

Funding MMA, Punishing Hamas

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While the European Union and the United States have arrogantly denied the Hamas government any funding, they have been generously funding the coalition of fundamentalist parties ruling Pakistan's North Western Frontier Province (NWFP) for the past four years.

The Mutahida Majlis e Amal (United Action Council or MMA) is Pakistan's version of the Taliban. A coalition of six fundamentalist parties, its two major constituents are Jamiat Ulema Islam and Jamaat Islami. While Jamiat Ulema Islam has been patronising terrorist outfits like Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan, Jamaat Islami played a pivotal role in the anti-Soviet Afghan 'Jihad' in the 1980s and later in the Kashmiri 'Jihad' in the 1990s. Owing to its role as a recruiting agency for the Afghan 'Jihad,' Jamaat Islami has close relations with al-Qaida. Jamiat Ulema Islam, on the other hand, had distanced itself from the Afghan 'Jihad,' but later played an active role in Afghanistan since the Taliban were a product of madrassas (seminaries) run by Jamiat Ulema Islam.

In Pakistan's 2002 parliamentary elections, the MMA received 15 percent of the votes nationally, an electoral 'surprise' that rang alarm bells across the world. It was the MMA's fierce opposition to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan that paid them electoral dividends, particularly in Pakistan's third largest province, NWFP. Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the MMA chief and head of Jamiat Ulema Islam, once made headlines when he issued a fatwa legitimising the killing of any American sighted in Pakistan. In its election campaign, the MMA also promised to liberate the nation and economy from the IMF and the World Bank. While Hamas has never threatened the West or gotten itself involved in the al-Qaida network or so-called global Jihad, MMA's constituent parties have openly lent active support to global Jihad and al-Qaida. Not one but half a dozen al-Qaida militants arrested in Pakistan were nabbed from hide-outs provided by Jamaat Islami.

Jamaat Islami itself has been the main beneficiary of US largesse in Pakistan. But it has also delivered. It was pivotal in the US campaign back in 1977 to remove Zulfikar Ali Bhutto from power. The coup that saw Bhutto off was an early version of the CIA-backed anti-Chavez coup of four years ago. Bhutto died, Chavez survived. Perhaps Jamaat Islami was the missing factor in Venezuela?

A Jamiat-Jamaat combo called MMA formed the government in NWFP in the wake of the 2002 parliamentary elections. Did the US Senate veto any money to the MMA government even when Jamaat Islami was harbouring al-Qaeda activists? No, not at all. On the contrary, Nancy Powell, the then-US ambassador to Pakistan, paid the MMA leadership a visit in the NWFP capital of Peshawar. The meeting details are not available, but during her visit she spoke at a Peshawar University seminar where she revealed that her government wanted a dialogue with Muslims to remove 'misunderstandings' that exist on both sides.

The 'misunderstandings' were removed through Washington's economic tool: the World Bank. An 11-member World Bank delegation, led by Country Director John Walls, met the NWFP chief minister and expressed satisfaction with the financial discipline enforced by the MMA government. The reward for this financial discipline was a promise of an early release of a \$90 million tranche to the NWFP government for its Structural Adjustment Credit (SACIII).

There were a few other 'disciplines' that the MMA government had enforced that John Walls did not

praise. Dress code for students, for instance. Western-style trousers were banned. Prayers at work places became mandatory for government employees. Music was banned and Peshawar's historic Music Market was destroyed. The weirdest 'disciplinary action' was a code for billboards. Women's images on billboards were banned. This ban was a reaction to Jamaat-style ad-busting: Jamaat activists destroyed all billboards with women images. The oddest sight as a result of this ban was cinema houses' billboards. Life size signs outside of cinema houses have been part of the Indian sub-continent's film culture for years and Peshawar was famous for its exotic film hoardings. Now, after the ban, women's faces cannot be displayed, so instead such things as bangles and peacocks show their presence in the films' cast.

A town with limited possibilities for women to go out, Peshawar now became a totally-male town. Women could not be seen even on billboards. If an alien happened to visit Peshawar these days, it would certainly wonder how people reproduce here.

None of this has bothered the World Bank or the US aid agency, USAID. USAID at present is funding 14 different projects in NWFP. One funny project entitled 'Democracy and Governance' at 'capacity building' and to 'strengthen the oversight capacity of provincial legislature.'

Meantime, World Bank benevolence keeps showering upon the MMA government. Since its formation in 2002, the MMA government in NWFP has been granted World Bank aid worth \$378 million. At present, the World Bank is running five different projects with the NWFP government. On top of that, the NWFP received Earthquake Additional Financing worth \$10 million for one of the projects, while another \$50 million was granted as Supplemental Financing for yet another project: the NWFP Structural Adjustment Credit II (SAC II). The World Bank-funded SAC I and SAC II aim at implementing the neo-liberal agenda the donors have set for Pakistan. Under these adjustments, one of the key 'structural reforms' is to employ the state employees on an ad hoc basis in order to avoid future pension costs. The MMA has religiously implemented the 'structural reforms.'

After the NWFP government had enforced the 'structural reforms', MMA Chief Minister Akram Durrani was paid another visit, this time by Ryan Crocker who had replaced Nancy Powell as US ambassador to Pakistan. According to a newspaper report (published 12 April 2005), 'Ryan Crocker along with his team, called on NWFP chief minister Akram Khan Durrani here at Frontier House and agreed to reinforce the existing developmental ties between US and NWFP. The American envoy sought long term developmental partnership with the Frontier government to bring the two governments close to each other.' Do they need any further closeness when the MMA is sheepishly lending support to the US 'war on terror' in bordering Tribal Areas? In fact, both are already close and have always been since Cold War days.

One might wonder why the USA is supporting MMA despite the fact that MMA has sheltered al-Qaida and threatened to kill Americans. Is US strategy to coddle some pro-Taliban, pro-al Qaida fundamentalists to prevent them from growing and taking over the whole of Pakistan?

In fact, this 'contradiction' owes to opportunism on both sides. The MMA keeps presenting itself to the public as anti-imperialist. On the other hand, it is always ready to compromise. For instance, MMA keeps opposing General Musharraf but also helped him amend the constitution to enable himself to continue in power another five years. Similarly, in the case of the USA, the MMA compromises when it needs US money. It co-operated in the 'war on terror' going on in the Tribal Areas (a buffer zone between NWFP and Afghanistan) where Osama bin Laden is most likely hiding. On the other hand, the USA has been very selective and opportunistic. Instead of fighting mullahs en bloc, some of them have been co-opted. For instance, certain Taliban were co-opted (Mullah Rockety is now a member of the Afghan parliament), while others were put on a hit list. MMA co-operation was important for US Afghan policy post 9/11.

Moreover, the six MMA components are not all united in their relation to the USA. The Shiite and Wahhabist components oppose or support US actions depending on the preferences of their Iranian or Saudi mentors.

However, what is very obvious is that the United States has a very selective policy regarding mullahs. It is not fundamentalism Washington is fighting, but certain fundamentalists (who refuse to co-operate). The fact that none of the Pakistani Islamist organizations were on the US terror list prior to 9/11 shows the selectiveness of US opposition to fundamentalists.

Uncle Sam has never been a miser while blessing beards with dollars. The very same Bush administration, which is so busy today launching crusades, formerly embraced the Taliban. It was Secretary of State Colin Powell who himself announced a gift worth \$43 million for Taliban. Nor did the puritan Taliban have any qualms in accepting infidel money. This \$43 million was a reward for the Taliban's declaration that opium growing was contrary to the will of Allah. Of course, to the Taliban a lot of other things were also contrary to Allah's will, but that did not bother the Bush administration pre-9/11.

Last but not least, noting that Washington has been funding the MMA while punishing Hamas does not imply that MMA funding should be cut too. As a matter of fact, the USA has got no right to dictate to other people their way of life. The US double standards regarding Hamas and MMA drive home one message: what actually is decisive for Washington's sanctions is definitely not whether a group is fundamentalist or not, but whether it is a threat to US hegemony or not.

P.S.

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