
PAKISTAN'S OPTIONS

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The horror and terror of September 11 has now turned into moments of suspense and worry. Pakistanis are familiar with acts of terrorism and its consequences. They, have, therefore, almost unanimously condemned the killing of innocent people in New York and Washington. There can be no justification for or rationale behind such acts. It does, however, call for reflection by the entire world leadership. The North needs to change its policies towards the South, just as much as the Muslim world needs to correct its rhetoric against "infidels" and promote a culture of democracy and tolerance within their own countries.

The solution to terrorism does not lie in "waging wars" but in bringing those responsible to justice and in ensuring that governments do not tolerate or promote terrorist gangs. A measured response is called for because an all-out war may polarize the world further, thus playing into the hands of the very forces which encourage terrorism. Since the international alliance against terrorism claims to fight this battle to protect freedoms, it will be expected to be transparent in its moves. It will require greater resolve to uphold the norms of justice, particularly in the face of an adversary who spurns universal values of freedom. The issue of terrorism is one of the most controversial in contemporary international law and politics. Acts of terror have been glorified as "freedom fighting" and genuine freedom fighters have often been dubbed terrorists. The United Nations too failed to define "terrorism" because the term is emotive and highly loaded politically. The League of Nations failed in 1937 to determine the parameters of "terrorism" and since then there has been no serious attempt to define the term, which continues to be used selectively and vaguely. But whatever definition one accepts, the tragedy of September 11 will cover it all, particularly as none has so far claimed responsibility for it. It has violated the right to live free from fear and the right to life, liberty and security.

The world has changed after September 11. Freedoms will now be compromised in favour of the pressing need for security. Despite the assurances of the West that its campaign will not discriminate against any religion or nationality, Muslims, Pakistanis and Arab nationals are experiencing more prejudice and bias. Airport terminals, employers, buyers and business houses of the West are being selective. The growing flow of refugees from Afghanistan will bring multiple problems for Pakistan. Despite foreign aid, our resources will suffer and our governance deteriorate. Many freedom fighters will be unfairly painted as terrorists and oppressive regimes will take advantage of this new wave of anger against "terrorism".

In the wake of efforts for a new world of security, Pakistan must strive to acquire a new image. It must be seen as being independent of the West but no friend of terrorist regimes or gangs. Above all, we must make sincere effort at cleaning up our cupboards of all the skeletons we have gathered over the years. Let there be no ambiguity about our present position. It was not courage but plain good sense that compelled us to side with the international community on the question of terrorism. The people of Pakistan are paying for the sins of their past leaders. It ought to be made amply clear so that we are not led into another myth, another trap by our leaders. Pakistanis take crisis well. This has been no exception. There is no panic and the common people have not taken to the streets in support of the Taliban regime. Their lack of support for the Taliban is not because they respect the government of the US—whom they closely associate with the Israeli atrocities against the Palestinians—but because there is a growing resentment against domestic *jihadi* groups and disrespect for the Taliban style of government. As such, there was a sigh of relief at the military regime's decision to join the world alliance against terrorism.

It was not courage but preservation that drove President Musharraf to fall in line with the alliance. The few *jihadi* groups and religious parties, who oppose the government's decision stand alone. The people have wisely decided to back the regime, not because they support army rule but because they have had enough of religious extremism. Tension between the army and the *jihadi* groups may bode well for the country and democracy but there will be a price to pay for the legacy of the past.

No one can predict the turn of events to follow. It is difficult to grasp the full impact of the future shape of globalization in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the US. So far the emerging signs are not very helpful for Pakistan. We have a tendency to jump to conclusions. The signals given by the West, and reinforced by our government, is that we will be awash with dollars for our support to the world alliance against terrorism.

Such expectations are unreal as the West will carefully watch a nuclear power with a military government at the helm and a tendency to promote obscurantist ideas and practices. The separate electorate system, the so-called Islamization of laws and periodic calls for *jihad* are breeding grounds for extremism—a spur for the worst type of conservative elements, which, given a chance, will keep us perpetually hostage to Ziaism.

If we wish to turn the present crisis into an opportunity for ourselves, we will have to find the political will to radically change our

domestic and foreign policies. It will require a sustained process towards democratization of Pakistan and promotion of higher human values and norms. As a first step the military government has to change its orientation and recognize the follies of the past. It has to take the lead in reining in the militant forces they so openly patronized at one time. At the same time, political forces have to be involved in mobilizing public opinion and in decision making at this critical juncture. Therefore, general elections should be held sooner rather than later.

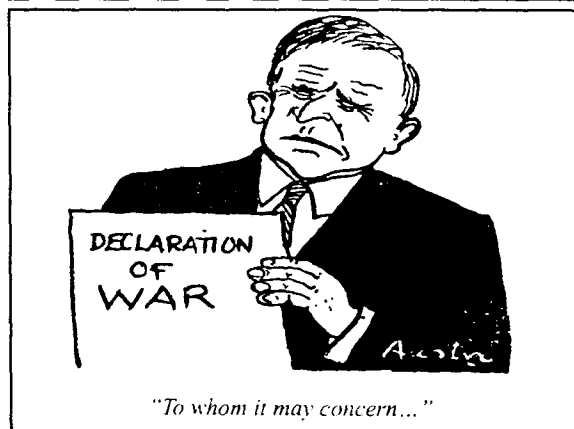
The government can force people to attend its rallies but it cannot command the receptivity and enthusiasm needed to carry the actual message of the moment far and wide. The armed forces can easily control the militants but recent events have shown that without involving the political forces, the military cannot motivate and mobilize the people sufficiently to express their strong disapproval of acts of terrorism carried out in the name of religion.

Militant religious groups could easily exploit the emotions of a large conservative fringe in the country if they are seen to be taken to task because of the demands of the West and without visible support of the people of Pakistan. Any such backlash will only strengthen militant groups and marginalize the people, silencing their voices infinitely.

The campaign against terrorism, as it is being called, will last quite a while, its first target being Osama bin Laden and the Taliban regime in Kabul. This puts Pakistan's foreign policy in a dilemma. The Northern Alliance, an avowed enemy of Pakistan, will be on board to push the Taliban southwards. As a reward, the Northern Alliance will ask for their piece of the cake when the booty in Afghanistan comes to be distributed. Pakistan will need better political and diplomatic skills along with a vision to play a positive role in the emerging context. It is, therefore, imperative that the democratic process starts immediately so that a broader-based government brings full force of public opinion to bear on the critical decisions that are clearly involved.

Generally, politicians rather than generals have a better understanding of political dynamics and will be more willing to take a regional approach in the days to follow. Pakistan must acquire an image of a serious player with a fresh approach in building peace in the region. We are being led to the final crossroads with an opportunity to choose between being regarded as hidebound or counted as a mature player, capable of moving ahead with a new resolve and confidence.

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On Pat Robertson's influential American Christian programme, the 700 club, Falwell claimed: "I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle ... the American Civil Liberties Union, People For the American Way (a civil rights group), all of them who have tried to secularise America... I point the finger in their face and say: 'You helped this happen'."

With Falwell identifying lesbians as the culprit, can it be long before American politicians demand that aircraft carriers be sent to Lesbia, so the Lesbianese government can be forced to hand over Osama bin Lesbian or face the consequences?

Courtesy Private Eye, Sept.-Oct, 2001