

## **Letter from Pakistan: Resisting Feudalism?**

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Observers attribute the current emergency President Gen. Pervez Musharraf declared in Pakistan solely to his alleged "greed for power" and desire to continue to hold the offices of both president and chief of army. Any mono-causal explanation of political events, especially those fuelled by power struggles, is immediately suspect, for they are outcomes of complex interactions of competing social forces. Equally facile is the assertion that President George W. Bush is putting pressure on the "dictator" to save the Pakistani people and usher democracy. But as we know in the world of realpolitik, states are guided by interests and not by sentiments. It is naive to believe that President Bush and his administration are shedding tears for the democratic rights of Pakistani masses. Indeed, the Bush administration cheerfully continues to bankroll medieval kingdoms and emirates in West Asia. No mention of democracy there. Rather, we must dig deeper; we must look at U.S. interests in Pakistan and the surrounding region to understand Bush's foreign policy posture.

When Musharraf overthrew the democratically-elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in the 1999 coup, he stymied Sharif's ploy to make the Koran the supreme law of the land ala Saudi Arabia and turn Pakistan into an undemocratic Islamic state. Western governments, especially in the U.S. and U.K., welcomed the "dictator" with open arms. They embraced him as a comrade-in-arms in the war against Islamic extremism. There was no talk of democracy then, because both Bush and Tony Blair took it for granted that Musharraf would be their docile ally.

But for Musharraf, Pakistan's national interest comes first. He refused to go along with Bush on Iraq. That was the first fissure.

Now, he is refusing to tow Bush's line and isolate Iran. In fact, he is going ahead with building the natural gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan in the teeth of opposition from the Bush administration. Similarly, he is expanding bi-lateral relations and nuclear cooperation with China against the express wishes of the Bush administration. So he has fallen out of favor in Washington (and London).

Pakistan's State of Emergency Can Be Seen as Struggle Between Modern and Feudal Forces. They need Musharraf to continue as president in the frontline state in the war on terror to keep the extremists at bay. But they also need to reduce his power and induce a change in Pakistani foreign policy to the advantage of U.S. and U.K. So, democracy rears its ugly head!

Bush is promoting Benazir Bhutto because she is putty in his hands. If elected prime minister, she said, she would offer U.S. intelligence agencies access to Dr. A.Q. Khan

and would allow U.S. forces free entry into Pakistan to search for Osama bin Laden. Musharraf has stoutly refused to concede both. If an Indian leader had similarly capitulated to a major foreign power, he or she would have been banished by the country's political elite. But Pakistan's immature political elite cannot see the wood for the trees. So Bhutto merrily sails along, willing to do Bush's bidding in return for his administration's support to occupy the prime minister's seat. She has made it clear to him she will go along with U.S. foreign policy Iraq, Iran and China.

In fact, the power sharing Bush talks about between Musharraf and Bhutto boils down to Bhutto getting control of Pakistan's foreign policy so that she could obligingly dovetail Pakistan's foreign policy with Bush's foreign policy -- which is something Musharraf has steadfastly refused to do.

In this "regime adjustment" the Bush administration has found allies amongst Pakistan's elite, which is unremittingly feudal. Bhutto, for example, comes from a traditional feudal family and married into another traditional feudal family; for her, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) formed by her father, is her fiefdom -- she is president for life. Inner-party democracy is the stuff of fiction. It is important to keep in mind that the PPP and Nawaz Sharif's PML(N) are not the secular modern parties voters are accustomed to in the west.

Feudals in both parties oppose Musharraf's reforms tooth and nail. Because his administrative modernization set up, for the first time, representative, elected local government institutions (Nazims) and politically empowered the poor; his economic liberalization (including privatization) is promoting the growth of the middle class -- universally recognized as the backbone of liberal democracy. Both hit at their feudal roots. Predictably, the judiciary has time and again ruled against Musharraf's privatization of key economic sectors. The clerics in the religious coalition -- the MMA -- resist his educational reforms and promotion of women's rights since both are undermining the ideological domination of the religious establishment. In the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) the ruling MMA is systematically sabotaging Musharraf's reforms. By all accounts, Musharraf allowed the highest degree of media freedom ever experienced in the country's history. This is exposing the average Pakistani to the world outside, and to modern values of democracy and individual rights. Not surprisingly, the PPP, PML and the MMA are ranged against the army, led by Musharraf.

It is crucial to keep in mind that he is the first leader who has attempted the modernization of Pakistani economy and society. Many prominent lawyers leading the opposition to Musharraf are either members of PPP or are closely connected to it through kinship links. A majority of the lawyers and judges and "liberal" defenders of human rights are part of the feudal elite; the rest share in the feudal values. They feel extremely threatened by Musharraf's modernization and are bent on protecting their inherited status and privileges. They are hardly the stuff of independent, modern professionals.

Some of the street support for Bhutto on TV is, of course, from party workers. But a lot of it is the poorest of the poor, most of whom are serfs who live a hand-to-mouth existence on the fiefs of feudals. They are lured in truckloads with the offer of two meals

a day, which is a luxury for them. This is the background to and the essence of the sordid "pro-democracy" movement. It would be a real pity if American opinion makers and professionals lose sight of this unfolding power struggle between the army led by Musharraf on the one hand and the obscurantist feudal and clerical forces on the other.

If the Pakistani legal establishment and liberals were able to rise above their self-interest, they too would support Musharraf, like the liberals in Turkey who backed their modernizing army.