

Musharraf's second coup: Not in my name

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On November 3rd, General Pervez Musharraf enforced his second coup, a little over eight years after the first one that brought him to power. His reason? That this was the only way to ensure that the so-called 'war on terror' remained on track. The brutality that has been exhibited by the regime in the three days since the November 3rd announcement of 'emergency' (read: martial law) has been plain for the world to see. However, some are still willing to argue that Musharraf is indeed right in asserting that only strong-arm measures can contain the spread of 'extremism'.

Let us not forget that the focus of the corporate media has only recently turned back towards the long forgotten 'other' front of the 'war on terror', namely Afghanistan. Accordingly General Musharraf's role in fighting the 'extremist' threat has also come into the spotlight. Over the past year or so there has been increasing pressure on the Bush administration from within the US to reevaluate its generous military and financial aid disbursements to Pakistan because there is a belief that the Pakistani military is not doing all it can in the mystical 'Pakistan-Afghanistan border region' where all of the world's militants seem to have converged.

Recently Benazir Bhutto has been permitted to return to the country by the military, a step widely believed to have been engineered in London and Washington. Ostensibly Bush and Brown see Ms. Bhutto to be crucial to pushing the agenda of 'moderates' and more specifically generating some kind of popular support for the 'war on terror', whilst also compelling the military to come through on its 6-year old commitment to challenging 'extremism'.

Notwithstanding the suspicions that much of the liberal elite in Pakistan may harbour vis a vis Ms. Bhutto – largely because of the populist history of her Pakistan People's Party – there does seem to be an emerging consensus within this elite that the question of how to handle the 'extremist' threat has emerged as the most important question facing Pakistan at the present time. Some 'moderates' might argue that this has been a concern for some time now — they have consistently issued warnings about the creeping threat of 'Talibanisation' since the regime of that name came to power in Afghanistan over a decade ago. Aside from the fact that the familiarity of the 'moderates vs. extremists' discourse can be attributed in large part to the ravings of the western media, it is true that alongside the situation in the areas immediately gripped by conflict, there is quite serious polarisation in adjacent parts of Pakistan, and that it is deepening with each passing day.

Over the past few weeks, there have been a spate of bombings and attacks that have been attributed to 'extremists', most directed at police and other security personnel, with the notable exception being the deadly attack on Benazir Bhutto's convoy on her return. The intensity of the attacks has seemed to increase in direct correlation to the intensification of American/Pakistani bombings of the tribal areas and more recently adjacent regions such as Swat. Notwithstanding the very real possibility that fragments of the state are involved in these attacks, the deteriorating situation in the country is of concern not just to the 'moderates' but to all Pakistanis.

In trying to make sense of what is going on at the present time, and particularly in objectively analyzing the moderates' case, it is crucial to bear in mind that the liberal elite has a history of being short-sighted at best, and downright hypocritical at worst in adjusting its politics to the perceived needs of the hour. It was a significant section of Pakistan's liberal elite that acquiesced to the cynical use of religion by military ruler Zia-ul-Haq following his coming to power in 1977. Such alignment apparently made sense at the time because the need of the hour was the elimination of the populist politics that threatened to reconfigure the balance of power in Pakistan in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As is now well-known Zia's Islamisation coincided with the use of jihad as a plank of strategic policy by Islamabad in consonance with the geo-strategic objectives of American imperialism in the region. And is also now well-known, the mujahideen of the 1980s have morphed into today's 'extremists'. Pakistan's establishment of course reluctantly agreed to the about-turn in strategic policy - at least formally - following the infamous ultimatum issued by President George W Bush to the General Headquarters (GHQ) a few days after the September 11 attacks.

Towards the end of the dark Zia period, the 'moderates' recognized just how significant the impacts of 'Islamisation' were, that they had aligned themselves to a regime that did not share their social sensibilities. Ever since the 'moderates' have been insisting on the need for the government to reign in the 'extremists' and prevent Pakistan from becoming a Talibanised pariah state.

More recently this narrative has evolved in a direction that raises serious questions for progressives that are confronting empire all over the globe, and in particular at the three major fronts of the 'war on terror': Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan. Specifically, Pakistani 'moderates' have been insisting that this is Pakistan's war or, more precisely, the Pakistani people's war. They argue that it is imbecilic to try and stave off what they believe to be an inevitable clash with 'extremists' — the tone is very often Huntingtonian - by taking refuge in the argument that this is America's war. Slightly nuanced versions of this argument look towards the 'judicious use of force' to win the hearts and minds of the Pakistani public.

Benazir Bhutto has been quoted as saying that the only long-term solution to the 'extremist' threat (within Pakistan at least) is to bring the tribal areas within the political mainstream and allow political parties to function freely there. To be fair, of all the possible options proffered by the 'moderates', this one seems to be the most far-sighted. Yet at the same time, Benazir seems intent on reinforcing the 'moderate' vs 'extremist' binary, deliberately kissing up to the US (and the West more generally), and thereby alienating herself from at least some of the people she would ostensibly hope to reach if and when a political process was initiated in the tribal areas.

What should not be lost on anyone is the fact that the spectre of 'Talibanisation' is acute only in certain geographical zones of the country, which is why Benazir's pro-America stance does not seem to have affected her traditional stronghold in, for example, Sindh (as evident from the reception she received on October 18 on her return to Pakistan). This is not to suggest that polarisation is not increasing or that more and more people will not eschew the mainstream political process if they perceive all major players to be only fighting over the scraps being thrown their way from Washington, but only to point out that it is important to keep the premonitions of the 'moderates' in perspective.

The fact of the matter is that what is going on in the tribal areas and spreading into some of the settled Pakhtun districts is a function of America's war — a war that started in the late 1970s and has now morphed into something quite different in accordance with Uncle Sam's changed geo-strategic priorities. It is true that the Pakistani state — and particularly the military — has had a stake in both this and previous wars in the region, and that, to this extent only, this is Pakistan's war. But to suggest that this is the Pakistani people's war is almost perverse.

It is not the Pakistani people's war because jihad was sponsored not by the people but by the American and Pakistani establishments, and similarly the decision to now combat jihad is not a decision of the people but that of the American and Pakistani establishments. To suggest that it is the responsibility of people to clean up the mess that has been created by the CIA's and ISI's cynical use of religion, and their systematic promotion of violence within a particular set of communities, is to very conveniently assume that the people also see the world in straight lines like the 'moderates' view the 'extremists'.

What people do see at the present juncture is a behemoth in the form of the US, waging endless war with the support of the Pakistani military that has turned against the very forces that it once cultivated. Thus there is deep anger and in the absence of serious political alternatives — a grim reality for which one also has America and the GHQ to thank — the rise of rightist forms of resistance is hardly surprising. Meanwhile the military is wracked by internal conflicts over the abandonment of a time-tested strategic

policy, which is giving rise to intrigue of an altogether more treacherous kind. There is also severe demoralisation within the military's rank and file, as it becomes painfully clear that this is not an epic historical battle between 'moderates' and 'extremists' but rather a fallout of the self-serving policies of the US, the most brash imperial power the world has ever known.

Now that the war is at the doorstep of Pakistanis, one can understand the dilemmas that have been plaguing radicals in Palestine for many years, or comrades in Iraq for almost as long. As the 'war on terror' has inflicted death and destruction on more and more Palestinians and Iraqis, 'Islamists' have seen their support base expand. The global anti-war movement faced questions soon after the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003 about the fact that a major section of the Iraqi resistance was motivated by 'Islamist' ideologies of various kinds. At the time the consensus seemed to be that such was the nature of the contradiction that it was impossible to raise opposition to such forces at that particular juncture.

In Palestine, the consensus has been even more widespread. Specifically, Hamas is hardly considered by most observers to be a fountainhead of progressive politics, yet over the past couple of years progressives everywhere have found themselves turned into supporters of the organization as the treachery of the US, Israel and increasingly Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah becomes more and more difficult to ignore.

It is true that the nature of the contradiction that has emerged in the wreckage of imperialist war in Iraq, Palestine and Pakistan-Afghanistan must be considered in all of its contextual specificity. Pakistan does have internal cleavages that it must confront, which to some extent derive from the dialectic of state and Islam that reflects the country's genesis as a prospective home for the subcontinent's Muslims. As a distinct ethnic group, the Pakhtuns (who are spread out across Pakistan and Afghanistan, and are the dominant ethnic group in the latter; the Taliban, for example, is as much an Islamist entity as a Pakhtun one) also need to delve into their history and seek to resolve the long-standing tension between the legacies of non-violence (as exemplified by the Gandhian Red Shirts movement) and 'Islamist'/tribal militancy.

However, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the 'Islamist' wave has intensified as the Americans and their stooges everywhere have become more shameless about the use of indiscriminate force. For example to engage in the utterly useless debate over the balance of power in the tribal areas between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, a favourite of the media, is to gloss over the more important fact that bombing the place into the stone age will serve only to confirm what the British concluded about the Pakhtun tribes well over 150 years ago — fighting them indiscriminately is a sure recipe for failure.

In the 20th century too, the US learned in many cases that its huge

military advantage counted for naught when fighting a guerilla force that had won the hearts and minds of the local people who were facing the brunt of the warfare. Add to this the fact that under the Pakhtun tribal code, refuge is provided to outsiders believed to be the victims of injustice even when they are not necessarily personal favourites.

America's war is plunging the region into a crisis from which it looks increasingly unlikely to emerge. The only responsibility that the people of Pakistan and Afghanistan must accept is that to free themselves from the suffocating clutches of imperialism and its local stooges. 'Moderates' speak only for themselves when they call this a people's war. This is an imperialist war, and while all progressives continue to confront difficult questions about the rise of rightists in the wake of this war, putting our weight behind the aggressors surely will not serve progressive causes in any meaningful way.

If nothing else, this fact should be clear in the aftermath of the imposition of 'emergency'. Everyone in Pakistan committed to a secular, democratic order is currently being victimized while the 'extremists' that the media usually harps on about have suddenly disappeared from the radar screen. The Pakistani military is and always will be the nemesis of a truly progressive alternative, and so long as it continues to be patronized by the most reactionary American administration in decades, the situation in Pakistan and the region will only deteriorate.

P.S.

* From ZNet.