troops were withdrawn in 1989. Pakistan had to deal with more than three million Afghan refugees and hardly any Western country came to aid to provide relief to Pakistan.

One fact must be noted that President Musharraf has been a pragmatic leader. He shuns extremism and is a strong advocate for moderate Islam. In 2002, he was courageous enough to criticise the Islamic world as "the poorest, the most illiterate, the most backward, the most unhealthy, the most unenlightened, the most deprived and the weakest of all the human race."

His support for the US brought political and economic dividends for the country. Flush with aid and having rescheduled its debt, Pakistan has been economically vibrant and GDP has increased and its foreign reserves are more than US\$10 billion. His rapprochement with India on Kashmir has been widely noted. He knows given the geo-political reality what Pakistan can or cannot achieve.

His speech in Sydney brings home to Australia's elite that poverty is the root of extremist elements in the world. He has said that terrorism is not to be regarded a predominantly strategic issue but the root causes lie in "the political disputes, deprivation and poverty that breed extremism". By mentioning "political

disputes", he cleverly indicated indirectly the issue of Kashmir and Palestinians.

Furthermore he reminded the audience that the emergence of Taliban in Afghanistan was in large a creation of the US which armed and trained Taliban and Osama Bin Laden's supporters to fight the then Soviet occupation in Afghanistan. To some of Australian political leaders, the blunt message was not comfortable because many including a few senior cabinet ministers have argued that poverty has nothing to do with terrorism.

Conclusion

September 11 has transformed the alliance of the US. Those who were friends before 9/11 have distanced from foreign policy of the Bush administration and those that were ignored or deliberately marginalised by the US became friends of the US. Both Britain and Australia look up to the US for their friends.

The nationalist British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston (1784-1865) once said: "We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow." The turnaround of political fortune of military leader President Musharraf of Pakistan in the eyes of Australia's leaders testifies to that truth.

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The 'Moderate Muslim Democracy'

Through the eyes of an expatriate

DR MOAZZEM HOSSAIN

THROUGH the courtesy of President Bill Clinton, Bangladesh is known in the West as a Moderate Muslim Democracy (MMD). During his visit in 2000, the former President maintained that being a Muslim majority nation, Bangladesh has successfully conducted a few general elections in the past and the country is being ruled with the mandate of the majority people since the 1991.

Some commentators including this author, however, went against the wishes of the President and insist elsewhere that democracy is always secular and liberal and there is no Muslim or Christian democracy. It seems, the President was willing to endorse those Muslim majority nations as MMD that have some sort of democratic practices in place, for example, holding general elections with regular interval. Bangladesh, Indonesia and Turkey (all Muslim majority nations) fall under this category. The exception is Malaysia. No one calls Malaysia an MMD (also a Muslim majority nation) since it has successfully implemented and followed almost all the basic principles of liberal democracy over the last half a century.

In this commentary, we would like to argue that even a so-called MMD is no longer justified for Bangladesh any more. The nation has made a U-

turn as far as the MMD is concerned and is approaching fast towards its destruction. This commentary further argues that the major features of Bangladesh's MMD are none other than: thriving corruption, notorious cadre politics and uncontrolled criminal activities, in short known as triple-C.

Bangladesh's last 34 years of existence have experienced three regimes with formidable contrast: a short-lived democracy immediately after independence (1971-75); Military-turn-Civil authoritarian regime (1975-90); and a so-called Moderate Muslim Democracy (1991-present).

Except for the initial democratic period, the duration of the authoritarian and MMD regimes are almost equal, 15 years each. It apparently shows that the triple-C has thrived at an unprecedented speed in the last 15 years (1991-present) compared to that of the preceding authoritarian regime (1975-90).

This is not what the people wanted when they brought down the Military-turn-Civilian rulers in 1990. Almost universally, the people extended full support to the politicians of both persuasions (AL and BNP). Consequently, both the parties by turn ruled the nation. Since 2001, however, the BNP assumed power again, and is now leading the government under a four party alliance.

The way democracy has unfolded

A nation state cannot tolerate an endemic corruption, notorious cadre politics and uncontrolled criminal activities for an indefinite period. In an alarming environment such as this, politics of arrogance and intolerance must be avoided to save whatever democracy remains in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh during the last 15 years, one may ask whether our politicians lived up to the trust bestowed by the people to them in 1990. Without hesitation, the answer is a resounding "no." There is no need to argue the "no" case, since the corruption, cadre, and crime are no longer secret weapons in the Bangladesh body politic. They have been breeding unchallenged everywhere, anywhere, and anytime. By all means, what has been happening in the areas of corruption, cadre politics, and crime in the recent years is quite staggering. The question is why.

All the past and present governments failed to recognise the role of the opposition in the affairs of the nation. In any democracy including MMD, the opposition is regarded as the opposite side of a same coin. The way all the governments under the so-called MMD handled opposition in the street and in parliament was not seen ever before even during the worst time of Military-turn-Civil regime in the late 1980s.

In particular, the heavy-handed approach followed by the incumbent surpassed all the previous records.

It made a new record in the history of Bangladesh when the opposition leader and her party colleagues are facing physical extermination and literally living under a constant threat on life. How is it possible for the opposition leader to become an effective opponent while she is technically under house arrest since August 21, 2004, after an attempt on her life?

In this carnage she lost more than 20 of her leaders and workers. Since this period, the incumbent has failed to restore the opposition leader's full mobility within the country with adequate safety and security. Moreover, the unsecured status of the opposition politicians as a whole led to the killing of two front ranking leaders of the AL (Shah AMS Kibria and Ahasanullah Master).

Under these political circumstances, the government remains unmoved and the Home Ministry remains stubbornly unaccountable. It seems that the term accountability is unheard of under the rules of the BNP-alliance. One may, however, insist that this is nothing new in Bangladesh politics. During the immediate past AL-led government,

the then opposition leader (current PM) and her colleagues also suffered from similar kind of insecurity.

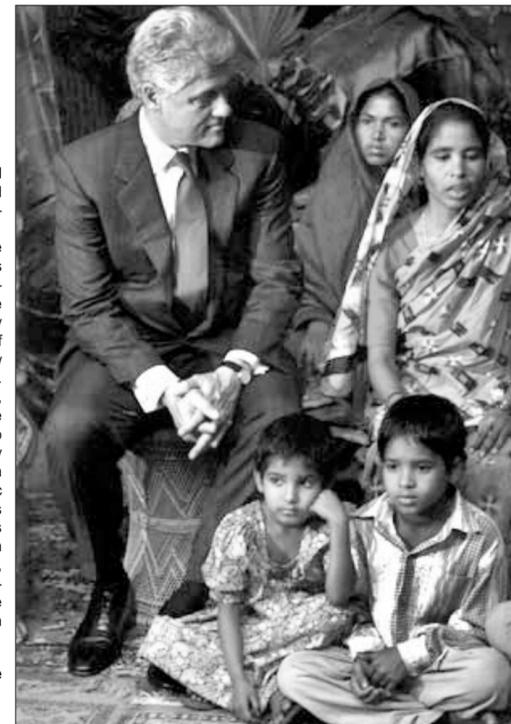
While this may be true, it is certain that no MP's life was lost due to assassination. Most importantly, the safety of then opposition leader was kept at zero risk since she was residing in a no-go zone (Dhaka Cantonment) of the Dhaka city. In contrast, if one looks at the current housing and safety measures taken by the state for the present opposition leader, this has no match. The opposition leader deserves similar treatment to what was received by her predecessor, at least in safety and security terms.

Both the PM and the opposition leader, irrespective of party politics, deserve fool-proof security in this era of terror and uncertainty. One must not forget that in the parliamentary system the opposition leader is considered as the alternate prime minister. In this regard, both of our leaders are the living proof. In essence, without a proper role for the opposition in the affairs of the nation, no democracy is meaningful, MMD or otherwise. Without this role in place the triple-C

(corruption, cadre, and crime) will certainly remain unchallenged and will invite another man-made catastrophe.

In conclusion, we are well aware that none of the commentaries delivered on this subject by members of the civil society or the editorials appearing in this daily reached even to the bottom rung of the political ladder, since we know that no one takes them seriously. Unfortunately, the corruption, cadre politics and crime under the so-called MMD have reached to such a point that the very security of the nation is at stake. A nation state cannot tolerate an endemic corruption, notorious cadre politics and uncontrolled criminal activities for an indefinite period. In an alarming environment such as this, politics of arrogance and intolerance must be avoided to save whatever democracy remains in Bangladesh.

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Former US President Clinton visiting Bangladesh in 2000

Defenders on the bank of the Jamuna

SHASHANKA BORON ROY

GOBINDAPUR is an old village on the bank of the river Jamuna. Its people are fighting from time immemorial against two giant adversaries river erosion and poverty. They have been crippled down fighting these two odds. Like many other poverty stricken villages of North Bengal, Gobindapur has also exhausted all its strength fighting these two scourges. Yearly flood and erosion of river have rendered the people of Gobindapur poor and homeless.

But now Gobindapur has a different look. Those miseries are becoming matters of the past. The people are overcoming those adversities. They have been organised to build up their own fate, pushing aside all hostile environment.

The suffering

Gobindapur is an ordinary village of Haldia Union Parishad, four kms off the upazila headquarters. Most of the five thousand villagers are landless, poor and illiterate. Though agriculture is their main occupation, very few of them have land of their own to work on. As a result they have to go to other parts of the country to find work as agricultural labour, daily labour, rickshaw puller, brick field labour etc. Like many other villages of the upazila, people of Gobindapur also are victims of seasonal famine

'Monga'. They have to bear the lashes of bitter cold of winter every year. But their sorrows increase manifold when flood and river erosion take a furious turn. The river Jamuna was 15 km away from Gobindapur two decades ago. Due to the constant erosion it is now within half km, and all the cultivable lands have gone in the river. Now for the people of Gobindapur, there is no land to grow paddy jute or any crop to earn a living.

The whole village sunk in an utter hopeless and helplessness. The villagers took it as part of their fate that they would have to suffer, and starve. The labour force or the work potential they had, could not be utilised for any productive purpose which could deliver them from the clutches of poverty and miseries. There prevailed most unhygienic condition everywhere. Open latrine was a common sight. Illiteracy was another curse.

Flash of light

In 2003 Samsuzzoha Bablu a volunteer of the The Hunger Project (THP) contacted the chairman of Haldia Union Parishad Khairuzzaman Sarker. Bablu could convince the chairman, that he could develop his area in a different way and make it hunger free and self-reliant. The chairman agreed to the proposal of Bablu. They took Mr. Nurul Islam Master, a teacher of Gobindapur



Animators of Gobindapur village

High School with them and arranged for an Animators Training Programme in the school. Their objectives were to create a good number of animators in the area who would pioneer the movement of self-reliance.

In October 2003, the chairman and teachers of Gobindapur High School organised training for the

batch in the school in collaboration with THP. A good number of villagers participated in the training. The Animators Training Programme was quite effective and inspired the poor villagers. They were animated with a new vision and a new determination.

Fire of inspiration

The inspiration of the 4-day Animators Training spread fast over the nearby villages and everywhere there was a talk that they can solve their problems themselves. Animator Nurul Islam Master, Abul Kashem Member, Motiur Rahman, chairman Khairuzzaman and volunteer Bablu took the leadership and

discussed with the elderly people of the area. They all agreed that they would build up their villages themselves.

They first identified the most backward people of the village and prepared some plan for them. They organised workshop with 25-30 villagers on sanitation, oppression on women, self-employment, education, family planning etc. Initially some of the villagers, of course, laughed at them, but soon they realised that the animators were serious in their purpose. In few months there was a revolution in the village, and a change was noticeable everywhere.

Well done Gobindapur

A group of animators went on organising workshops and meetings with a view to convince the villagers, that they could solve their own problems, if they are united. The result was very positive and in November 2003, they were able to form the Gobindapur Unnayan Samity.

Gobindapur Unnayan Samity is now a driving force of development with 101 members. Of them 50 are animators and 40 female. Under the leadership of Abul Kashem as president and Nurul Islam Master as secretary, the samity started to make a capital of their own with savings of Tk.5 a week from each member. After

three months, the members unanimously agreed to raise the rate of contribution from Tk. 5 to Tk. 10 and Tk.100 as onetime contribution, at the beginning of harvesting season.

The present saving of the Samity is Tk.80,000. When a member of the samity has Tk.5,000 as share in his account, he opens a fixed deposit account with the Grameen Bank. Now the target of the Samity is to get Tk.5,000 fixed deposit for each member.

The samity has a plan to start a textile factory when they would have a capital of Tk.5,00,000, to create employment opportunity for the people who have been rendered landless by the erosion of river. By this time they have contacted different textile factories and agencies of Sirajganj for that purpose.

The samity, has also directed its attention to other areas for development. They identified open latrine as a major health hazard of the village. In November 2003, 60 percent people of the village used sanitary latrine. They made it one of their targets that, all the villagers should have sanitary latrine, by the next year, Haldia Union Parishad supplied 15 percent of the rings and slabs for the latrine and the rest was done by the beneficiaries. In December 2004, Gobindapur was

declared a village free from open latrine. Being inspired by the instance of Gobindapur nearby villages namely Malchia and Garamara have taken similar initiative. Ninety percent latrines of the neighbouring villages are now hygienic.

The Gobindapur Unnayan Samity has also undertaken another praiseworthy project to create employment for the poor and increase their income. They have taken, on lease, a Haor (water body) of 300 acres, from the neighbouring village and started pisciculture there. The people of Gobindapur will stand on their own feet with all these projects and income generating activities by the next year, if flood and river erosion do not create any havoc.

The efforts, made by the animators towards self-reliance, are by no means insignificant: 300 people who were earlier landless and homeless are now self-employed, and can earn a moderate living.

The example which the animators of Gobindapur have created by utilizing their own talents and efforts, is now being followed by others to make their areas developed, self-reliant and hunger free.

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