

Benazir Bhutto asks West to call Musharaff's bluff

Former Pakistan premier Benazir Bhutto says 'nothing could be further from the truth' than the long held western perception that President Pervez Musharraf's regime is the only thing standing between the West and nuclear-armed fundamentalists.

'The notion of Musharraf's regime as the only non-Islamist option is disingenuous and the worst type of fear-mongering,' she said in an article published here Monday, noting that Islamic parties have never garnered more than 13 percent in any free parliamentary elections in Pakistan.

'Much has been said about Pakistan being a key Western ally in the war against terrorism. It is the fifth-largest recipient of US aid - the Bush administration proposed \$785 million in its latest budget,' Bhutto said in an article in The Washington Post.

'Yet terrorism around the world has increased. Why is it that all terrorist plots - from the Sep 11 attacks, to Madrid, to London, to [Mumbai](#) - seem to have roots in Islamabad?' she asked.

Pakistan's military and intelligence services have, for decades, used religious parties for recruits. Political madrassas, Islamic seminaries, have spread by the tens of thousands, Bhutto said.

The West has been shortsighted in dealing with Pakistan, she said, suggesting that 'restoring democracy through free, fair, transparent and internationally supervised elections is the only way to return Pakistan to civilisation and marginalize the extremists'.

'A democratic Pakistan, free from the yoke of military dictatorship, would cease to be a breeding ground for international terrorism,' Bhutto said. 'Now is the time to force Pakistan's government to make good on its promise to return to democracy.'

Noting that President George Bush had told Musharraf to be 'more aggressive in hunting down Al Qaeda and the Taliban' along his country's border with Afghanistan and Vice President Dick Cheney had asked him to shut down Al Qaeda operations in Pakistan's tribal areas, she said, 'Clearly, the pressure is on.'

Western leaders are finally beginning to recognise that Musharraf's regime has been unsuccessful in taming the Taliban, which has regrouped in the tribal areas of Pakistan while the military regime has given up trying to establish order on the Afghan border, Bhutto said.

Meanwhile, in a strange coincidence, The New York Times Sunday suggested that the frustration of doing business with Musharraf is matched only by the fear of living life without him.

'For years, the notion that Musharraf is all that stands between Washington and a group of nuclear-armed mullahs has dictated just how far the White House feels it can push him to root out Al Qaeda and Taliban operatives who enjoy a relatively safe existence in Pakistan,' said Mark Mazzetti in an article in the influential daily.

'The spectre of Islamic radicals overthrowing Musharraf has also limited the Bush administration's policy options, taking off the table any ideas about American military strikes against a resurgent Al Qaeda, which has camps in Pakistani tribal areas.'

'But just how fragile is Musharraf's hold on power? And might the United States have more leverage than it believes?' Mazzetti asked.

The question of how to handle Musharraf is critical at a time when intelligence officials widely agree that the Taliban is expanding its reach in Pakistan, gradually spreading from remote areas into more settled regions of the country, he said.

The fear within Washington that Islamic extremism has become a dominant force in Pakistan has been stoked in part by Musharraf himself. Some analysts say his warnings are used to maintain a steady flow of American aid and keep at bay demands from Washington for democratic reforms.

But Robert Richer, who was associate director of operations in 2004 and 2005 for the Central Intelligence Agency, was quoted by the American daily as saying, 'I am not particularly worried about an extremist government coming to power and getting hold of nuclear weapons... If something happened to Musharraf tomorrow, another general would step in.'

Based on the succession plan, the vice chief of the army, Gen. Ahsan Saleem Hyat, would take over as the leader of the army and Mohammedmian Soomro, an ex-banker, would become president.

General Hyat, who is secular like Musharraf, would hold the real power. But it is unclear whether General Hyat would be as adept as Musharraf at keeping various interest groups within the military in line, the Times said.

While many in Washington agree that the threat of Islamic militants has become something of a useful foil for Musharraf, there is a rift about just how the White House should be treating the Pakistani president, it said.

Some counter-terrorism officials at the Pentagon argue that to the extent that Musharraf's government feels real pressure, it is from those within the Pakistani military who worry most about alienating Washington and jeopardising the flow of military aid to Pakistan.

On the other side of the debate, some State Department officials say that while Islamic militants probably would not topple Musharraf, why roll the dice?

The Democratic takeover of Congress has given the Bush administration its own useful foil in its negotiations with Pakistan, Mazzetti said.

Congress is unlikely to ever stem the flow of aid to Pakistan. But invoking Congressional frustration with the country could play on Pakistani fears that the United States is engaged in an ever tighter embrace with India. And within Pakistan, that is considered the greatest threat of all, he said.

Arun Kumar (© IANS / India eNews)