

Abdul Kalam: 'Missile Man' as India's President - An appeal to crass militarism

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By choosing to nominate APJ Abdul Kalam as its candidate for Presidential elections next month, the Vajpayee government has sent out an unambiguous message: It has no compunctions in making an appeal to crass militarism to advance its narrow parochial interests. And by going along with the nomination or co-sponsoring it, the bulk of India's Opposition parties – the Left alone stands out as the exception – have shown they lack the stomach to question jingoistic nationalism.

Mr Kalam is India's "Missile Man", lionised and glorified as such. He was awarded the highest honour the Indian state gives – the "Bharat Ratna", or the Jewel of India – many years before Amartya Sen, known for his liberal and anti-militaristic views, received it, after winning the economics Nobel Prize. In principle, elevating Mr Kalam to India's Presidency is no different from making Dr A.Q. Khan, the "Father of the Pakistani Bomb", that country's president.

Mr Kalam has only two public faces: devotion to militarism, and his image as a Muslim, which fits the stereotype constructed by the Hindu-chauvinist core of India's present ruling coalition, represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party. Unlike most Indians, and the vast majority of Indian Muslims, Mr Kalam is a vegetarian. He believes more in Hindu scriptures than the Koran. He takes pride in knowing Sanskrit but no Urdu. He plays the rudra verna and reads the Bhagwad-Gita.

His first face is the more important of the two. But the second is not unrelated to it. The Hindu-sectarian BJP is totally militaristic in its outlook, and wants Muslims to "Indianise" themselves, i.e. adopt "Hindu" (read Brahmanical upper-caste) ways. Its anti-Islam, anti-Pakistan ideology is closely connected with its obsession with nuclear weapons and missiles.

The BJP decided to nominate Mr Kalam for utterly cynical reasons. The "Missile Man" was not its first choice. Its original favourite until June 8 was Vice-President Krishna Kant. Then, it suddenly switched to Maharashtra governor P.C. Alexander. The reasons were connected with the BJP's bid to topple a Congress-led government in Maharashtra, and Home Minister Advani's attempt to score a point against Mr Vajpayee.

At this point, the BJP's internal power dynamics took over. Mr Vajpayee proposed Mr Kalam's name basically to outmanoeuvre his own party colleagues. He succeeded.

Mr Kalam lacks experience in public life, government or Parliament. In India's Constitutional scheme, the President's is a non-executive but political office. He/she is called upon to counsel the Cabinet and exercise discriminating judgment on sensitive matters.

The President need not have a party background. But s/he cannot be uncoached in politics. Most Indian Presidents have been academics, typically with high qualifications from world-class universities. But they have also been experienced diplomats, administrators or legislators with an understanding of the Constitution and politics.

Mr Kalam lacks such experience or orientation. He is an engineer who became a manager of

cloistered defence-related programmes, with little exposure to the broader process of governance. He is wrongly thought to hold a PhD in science or engineering. His doctorate is purely honorary, like Margaret Thatcher's.

Kalam has an overly-simple, untutored and at times unpardonably naïve understanding of political issues. Even a casual reading of his books, *Wings of Fire* and *India 2020*, will confirm this. Naivety marred his first two post-nomination press conferences, at which he evaded inconvenient questions. He also attributed the recent avoidance of war with Pakistan to nuclear deterrence, which is at odds with the official view.

Strangely, Mr Kalam believes India is a "developed nation". "We are among the top five ... in terms of GDP... Our poverty levels are falling, our achievements are being globally recognised today. Yet we lack the self-confidence to see ourselves as a developed nation." Underdevelopment is not just a function of GDP. Even in nominal GDP terms, India is lower than Holland (pop. 15 million).

The per capita income-differential between India and the developed world is roughly 1:40, higher than 50 years ago. India's poverty ratios are not falling. At any rate, what should shame Indians is not just poverty, but also staggering income inequalities. Mr Kalam has no understanding of these, or of the structural constraints, including hierarchy, caste and illiteracy, which keep India backward.

Mr Kalam shows little comprehension of the complex, double-edged character of technology, especially its destructive aspect: nuclear missiles, biological weapons and mind-control technologies. He ardently advocates investing in the Military-Industrial Complex as the key to "development". The ethical questions posed by mass-destruction technologies do not bother him.

Mr Kalam's thinking is replete with poorly constructed, half-baked or undigested ideas. For instance, he advocates "bio-implants" for "deficient" brains (reminiscent of eugenics?), using nuclear fission (why?) to power short-haul airplanes, and combining the occult with modern science. He believes India is eminently capable of making anti-ballistic missile defence shields, when even the US has so far proved unable to master that technology which involves, among other things, reliably detecting launches in distant continents, and then accurately attacking incoming missiles – akin to hitting a bullet with another travelling at the same velocity!

As Princeton-based physicist M.V. Ramana says, Mr Kalam tends to "dress up even mediocre work with the Tricolour to pass it off as a great achievement. In his autobiography, he says he reverse-engineered a Russian rocket-assisted take-off system, simply borrowing the crucial motors. Publicly, however, it was passed off as an 'indigenous development'".

Although he is routinely called a "scientist" by the media and by political leaders, Mr Kalam is not that. He is an engineer who has manipulated aspects of the physical reality – essentially to military ends.

Mr Kalam is not a great engineer either. The performance of the two government institutions closest to him, Indian Space Research Organisation and Defence Research and Development Organisation, has been deeply unsatisfactory. Besides the rather primitive, short-range Prithvi (range, 150-250 km), their most important achievement has been the Space Launch Vehicle rocket in the 1970s. But this used an imported, not Indian, guidance system.

The SLV-3 was the base (actually, the first of two stages) for the original Agni (range, 1,500-2,500 km). But that Agni model went through three tests – one success, one failure, and one "limited success" (i.e. partial failure) – before being declared a "technology demonstrator", rather than a prototype that would fly.

Since then, there has been a longer-range Agni-II (2,500 to 3,000 km), and a renamed, wholly new, Agni-I (range 700-900 km) unrelated to the original missile, which uses a solid, not liquid, fuel in its second stage. Both were developed largely after Mr Kalam quit the DRDO.

India's Integrated Guided Missile Development Programme (launched 1983) is not a success story. Of the five different missile-classes it was meant to develop, only the Prithvi and Agni have become (quasi-)operational. The Trishul, Nag and Akash are nowhere near that status, despite long delays and massive cost overruns.

No Indian Navy or Air Force ship or plane carries a DRDO-made missile. The army's main anti-tank missile, the Milan ATM, is French in origin. All three forces' anti-aircraft weapons are of Russian origin.

It is only fair to judge Mr Kalam by the performance of the DRDO. He headed it for long years. This record is embarrassingly poor. The DRDO has never completed a major project on time. Its weapons are often of indifferent quality. Some of its big-ticket projects, like the AWACS Advanced Airborne Warning Systems or the aircraft carrier, are big disasters. Its sole experimental AWACS crashed in January 1999.

Three of DRDO's most expensive projects, the Main Battle Tank, Light Combat Aircraft, and Advanced Technology Vessel (nuclear submarine) have each soaked up \$500 million-plus, without delivering results. The Arjun MBT is so heavy that the army prefers Russian T-90 tanks. The LCA doesn't even have an Indian engine. And the ATV's design isn't ready – after 20 years of “work”.

The cumulative spending on these projects so far exceeds India's entire annual budget on tertiary education!

The DRDO can burn almost \$1 billion of public money annually without producing decent results – at least partly because it is shielded from public scrutiny, including the Comptroller and Auditor General's. Such “power without responsibility” has given the military-industrial complex a bad name everywhere. In India, jingoism and militarist nationalism have made the MIC a holy cow.

In this respect, Mr Kalam represents the seamy, undemocratic side of the Complex. His elevation as President will put the terrible stamp of militarisation on India's highest office.

Mr Kalam will also serve to whitewash the BJP after the Pogrom of Muslims in Gujarat, carried out by the party and its associates with state collusion. He has repeatedly refused to condemn those culpable for the Gujarat massacre; he only says the events were “very sad”. His “Hindutva-friendly” image will marginalise all those Muslims who don't follow the BJP stereotype, but who are no less Indian for that.

India's non-executive President is meant to reflect and defend a pluralist culture. Mr Kalam does not. His election, which is a mere formality, is a blow to the cause of Indian secularism and peace.

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* “‘Missile Man’ as India's President”.

<http://original.antiwar.com/bidwai/2002/06/22/missile-man-as-indias-president/>