

Musharraf's Memoir Sets Cats Among Pigeons

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NEW DELHI, Oct 4 (IPS) - By launching his memoir amidst a two week-long high-powered publicity blitz across three continents, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has set a cat, or rather several cats, among the pigeons.

He has raked up issues long considered settled, made abrasive or disparaging remarks about his former colleagues, superiors, allies and friends, claimed credit for Pakistan's unique and irreplaceable role in the United States-led 'global war on terror', and demanded that the world must pay attention to Pakistan's concerns and respect it as a 'responsible' nuclear state despite the nuclear blackmarket or 'Wal-Mart' run by the A.Q. Khan network.

Musharraf has thus, expectedly, generated controversy and contention with the volume 'In The Line of Fire'. He has attracted more anger, resentment and hostility than sympathy, support or affection. But he has also thrown up challenges, which neither South Asian policy-makers nor world leaders can ignore.

Musharraf's foremost priority in the book is to project himself as an indispensable Western ally in the war against terrorism, especially terrorism related to extremist Islam. As he told BBC Radio last week, "you [the West] will be brought down to your knees if, Pakistan doesn't cooperate with youà If we were not with you, you would not manage anythingà If the ISI (Pakistan's Inter-Services-Intelligence Agency) is not with you, you will fail."

Musharraf also presents himself as a bulwark of moderation, determined to wean Pakistan away from all forms of religious intolerance and fundamentalism. In that role too, he claims he is irreplaceable.

The book's content and composition reflect Musharraf's purposes and priorities. The part devoted to "The War on Terror" occupies 82 pages, while the entire section on his pre-coup army career claims 39 pages. The highly controversial chapter on the 1999 Kargil conflict with India across the Line of Control in Kashmir is only 12 pages long.

The text totally masks Musharraf's identity as a general. Of the 32 post-1999 coup photographs of Musharraf in the book's 16-page picture folio, only five show him in uniform.

The impact of Musharraf's book stands greatly magnified by the talks, interviews, panel discussions, press conferences and other media events organised around it.

Perhaps never before has a head of state published his or her memoir while still in service, and promoted it at state expense in such an extravagant way. Many people in Pakistan have objected to Musharraf using in the book privileged information available to him as head of both state and government. The government also bore the bulk of the expenses of his fortnight-long foreign tour, with a 70-strong entourage.

Many South Asian analysts see the timing of book's publication as related to Musharraf's likely plans

for presidential elections in Pakistan, due next year under a Supreme Court-stipulated deadline.

Says Kamal Mitra Chenoy, from the School of International Relations at Jawaharlal Nehru University: "It's highly probable that Musharraf will contest the elections."

"But there may be a deeper game", adds Chenoy. "By telling the West that he is indispensable, he is creating the ground for tolerance of a certain level of rigging or manipulation in the elections. He would like the United States, which has long indulged him, to turn a blind eye to electoral malpractices so that a reliable ally will stay in power in a 'sensitive country'."

Whatever the links between the book and Musharraf's plans, each major contention or "disclosure" in it has been contradicted by those involved in events pertaining to them.

- Musharraf claims that the Kargil operation was a great "victory" for Pakistan and "a landmark in the history" of its army. But Pakistan earned international reprimand for crossing the Line of Control. Eventually, under U.S. pressure, it had to withdraw from all the territory it had seized. Hundreds of lives were lost. The claims vary between 725 and 2,700 (the latter according to former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif).

- Musharraf claims that he had kept Sharif in the picture as regards the Kargil intrusion plan and preparations. This is contradicted not just by Sharif, but by former foreign minister Sartaj Aziz too.

- Musharraf says that former U.S. official Richard Armitage told the ISI chief in September 2001 that if Pakistan does not join America's war on terror, the U.S. would bomb it "back to the Stone Age!" That was the "strong" message Bush wanted delivered. Bush expressed surprise over this. Armitage has totally denied it. The former ISI chief has been incommunicado.

- Musharraf claims that the Pakistan government had no inkling of the strength and ramifications of the A.Q. Khan network. In particular, it knew nothing about shipments of uranium centrifuges and other components and designs from Khan laboratories. However, it is impossible for Khan to have transferred 18 tonnes of equipment from high-security premises to the airport and then out of Pakistan without the army's knowledge and approval.

"The General may have shifted stance and even made a U-turn on some issues like the Taliban-al-Qaeda", says Chenoy. "But he did so only under pressure, because he had no choice. In turn, he is now mounting pressure on the West."

At all probability, Musharraf deliberately exaggerated the threat communicated by Armitage. But his purpose was to remind Bush of the assurances reportedly given to Musharraf in 2001 in respect of Afghanistan and India. Musharraf was apparently told that Washington would help contain the Northern Alliance and accommodate more Pushtuns in the government; also, it would help in getting India to discuss Kashmir.

Musharraf has been pressing for accommodating what he calls "moderate Taliban". He has just reached a deal with pro-Taliban tribal leaders in the North Waziristan agency on the Afghanistan border.

This deal will create a virtual sanctuary for the al-Qaeda-Taliban and is viewed by many in Washington with suspicion. But Musharraf appears to have won Bush's backing for it.

The challenge the West faces is how to keep Musharraf on board without letting him appease the Taliban and other extremists for short-term reasons. The Anglo-American forces in Afghanistan are too exhausted to fight. NATO forces are replacing them, but their strength seems inadequate to stop

the Taliban's growing resurgence.

Musharraf claims to be a bulwark of moderation, but his reforms against extremist and obscurantist practices have been half-hearted. He banned terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba. But he has not taken action against their revival through false identities like Markaz-ud-Dawa.

How far, and by what means the U.S. can push Pakistan towards a moderate Islamic society remains unclear. Any overt pressure will provoke a hostile popular response. Covert, subtle, pressure may not work.

India too faces a challenge. On the one hand, New Delhi is committed to the bilateral dialogue process with Islamabad launched in January 2004. On the other, it seriously suspects that Pakistani secret agencies, or some elements in them, have been involved in recent terrorist incidents in India, including the Varanasi and Mumbai bombings.

Musharraf's boastful claims about Kargil, in particular his view that no progress in the bilateral dialogue could have taken place without Kargil, have upset many Indian policy-makers and ùshapers. Some say he cannot be trusted as a reliable dialogue partner.

This lobby's weight has risen following last week's announcement by the Mumbai police that 11 Pakistanis who entered India committed the July blasts in Mumbai.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh still remains inclined to take Musharraf at face value on the agreement to create a "joint mechanism" on terrorism, which the two announced at Havana last fortnight.

Although Pakistan says that so suspects will be arrested and handed over to India under the "joint mechanism", its position may change if India presents comprehensive and unimpeachable evidence of Pakistani involvement in the Mumbai blasts.

P.S.

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