

Responding to Musharraf's self-goal

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The deportation of Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia will only further inflame popular sentiment against Musharraf.

In medieval times, despotic rulers would routinely exile anyone they didn't trust or like—emerging military rivals, potential future claimants to the throne, even petty criminals. Banishment was a rough-and-ready way of keeping “troublemakers” away from societies, which had no pretence to delivering justice based on objective criteria, or to defending citizens' rights. (Indeed, such rights didn't exist.)

On Monday, Pakistan witnessed a modern version of this obnoxious practice when President Musharraf's government deported Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia. On arrival at Islamabad airport, Sharif was served a warrant charging him with money laundering. Logically, he should have been arrested and put on trial. Instead, he was manhandled, humiliated and summarily deported.

Only the naïve will buy into the propaganda that Pakistani and Saudi negotiators offered Sharif “the choice” to be jailed or deported, and that he preferred the second. Even if one assumes that he was reluctant to face incarceration—and some of my Pakistani friends believe he almost broke down when jailed in 1999—, it's hard to imagine that he would have so easily spurned the chance of becoming a powerful symbol of the anti-Musharraf resistance, which would have brought him political advantage. Besides, he would probably have been granted bail.

If Sharif were an astute politician, he would have staged a dramatic sit-in at the airport and made a fiery anti-regime speech. Instead, he allowed himself to be browbeaten.

However, that doesn't let the Musharraf government off the culpability hook. It stooped low by invoking an extra-constitutional “secret” agreement, and privileging it over his fundamental right, pronounced “inalienable” by the Supreme Court, to return home. This does not behove a government with elementary respect for the rule of law.

Musharraf has only brought discredit upon himself by this act. This will further inflame popular sentiment against him, and more broadly, the Pakistan military. Even an outside observer can't fail to notice the great currency, which anti-military slogans have acquired in Pakistan's public discourse in recent weeks, especially since the May 12 events in Karachi.

Sharif has recently gained in popularity, in contrast to Benazir Bhutto, precisely because he has tried to relate to the popular mood and taken a strong position against another term for President Musharraf, whether in or out of uniform.

At any rate, Musharraf seems bent on committing blunder after blunder, as if driven by a self-destructive calculus. This is typical of the way all authoritarian regimes behave once they start losing legitimacy. After Sharif's return, Musharraf's best bet would have been to put him on trial in a transparent and fair manner, and while on bail, allow him, like all others, to engage in political activity leading to free and fair National Assembly elections.

Musharraf seems to have set the stage for another showdown with the Supreme Court, which ruled in favour of Sharif's right to come home by virtue of his citizenship. Its spirit was clearly to affirm his right to live in Pakistan. Deporting him to Saudi Arabia, with whom the Musharraf government signed a collusive agreement, makes nonsense of this rationale. If Sharif is a fugitive from the law, it makes no sense to banish him.

The Pakistan Muslim League-N has moved the Supreme Court asking it to order the government to allow his immediate return. It would be a surprise if the Court does not rule in its favour. That would only bring the government more ignominy.

It would convince the public that the government is neither capable nor willing to meet a challenge politically. This is likely to foment vigorous mass protests. Under state repression, some of them could turn violent. The government will probably cynically try to exploit this by engineering inter-ethnic conflict, or prepare the ground for imposing martial law or emergency. That would be a disastrously reckless move.

That's where the "foreign hand" comes in. The United States has been aggressively "proactive" in Pakistani affairs and provided support to Musharraf. Although the US says that Sharif's deportation is Pakistan's "internal matter", Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia (and "Virtual viceroy"), Richard Boucher was present in Islamabad just when the drama was taking place. He was joined in Islamabad by the Deputy Secretary of State, John Negroponte.

Clearly, the US wants to directly supervise a power-sharing arrangement between Musharraf and Bhutto.

Just last month, Musharraf was contemplating the imposition of emergency. But Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, famously warned him against this a late-night telephone call. How the US will behave today is anybody's guess. If it acts in the myopic fashion typical of it, with "counterterrorism-at-any-cost" as its preoccupation, it may go along with adventurist measures by Musharraf to "contain" violent protests.

The Musharraf's regime talks with Bhutto ran into a crisis because the General rejected her demand for amending the Constitution to allow Prime Ministers a third term. The US desperately wants to bring Ms into a power-sharing deal—not least because she has promised to do its bidding, but also because it fears that Sharif might again ally himself with the "moderately Islamist", Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA).

However, none other than Musharraf struck a deal with the MMA and brought it into the rag-tag alliance, which rules under him. Washington also underestimates the strength of the pervasive anti-American sentiment in Pakistan.

Earlier fuelled by resentment against the US for "leaving Pakistan in the lurch" after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, has grown in recent years, thanks to Pakistan's recruitment into the US-led Global War on Terror in the badlands along the Afghanistan border, in which thousands of Pakistani soldiers have lost their lives. In Pakistan, favourable opinion of the US is as low as 15 per cent, according to a Pew Global Research survey—the third lowest in the world. Any overbearing US intervention will prove unpopular and destabilising.

Not to be discounted is Saudi Arabia's collaboration with Musharraf in deporting Sharif, who is in all probability, now a captive of sorts in Jeddah. It's unclear that he'll be allowed to leave that country even if the Pakistan Supreme Court orders his return. Saudi Arabia, a state deeply compromised with the US, is messing in Pakistani affairs—a fact resentfully reflected in the growing popularity of

anti-Saudi slogans among anti-Musharraf protesters.

The Indian government's position that the turmoil in Pakistan is its "internal matter", and that "we want a peaceful, prosperous and stable neighbour", might appear even-handed. In reality, India has tended to put all its eggs in the Musharraf basket. National Security Adviser, MK Narayanan declared (July 29) that "the worst is over" for Musharraf and there's been "no major dent" in his influence because he accepted Chief Justice Chowdhry's reinstatement "with grace".

Some Indian officials have misread the meaning of Sharif's deportation. They reportedly feel "a grudging admiration" for Musharraf's handling of it. For the past year, India has been in contact with Bhutto, but not Sharif. This needs correction—with a statement that India would like a "smooth democratic transition" in Pakistan.

There's far too much at stake in Pakistan for its neighbours or the larger world to be indifferent to its people's struggle for full democratisation, which deserves solidarity and support.

P.S.

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