

Now, a free EC secretariat

More safeguards needed for it to act independently

It appears that at last the Election Commission will begin to work as an independent body through severing its links with the executive branch of government. That should be cheering news for the nation. Demands for the EC secretariat to function independently in the interest of free, fair and transparent elections have been there for as long as one can recall. And those demands have had a direct link with the legacy upon which the Election Commission has so far conducted itself. In times of a presidential form of government, the EC was dominated by the President's Office. No change was discernible when a parliamentary system took over, for the EC then began to operate as an appendage of the Prime Minister's Office.

The move towards effecting a separation of the Election Commission from the executive, welcome as it is, may not guarantee full autonomy to the EC. In future political governments might take advantage of some of the gaps remaining in the proposed ordinance. It provides for a secretariat independent of PMO with separate budget and manpower requirement determined by the commission. The proposed ordinance leaves authority of making laws and rules in the hands of the law ministry. It is alright for the law ministry to formulate laws but unless the rules are framed by the commission implementation of the laws may be caught up in bureaucratic tangles.

Secretary of the commission will be on deputation from the government whereas it would have been better if the commission had a say in his appointment. There has been example in the past where secretary worked at cross purposes with the commission.

The power to control the secretariat is to lie with the CEC while its administrative head will be the secretary. The role of the commissioners should be well defined to allow team work.

Laws that accord independence of action to a body are one thing. Seeing them actually work in practice is quite something else. In the recent past, the replacement of the ineffectual Bureau of Anti-Corruption by a supposedly independent Anti-Corruption Commission did not yield the results the nation looked forward to until the present set of men at the ACC arrived following the imposition of the state of emergency last year. The case of the Parliament Secretariat, which was established in order for the law ministry not to interfere with its functions, remains a glaring instance of how organisational independence cannot be itself guarantee autonomy.

It is against such a background that certain safeguards must be built into the system for the EC to work truly independently.

ADP implementation sluggish

Isn't the time too short to meet physical targets?

At the half-way point of fiscal 2007-08, only 21 percent of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) stands implemented. This is the record low rate of implementation in the last four years. That this has happened during the rule of a non-party interim government cannot but surprise experts. The very technocratic nature of the government was supposed to have infused certain efficiency and dynamism into ADP management. Besides, being apolitical, the government has been free from political distractions with project planning and selection keeping above any political or lobby considerations.

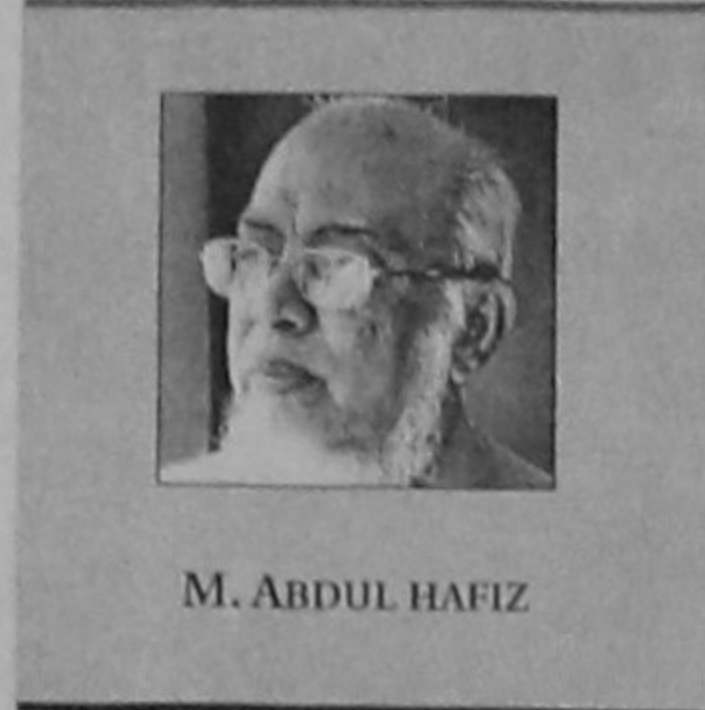
Against this backdrop, the ECNEC is rightly indignant over the slow pace of work and has issued directives to the ministries to expedite implementation. Taking a tough stance, the ECNEC has asked the low performing ministries to surrender their funds to the planning ministry by February 7 whereupon the money will be diverted to other ministries in the revised budget in February. Our worry is the physical targets of some ministries may not be met.

It is worthwhile to note that 10 large ministries and divisions taking up 81 percent of the ADP allocations had utilised 16 percent of these from July to November, 2007. But they accomplished a neat six percent of the target in December alone. In other words, these ministries at the December rate of implementation can hope to very nearly reach their overall target by June 2008.

It is a pity, however, that the power division on whom the public attention is focused for obvious reasons of erratic power supplies has been must too slow in implementing its projects virtually risking reduction of allocation.

Let's not forget, accelerating the pace of ADP implementation in the remaining six months of the year carries a certain risk of compromising on quality, a possibility which the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Department (IMED) of the Planning Ministry should be seized of and tackled in advance.

Washington's paranoia over Pakistan's bombs



M. ABDUL HAFIZ

ALL it prudent or paranoid, the US has its own concerns of others' problems, which are highly discriminatory. At times, those concerns can turn volatile as is evident in US outbursts against Iran's nuclear program, although it looked the other way when Israel built up its undeclared nuclear arsenal long ago.

Yet, the US opposition to Iran acquiring it borders on obsession. So much so that President Bush recently undertook a journey to the Middle East, particularly to drum up support from the Gulf states in the neighbourhood of Iran for a concerted action against her.

His mission remains unfulfilled, as his comprador allies in

PERSPECTIVES

There is also the fear of Musharraf's inherently unstable regime becoming destabilised, meaning that the US would lose the last bastion of "liberalism" in Pakistan. Yet, by all indications, they will be foolhardy if they risk the rash action by opening up another front of conflict.

the region did not apparently oblige him this time with their traditional obeisance.

Washington's focus is now on Pakistan, where its great anti-terror warrior is comatose. After Benazir Bhutto's mysterious assassination, claimed to be the handiwork of al-Qaeda by the Pakistani establishment, and a fall in the standing of Musharraf himself, in spite of his fresh presidential term as a civilian politician, the Americans are far from being assured about the safety of the country's 50-odd nuclear warheads.

Washington is genuinely frightened at the new wave of suicide bombings within Pakistan, and a countrywide spread of terrorism, suspected to be the result of the fresh alacrity of resurgent al-Qaeda and Taliban in disguise.

The Pakistan government

seems to be under a lot of pressure deflecting the various statements and opinions published in the Western media with regard to Pakistan's "strategic assets." The head of the UN Atomic Agency, Mohammed El-Baradei, also does not hide his anxiety about these monstrous weapons in a country infested with dreaded bands of suicide bombers.

Considering the political instability, which is likely to worsen in Pakistan in the wake of the February 18 election, many, including the Americans, fear that the weapons could fall into the hands of religious extremists who, in fact, rule the roost now. Such a fear seems to have increased especially after the death of Benazir Bhutto. After all, if she could be killed for her liberal views, many think, then why couldn't someone target

even Musharraf himself, whom the western press has popularised and glorified as the most liberal human being in Pakistan?

One cannot, however, be oblivious of the two assassination attempts on him by Jaish-e-Mohammad, an outfit whose leadership sits comfortably inside the country and will probably never get caught. In the politico-religious milieu that prevails in Pakistan, after the policy pursued in Pakistan for ages, the diehard religious extremists groups manage to survive in different guises. These facts make Pakistan extremely vulnerable, and its nuclear assets insecure.

The reports as to the likelihood of US military's plan of taking out or securing Pakistan's nuclear weapon abound these days, and also gained some legitimacy. Of course, that is an

option only in case of emergency alone. What if something happens to Musharraf or the head of the army, believed to be the custodian of the nuclear weapons and their secrets? Then the US cannot but feel insecure in letting Pakistan retain the control of those weapons.

Yet, any logical mind would raise the question about the possibility of US military finding and getting hold of those weapons. Maybe it will be difficult to locate all weapons, even if the US has some general idea of Pakistan's security establishments.

Since 9/11, Pakistan has played host to many foreign visitors in the name of war on terror, including various covert and overt foreign agencies, who couldn't have been unaware of the general location of the weapons and their deployment pattern.

Pakistan's Strategic Plan Division has a long and deep interaction with the Pentagon and American think-tanks. So, the possibility of information slipping through these channels can't be ruled out, helping the US in getting hold of the weapons. So far Islamabad has

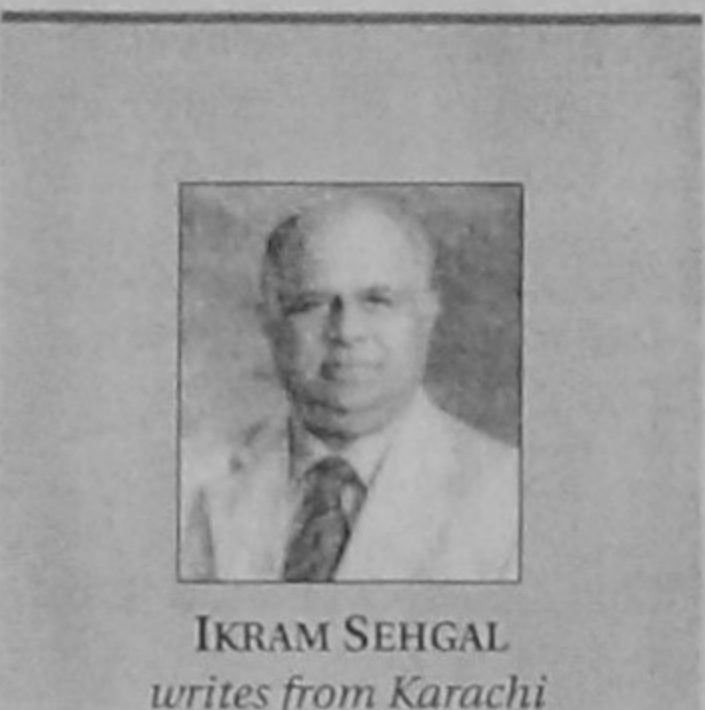
adversely reacted to the leaked-out plan of US taking control of its nuclear weapon and vociferously condemned the idea. The US also does not seem to realise the political cost of such enterprise.

Earlier, when the American plan to carry out attacks against suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban strongholds in tribal areas was made known both public and official reactions were hostile, generating fresh anti-Americanism in Pakistan. Also, the terrorists' activities escalated.

According to government views in Pakistan, any direct action by foreign forces will be highly unpopular and counterproductive. It wouldn't be surprising if the ranks of al-Qaeda and Taliban get further boost from such action. There is also the fear of Musharraf's inherently unstable regime becoming destabilised, meaning that the US would lose the last bastion of "liberalism" in Pakistan. Yet, by all indications, they will be foolhardy if they risk the rash action by opening up another front of conflict.

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Learning pragmatism at Davos



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

A day before the start of the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos, the world's economic equilibrium was shaken by stocks falling across the board from Hong Kong to New York. It required an unprecedented cut in lending rates by the US Federal Reserve (the Fed) to shore up the world's badly shaken markets. Whether the recovery can be sustained is still to be seen.

The world's elite in commerce, finance and manufacturing were somber but did not show apprehension of an imminent recession. Economic apocalypse did rear its ugly head frequently during discussions in panel after panel, all the economic geniuses who were proved thoroughly wrong neither showed any remorse nor, for that matter, act sheepish.

While die-hard optimists predict only a "slow down," how deep and how long the recession will be will depend upon the measures being taken to cushion its impact. Where capitalist philosophy once shunned the public sector, public money in the form of "sovereign wealth" is now not only readily acceptable but actively sought to offset the huge losses sustained by financial institutions as well as multina-

AS I SEE IT

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Former US treasury secretary and now Chairman Citigroup, Rubin, who hates flying, had to journey personally to Kuwait to plead for funds to bail out Citibank. Asian economies were expected to weather the financial crunch far better than their US and European counterparts, is it more optimism than real fact, given the economic interdependencies?

A galaxy of world leaders came to Davos this year. US Secretary of State Ms. Condoleezza Rice joined British PM Gordon Brown, Singapore PM Lee Hsien Loong, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and a host of others including former British PM Tony Blair, former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Queen Rania of Jordan, Chief Advisor Fakhruddin Ahmad of Bangladesh, Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon etc. More than 75 of the world's leading corporations easily eclipsed the 25 heads of states and governments present.

Among the business and industry leaders, James Dixon, Chairman and CEO of JP Morgan Chase and Co, Indra Nooyi, President and CEO PepsiCo, David J. O'Reilly, Chairman and CEO Chevron and Wang Jianzhou, Chairman and CE China Mobile. George Soros was there and so was Rupert

Murdoch, both came to my breakfast for Pervez Musharraf. The president had a very responsive plenary with Henry Kissinger with a full house in attendance, Kissinger's sharp intellect belied his advanced years.

The Session on "Dividing the World Again," moderated by Dominique Rossi, stood out as really interesting. Ambassador Wu Jianmin, President China Foreign Affairs University, maintained that the agenda revealed the western psyche of following a policy of "divide and rule" to dominate the world. Asian values believe in uniting the world by strengthening commonalities and working out compromise on contentious issues.

Professor Moon Chung-In of South Korea agreed that creating division had been a western policy for centuries; now the initiative should be towards settling issues. John Chipman, DG and CE of International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), UK, said that Russia and China had accumulated enormous economic power in the recent past but were powerless presently to influence even the region in their immediate vicinity, let alone the world.

He contended that India, another rising economic power, was diffident in its role beyond the non-aligned approach that it had stayed with for over half a

century. Professor Samantha Power of Government, Harvard, US, and an active Barack Obama supporter, said that change in US policy was inevitable whoever came to power, as a result of the reaction of the US public as they took in the damage to the US image over the past 7 years because of the ineptitude and misadventures of the Bush administration in Iraq, Afghanistan and stagnant initiative on the Palestinian issue.

Ambassador Wu Jianmin in his overview of the 30 years since the launch of China's opening to the world said that China had been sharing its growth. China lost over \$ 100 billion because it refused to devalue its currency when Asia was in financial turmoil a decade ago, which would have destroyed the regional economies.

China needed peace and stability in the world in order to modernise, reminding us that it was easy to start a war but difficult to stop it. In contrast to western countries penchant for political and economic expediency, China preferred to remain strong on principles.

Western countries looked at crisis as "danger," whereas in Chinese "crisis" translated into "danger" and "opportunity." Dr. Samantha Power described

Barack Obama's struggle for change that matters, particularly in following principled foreign policy. In a broad sense, the Hamiltonian-Jefferson debate of two centuries ago in the first flush of US independence still remained alive, even though the agenda had broadened.

While the media (and eminent NGO heads like Gareth Evans of International Crisis Group, Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch, etc) remained generally hostile to President Pervez Musharraf, there were noticeable "converts" from hard to soft criticism.

Those who had invested in Pakistan, and a whole lot who were interested in investing, lined up around the block requesting for bi-lateral meetings. Because of genuine worry about the internal situation in Pakistan, particularly the political problems being aggravated by suicide bombers, Musharraf sometimes came out looking defensive, the circumstances availing being so adverse.

It is difficult to push the country's agenda when you are perceived to be a part of the problem. The severe lack of calibre around him shows and further aggravates his situation.

The Pakistan Embassy to the UN in Geneva made a great job in scheduling the president's visit and logistics thereof, but their ineptitude in ensuring that Pakistanis of substance got on the many WEF panels was pathetic.

Only Hussain Haqqani and Ahmed Rashid from non-WEF members made it to 200 or so panels, and that two on their own merit. This "please the boss only and damn the rest" syndrome is a typical babu-approach inherited from British India-times.

The panel on "Insider's view of Pakistan" had Richard Haas, former PM Shaukat Aziz, Hussain Dawood, Ahmad Rashid and myself, and was moderated by BBC's Owen Bennett-Jones. Perception dominates debates, even among the knowledgeable.

On balance, the panel was bullish on the country. The "Pakistan Breakfast" on January 25 was attended by 325 of the world's elite in government, business, academics, media, NGOs, etc. Even though the president faced tough questions, he acquitted himself well. The audience was reluctantly willing to still give him the benefit of doubt.

The February 18 elections is a no-win situation for Pervez Musharraf, even the winners will yell "rigging" after falling well short of their rhetoric of unrealistic expectations. February 18 will be used as a launch pad for a long hot summer of discontent, i.e. if he safely negotiates the Ides of March.

Pervez Musharraf must do comprehensive re-evaluation of his own position, making compromises to bring harmony between rhetoric, perception and reality. He is too smart not to know that the dice is loaded against him, and he should not try to brazen it out but to come to terms with reality.

His lonely task is to decide (before others do it for him) how to keep his destiny and that of Pakistan in sync. A "window of opportunity" to effect genuine national compromise may exist only for the next fortnight, and that makes a government of national compromise unavoidable. If anyone can learn anything from Davos, it is pragmatism.

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Grasping for a legacy

President Bush's legacy will be assessed by many measures, most notably the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But by his own standards set at the start of his time in office, the president has failed to live up to either the tone or the results he promised. The tone in the nation's capital is hardly better than it was as impeachment roiled the final years of Bill Clinton's presidency. With the rare exception of the recent economic stimulus package, respect and cooperation is hard to find in the halls of Congress at the end of the Bush era.

RICHARD WOLFFE

THIS is where George W. Bush started his presidency, with an address to a joint session of Congress, one month after his inaugural speech in 2001. "The last time I visited the Capitol, I came to take an oath on the steps of this building," he said. "I pledged to honor our Constitution and laws. And I asked you to join me in setting a tone of civility and respect in Washington."

difference, because we're making progress. Together, we are changing the tone in the nation's capital. And this spirit of respect and cooperation is vital, because, in the end, we will be judged not only by what we say or how we say it, we will be judged by what we're able to accomplish."

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That much was obvious in President Bush's final state of the union speech on Monday. He started by seeking to explain just why the political debate has been

so acrimonious. "We have faced hard decisions about peace and war, rising competition in the world economy, and the health and welfare of our citizens," he said. "These issues call for vigorous debate, and I think it's fair to say we've answered that call. Yet history will record that amid our differences, we acted with purpose. And together, we showed the world the power and resilience of American self-government."

That brief telling of the Bush years -- marked by joint purpose and resilience -- hardly squares with the facts. Instead, what history may record is the intense partisan warfare over Iraq, tax cuts and domestic spying.

That contentiousness might explain why the president rapidly pivoted to putting pressure on Democrats to fall in line with the modest agenda of his final year in office. "In this election year, let us

show our fellow Americans that we recognize our responsibilities and are determined to meet them," he said. "And let us show them that Republicans and Democrats can compete for votes and cooperate for results at the same time."

Instead of offering ground for cooperation, the president continued the pattern he set in the earliest months of his presidency: to insist on cooperation on his terms. His first substantive policy issue was taxes. He warned Democrats that they had to make his tax cuts permanent -- something he could have done years ago, rather than waiting until election time to corner his opponents. "Some in Washington argue that letting tax relief expire is not a tax increase," he explained. "Try explaining that to 116 million American taxpayers who would see their taxes rise by an average of \$1,800. Others have

said they would personally be happy to pay higher taxes. I welcome their enthusiasm, and I am pleased to report that the IRS accepts both checks and money orders." So much for the civil and respectful tone of debate on taxes.

But what about the subject on which historians will really assess this president: the war in Iraq? On that question, he understandably claimed credit for real military progress, while also hyping up the analysis of political progress in Baghdad. What stood out, however, was the president's continued efforts to tie Iraq to Al Qaeda, the group responsible for the horrors of 9/11 that transformed his entire presidency.

"When we met last year, Al Qaeda had sanctuaries in many areas of Iraq, and their leaders had just offered American forces safe passage out of the country," he said. "Today, it is Al Qaeda that

is searching for safe passage. They have been driven from many of the strongholds they once held, and over the past year, we have captured or killed thousands of extremists in Iraq, including hundreds of key Al Qaeda leaders and operatives."

"Last month, Osama bin Laden released a tape in which he railed against Iraqi tribal leaders who have turned on Al Qaeda and admitted that Coalition forces are growing stronger in Iraq. Ladies and gentlemen, some may deny the surge is working, but among the terrorists there is no doubt. Al Qaeda is on the run in Iraq, and this enemy will be defeated."

One of the more unfortunate features of Bush's presidency has been the deliberate blurring of lines between the core Al Qaeda leadership and the global movement that was inspired by its campaign of mass murder.

Still, those ubiquitous histori-

ans will find that Bush has at least been consistent in his desire to tie together terrorists, dictators and weapons of mass destruction. In that first speech to Congress seven years ago, President Bush made almost no mention of foreign policy -- except for this: "Our nation also needs a clear strategy to confront the threats of the 21st century -- threats that are more widespread and less certain. They range from terrorists who threaten with bombs to tyrants in rogue nations intent upon developing weapons of mass destruction."

At the time, the president was calling for a missile defense system that he still hasn't fully developed or deployed. Instead, he leaves to his successor a terrorist challenge, and a WMD threat, that is far more complex than he could ever have imagined in February 2001.