

The Rhetoric of Democracy and War on Terror: The Case of Pakistan

By Masood Ashraf Raja

On November 3, 2007 General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan declared a state of emergency. What ensued in the preceding weeks on the national front was a total blockade of free speech, a complete reshuffling of Pakistani Supreme Court, and an absolute clamp down on all political activities. His address to the nation started with the following instructive rationale:

As I speak to you today, Pakistan is facing a very dangerous situation. It is suffering from an internal crisis and whatever is happening now is related to the internal disturbance. During such moments for nations, a time comes when difficult decisions have to be taken. And if we do not take timely action, then God forbid it could be dangerous to Pakistan's sovereignty.

In the same speech Mr. Musharraf named terrorism, rising extremism, paralysis of the government system caused by the Supreme Court interventions, and negative media coverage as possible threats to the Pakistani sovereignty. He further went on to state that the law and order situation had deteriorated so drastically that the "extremists are roaming freely without let or hindrance in the country, and are not afraid of law enforcing agencies." In any other circumstances, this break down of law and order could clearly been the responsibility of the ruling government, for the failure of law and order was also the failure of the government, especially a government with absolute powers of a military dictator. But surprisingly enough, while admitting that the country was in turmoil, Mr. Musharraf failed to take any blame for it himself but attempted to apportion blame to the terrorists themselves and the judiciary and the free media, as if simply by performing their task of reporting and dispensing justice these the judiciary and the media had become the sole cause of the destabilization of Pakistan. Needless to say, in the very same speech—according to which Pakistan had reached a disastrous situation—Mr. Musharraf represented himself as the only true hope for Pakistan. Nowhere in his speech was there a reference to the failure of his own policies and the ramifications of his deep embrace with the United States in the "War against Terror" that might have brought Pakistan to the state of emergency. Let us remind ourselves that until September

11 2001, Mr. Musharraf was a completely isolated dictator who had seized power from an elected government and then cobbled together a government of political turncoats drawn from all segments of Pakistan's political spectrum.

His base, if that it may be called, was the military and the Muttahidda Qaumi Movement (MQM) in Karachi, an organization that the Pakistan army (until recently) considered a terrorist group notorious in the mid-eighties for murder, rape, and extortion in Karachi and Hyderabad, the two major southern cities of Pakistan. Surprisingly, while the general detailed the rise of fanaticism and troubles for Pakistan as a basis for declaring emergency, he did not even hazard an opinion as to why suddenly Pakistan had become such a dangerous place. It seemed as if this internal threat to Pakistan rose outside of history and could not find any explicatory narrative within the ten years of the general's own rule and the general's attempts at seeking much needed national and international legitimation.

In my opinion, most of the current problems of Pakistan stem from the very nature of Pakistan's involvement in the "War on Terror" mandate that the general accepted in order to legitimate his government in the eyes of the west in general and the United States in particular. September eleven suddenly made the general into the most sought after ally in the region due to immediate US interest in Afghanistan. It was his decision to support the US war effort uncritically in Afghanistan that set Pakistan for the current situation, for while the "War on Terror" policies are safe for the US, as most of these wars are not being fought on the US territories, an uncritical acquiescence to the US mandate was bound to create a tension within Pakistan. The situation was further complicated by the history of pre-September eleven engagement between the Pakistani government and the Taliban. General Pervez Musharraf, especially, was deeply connected to the Taliban mujahideen who he used as a proxy in his misadventure into the Kargil offensive in the Northern Areas of Pakistan, a military adventure, carried out without the approval of elected Pakistani government, that almost led India and Pakistan to an all out war in 1998. Certainly, then, when the general did an about turn to accommodate the US against the Taliban, for the Taliban, who had died fighting in the general's war, this about turn was not just political but also deeply personal. But buying into the US tactics of "War on Terror" has even further aggravated the situation.

Generally speaking the Afghan situation and the allied offensive against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda followed a certain tactical pattern: the US ground forces basically acted as, for lack of a better word, "strike calling groups" that moved into the Taliban territory and then tried to eliminate Taliban positions by carefully directing air strikes at the likely targets. From the US point of view these tactics made sense, for it reduced the chances of US casualties while ensuring maximum punishment for the likely targets from a safe distance. No doubt that in this process

of lethal air strikes, the US forces could, and did, term any civilian deaths, if the question ever arose, as necessary collateral damage. But emulating the same strike and kill strategy within the borders of Pakistan by its own national army takes a completely different shape in the popular Pakistani perception.

For the people of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), these incursions into the tribal territories are seen as an extension of US policy into the tribal heartlands by the Pakistan army. Thus, by extension, the Pakistani government and the Pakistan army in the tribal consciousness become conflated with the so-called infidel western powers. While the Taliban may not be able to launch any direct attacks against the mainland United States, they, in order to legitimate themselves as a resistance group, go for the easily available targets in the region, Pakistan itself. Hence, Pakistan in the popular imagination of the tribes and their Taliban counterparts is no longer a Muslim country that they may not have otherwise attacked but part of a global infidel conspiracy against their version of the shari'ah and Islam. The increasing Taliban attacks inside Pakistan are a direct result of the "War on Terror" that the Pakistan government waged during Musharraf years, often against its national interest and often for legitimating Mr. Musharraf's unconstitutional rule in the eyes of the western and the US policy makers. The US certainly is the main exponent of current neoliberal regime of economics. Under this economic model, the government cannot legitimate itself through its social welfare functions as most of those functions have been privatized. The chief mode of legitimation for the US then becomes the security of its citizens. Under this operative regime, the "War on Terror" serves as a constant tool of legitimation for the US government while the citizens are left to cope with the market forces at their own. Since the war itself is being fought elsewhere on other territories the immediate effects of the war do not concern average US citizens. However, the modes of legitimation in the other parts of the world, especially Pakistan, are still linked with the good works performed by the government. In a sense people still expect their government to run a welfare state in the traditional sense of the term. In fact in the words of one Pakistani journalist:

This [the neoliberal economic model] brings us to the role and responsibility of the state: should it outsource most of its functions and let citizens sink or swim? Or should it play an active role in ensuring that nobody should go hungry; that all children are enrolled in schools where they receive a decent education, whether they can pay or not; and that everybody has access to adequate health care.

Mr. Musharraf, however, having quickly moved into the neo-liberal economic policies, was also attempting to use public security as mode of legitimation, a fact painfully clear in his speech. But to most of the people of Pakistan this perpetual

war is inextricably linked with the US interest in the region and hence the idea of a security state no longer works as a legitimating strategy for Mr. Musharraf.

Also, most Al-Qaeda and Taliban supported groups in Pakistan are from the extreme Wahabi factions. Their actions are underwritten by a strict interpretation of the rules of Shariah and the concept of *Takfeer*, or the state of infidelness. *Takfeer* was first juridically discussed by Imam Ibn Taymiyyah. Accordingly, after Ibn Taymiyyah, it became possible to rationalize one Muslim power's war against the other Muslims if the condition of *Takfeer*—Muslims living in a state of infidelness—could be proved. By far Ibn Saud—the founder of Saudi dynasty—and his religious guide Muhammad ibn Abdulwahab, used this concept most effectively, and arbitrarily, to fight the other Muslim groups of the Arabian peninsula until the Saud family was completely in control of the Najd and later what they named as Saudi Arabia. The Taliban and their Al-Qaeda allies follow the same strict Wahabi interpretation of the Shariah. For them, to declare a Pakistani leader and institution in the state of *Takfeer* requires only, at this time, to be connected directly to US interests, especially the US “War on Terror” and its ensuing operations in Afghanistan. Hence, as long as Mr. Pervez Musharraf continued his policy of fighting the US proxy war on his own soil, the number of Taliban and Al-Qaeda volunteers continued to grow. A sad example of this escalation can be clearly traced to the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto. Bhutto wasn't killed because she was a woman; she was killed because she was seen as an extension of US interest in the region. Her case wasn't really helped when the US press represented her as a strong US ally and suggested that she had gone back to Pakistan under a deal brokered by the United States. Certainly, something must have changed in Pakistan that she returned to during her earlier two terms as Prime Minister, there were no known attempts by her opponents to assassinate her. What has changed drastically in Pakistan is its political climate, where the wars being fought in the NWFP and Baluchistan have now started spilling into the main urban areas of Pakistan. Sadly, Benazir Bhutto was a casualty of this particular escalation and her death warrant was written long before she stepped foot on the Pakistani soil. The main tragedy of her death is that at the very moment when she had decided to become a true leader by openly defying the Washington mandate to support Mr. Musharraf, she was killed. In this whole scenario the most important thing to remember is not as to which particular leader is pro or con US, but rather how does a particular leader maintain the illusion of Pakistani sovereignty. In the era of global capitalism this national sovereignty is nothing but an illusion, but such illusions serve an important function of legitimizing the national governments of particular nation-states. Every time the Pakistani leadership emulates the US tactics of “War on Terror”, the illusion is erased and the

people come to see their leaders as puppets of their US and European masters. In case of Mr. Musharraf this public perception of him had become almost axiomatic.

On the whole the newly imposed emergency wasn't much different from the arbitrary system of power that the general had employed until then, but it finally lifted the veil of carefully crated hegemonic power structure and brought the brute force of general's dictatorship clearly to his national and international audience, especially his US allies. This time was also extremely crucial for the future of US perception in Pakistan. The Pakistanis have never really believed the often loud declarations in favor of democracy that are issued from various media and political pulpits of the US, but the declaration of emergency became the absolute testing moment of the US commitment to democracy. It would be apt to suggest that in those few days the constant US rhetoric about the importance of democracy suddenly found itself under the limelight and was displayed in its nakedness as nothing but rhetoric. The US response was quite instructive, for it made it clear once and for all for the people of Pakistan that when it came time for the US to choose between an alliance with a military dictator and the possibility of a democratic Pakistan, the US chose the convenience of backing their favorite dictator, and this is the image of the United States that has now been reported, represented, and perceived by the Pakistani public. As a result any legitimate government, automatically, will have to put some distance between itself and the US war agenda in the region, which seems to be the only sane approach to stabilizing Pakistan and making it safe in the long run.

Notes:

¹ The text of the speech is available at <http://www.presidentofpakistan.gov.pk/PresidentialSpeeches.aspx>. Visited on January 9, 2008.

² In 1986 MQM was considered a terrorist organization. The author was in Karachi during that year and as an army officer was part of the regular curfew deployments to check the sectarian clashes between the Muhajirs and non-Muhajirs in the city. During that time the MQM was officially considered a terrorist organization.

³ I am not suggesting here that Pakistan should not fight actively against the threat of terrorism, but my point is that Pakistan's contribution to the War on Terror needs to be guided by Pakistan's own immediate national interest and should in no way be solely driven by the US national interest.

Pakistaniaat: A Journal of Pakistan Studies Vol. 1, No. 2 (2009)

⁴ For a good discussion of neoliberal economics see John Rapley, *Globalization and Inequality*, (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman provides a brilliant discussion of this particular aspect of neoliberal's reliance on security as legitimating tool for the state. For details see his *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (New York: Polity, 2004).

⁶ Irfan Husain. "Give us back Our Country." (Daily Dawn, Nov 24, 2007). Available at <http://dawn.com/weekly/mazdak/20071124.htm>.

⁷ For a detailed study of Ibn Tamiyyah's times and major works see his *Al-Jawab Al-Sahih* translated by Thomas F. Michel, *A Muslim Theologian's response to Christianity*, (New York: Caravan Books, 1984.)

⁸ Details of Wahab-Saud alliance are available in As'ad Abukhal's *The Battle for Saudi Arabia*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2004.)