

Is U.S. Blackmailing The PPP; If So, Why?

by Ramtanu Maitra

On Feb. 22, the co-chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), winner of the largest number of seats in the Feb. 18, 2008 National Assembly elections, Asif Ali Zardari, told Pakistani reporters that the United States is pressuring his party to form a coalition with the Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid), widely known as President Pervez Musharraf's party, which was crushed in the last elections, losing almost 80% of its previously held 118 seats, and securing less than 15% of the votes cast.

Washington is also exerting pressure on Zardari to bring into the coalition the arch-rival of the PPP in Sindh province, the Mohajir Qaum Movement (MQM), which won 19 seats. MQM, beside its close cooperation with the Pakistan Muslim League (Q) in the earlier government, has often been identified for terrorist activities, particularly against the PPP.

What Washington Wants Now

The reason the Bush Administration is aggressively interfering in coalition talks between Pakistan's political parties is that it wants to isolate the Pakistan Muslim League (N), the party of Nawaz Sharif. According to Arif Rafiq, an analyst with the *Daily Times* of Lahore, Vice President Dick Cheney's office is playing an active role.

The Bush Administration finds the PML(N)'s nationalism and antagonism to Musharraf troublesome. It must be noted that although Sharif has called for Pakistan's foreign policy to be debated in parliament, he supports continued cooperation with the United States. But he also wants the Supreme Court justices, who were sacked last November, to be restored. Washington had endorsed Musharraf's firing of the justices, seeing the court's insistence on constitutional accountability for Musharraf as a roadblock to its regional game plan. The court, for instance, had asked Musharraf to present for trial alleged terror suspects—some of whom were likely “rendered” to Pakistan by the CIA—and who have been detained for years without government acknowledgment.

Moreover, there are reports that, with the possibility of a strong uprising of the Afghan-Pushtuns in the coming Spring against the foreign occupying forces inside Afghanistan, and along the Pakistan-Afghanistan borders, the U.S. State Department and the Pentagon are planning to expand their presence in Pakistan's Tribal Areas by creating “special coordina-

tion centers” on the Afghan side of the border for information-sharing among U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani officials.

U.S. officials are constructing two new coordination centers on the Afghan side of the Torkham border. Four more are under consideration, according to a senior U.S. Defense Department official, the *Daily Times* reports. The CIA is also pushing to enhance surveillance capabilities and intelligence cooperation at a covert location in the Tribal Areas, according to a Pakistani official based in that area.

Pakistani newspapers had published earlier accounts of “invisible American commandos” operating inside the Tribal Areas for years, but Pakistani officials have become more open about the CIA presence there only in recent months. “What the U.S. would like is closer, on-the-ground intelligence coordination, U.S. intelligence boots on the ground, and more freedom of action in the tribal territories,” said Robert Grenier, a former CIA station chief in Pakistan, and director of the CIA's counterterrorism center.

It is generally accepted by the Bush Administration that Washington has a God-given right to interfere in Pakistan's domestic politics, and for those who really do not have any commitment to the people of Pakistan, or Afghanistan, it is easier to deal with “one man” (Musharraf, for instance). Nonetheless, it is still important to know, and understand, that these “champions of democracy” within the Bush Administration, and elsewhere in the United States, are not standing up for a “friend in distress,” such as President Musharraf. Washington claims it has no permanent friend, it has only a “permanent interest,” however sinister that could be.

On the other hand, the process, or the efforts required, to protect that “permanent interest” may lead to the collapse of the much-vaunted, and yet to be formed, democratic government in Pakistan. The 2008 election, which took many lives, including the life of the two-time prime minister and undisputed leader of the PPP, Benazir Bhutto, who was sent back to Pakistan from exile by none other than Bush Administration officials, may come to naught if the democratic government is collapsed from the outside.

The failure to form a government at all, or to form one that will be dysfunctional, may push Pakistan toward a new cycle of violence. This time around, it is expected that the militants will push the level of violence a notch higher, and that it will be targeted primarily against the United States. That is exactly the direction that Britain wants Pakistan to go. Britain will wring its hands and blame it on Washington, while promoting the secession of Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) from Pakistan, putting firmly in place Lord Palmerston's “permanent interest” concept.

Meanwhile, former premier Nawaz Sharif's PML(N) has shown some flexibility, by stating that it would support a PPP-led government from outside, as it does not want to be part of an administration with President Musharraf in power.

When asked what would be the working relationship between the two parties, PML(N) spokesman Ahsan Iqbal said the PML(N) will “respect the PPP’s mandate for forming a government at the center,” and “would not let its government be destabilized.” Another PML(N) leader said his party’s top leadership has informed the PPP about their reservations on the proposal to include the MQM, which backed Musharraf, in the Federal government.

These statements by the PML(N) reflect that the party does not want to be looked upon as the carpetbagger, and more importantly, as non-accommodating. But, it is almost a certainty that on the issue of reinstatement of the judiciary, all three contending parties—PML(N), President Musharraf, and Washington—will be inflexible.

As an indicator of such inflexibility, on Feb. 25, Nawaz Sharif and Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the head of Jamaat-i-Islami and of the MMA, a coalition of six Islamic parties, asked Musharraf to step down, and warned that otherwise, he would face impeachment. Addressing a joint press conference, the PML(N) leader said that after the formation of a new government, the PML(N) would take steps to restore the judiciary and the Constitution.

A Joint Rescue Team

Musharraf, who is much weaker now since he had to take off the Chief of Armed Services uniform and become a civilian President, still has the authority, using the amended Constitution, to dismantle any elected National Assembly. Musharraf has exploited the extra-legal latitude he had extracted from the court he set up after sacking the previous one, to amend the Constitution, removing the right to declare martial law from the army, and giving it to the President.

Notably, he has not yet asked the winning parties to form a government. Legally, he can wait till March 8 before setting up the new government, or dismiss the elections for failing to give a clear verdict. It is evident that Musharraf is looking to Washington to deliver what could be beneficial for both of them.

At the same time, on his own initiative, he has reinvigorated a Swiss corruption case against opposition leader Zardari, on the eve of post-election power-sharing talks with the PML(N).

Pakistani analysts point this out as a pressure tactic against Zardari, the husband of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto, as he prepared to start negotiations for a coalition government with the second-placed opposition leader, Sharif, who has campaigned to oust Musharraf. Government lawyers urged a court in Geneva to prosecute Zardari on 10-year-old charges of stashing \$55 million in kickbacks in a Swiss bank account.

There are other indications that the Washington-led blocking of the formation of a PPP-PML(N) government is now getting a second look. The defeated PML(Q), on Feb. 22, decided to reconsider its option of sitting on the opposition benches at the center, as its parliamentary party has given a mandate to its president, Ch. Shujaat Hussain, to hold a dialogue with the political parties and explore possibilities for the formation of a government.

On the ground, the American ambassador, Anne Patterson, has become very active. She held a long meeting with Zardari, and another PPP leader. Zardari then denied she had tried to pressure him to work with Musharraf. “I don’t think the diplomatic corps works on political lines. They do not give political positions,” he said.

Where’s the Rub?

To the average American observer, the Washington initiative to “protect” Musharraf makes much sense. The Pakistani President has been a staunch ally during the difficult days of the “war on terror.” He has taken punches from all sides, but has not wavered from his conviction that Nirvana against the Islamic militants lies in joining hands with the United States to militarily eliminate them.

Now that the former two-time prime minister and close ally of the Saudi royal household, Nawaz Sharif, is poised to become part of the ruling elite in Islamabad, there should be concern about Musharraf’s future. Sharif has made clear that he wants Musharraf removed. Washington is justifiably concerned about it, although the number of seats that the PPP and the PML(N) have won in the Assembly, is not even close to the two-thirds of the total required to impeach a sitting President.



White House/Tina Hager

The Bush-Cheney Administration thinks it has a “God-given right to interfere in Pakistan’s domestic politics,” but it is not coming to the rescue of its “friend in distress,” President Musharraf. Here, Musharraf meets with George Bush in the Oval Office, December 2004.

There are other reasons that Washington might not want to see Sharif's party in power. Sharif has said his party wants a political solution to the virulent militancy in the country's tribal areas. "Extremism and terrorism can be resolved by political parties, which symbolize sovereignty and integrity of the country," he said. Moreover, he has questioned the intent of the United States in providing Pakistan non-NATO-nation status (i.e., under the NATO defense umbrella). Sharif has said that Washington gave this status to Pakistan in order to get full access to the port of Karachi, through which 70% of food, arms, ammunition, and other logistics of the war against the Afghans, and Pakistan's tribals, is brought in by the United States, and its European allies.

Sharif has sent a warning to Washington by saying he would resist "foreign interference" in Pakistan. During a campaign rally at Haripur, in the troubled North West Frontier Province, before the Feb. 18 elections, he said: "We will not bow to U.S. pressure, just as when we went ahead with conducting six nuclear tests without caring for their pressure." At his meetings with the British and French envoys, Sharif is reported to have said that he will not budge from his position that the Supreme Court judiciary has to be restored to its pre-Nov. 3, 2007 position.

But there is more to this than meets the non-probing eye. What Sharif wants is especially to reinstate Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Chaudhry was looking at the validity of Musharraf's Presidential election, and it was likely that he would have nullified that election. But, that was not what concerned Musharraf and Washington as much as what else Chaudhry was investigating.

Since the "war on terror" was unleashed in 2002, and Pakistan became an active partner, reports indicate the government has swept up at least 5,000 Pakistanis, most of them Baluchis and Sindhis seeking ethnic or regional autonomy, who have nothing to do with the U.S. campaign against terrorism.

Chief Justice Chaudhry came under attack from Musharraf when he claimed that his court had obtained the release of 25 detainees, out of 41 cases of disappeared persons under investigation by the court. The fact is that they were not released by the orders of the court, but during *habeas corpus* proceedings conducted by the secret service agencies.

According to one Pakistani analyst, if a reinstated Chief Justice Chaudhry insists on obtaining all records about the disappeared persons from intelligence agencies and tries to rein in such practices, the U.S. will have serious concerns. The fear is that such a judicial process may expose the role the CIA may have played in some cases. The evidence collected in Pakistan may be used in the United States. Some human rights organizations may also initiate litigation against American intelligence agencies. Hence, the analyst pointed out, the U.S. will try its very best to avoid the development of such a situation.