

Iraq War — The View From Islamabad

by Pervez Hoodbhoy¹

Shock-and-Awe may have earned the United States fear and respect in Pakistan, but not much affection or admiration. The daily televised destruction of Baghdad with cruise missiles and bombs hailing down from the skies, smashed bodies and decapitated children, bombed out hospitals, women and children shot dead at checkpoints manned by the Marines - these have aroused intense emotions. Hundreds of thousands have poured out into the streets of Pakistani cities. Impotent anger finds expression in burning effigies of George Bush and Tony Blair, and ineffectual attempts to boycott American products like Coke and KFC

Given the power of such sentiments, one might have expected that, by now, America's war would have been declared by Pakistan's religious leaders as a war between Islam and kufr (unbelievers). Our bearded ones, who generally lose little time in declaring holy wars, should have long declared that Muslims are the target and must fight the infidel. Indeed, since George Bush and his cohorts possess the moral ideology of evangelical Christianity and use its vocabulary unsparingly, Pakistani Muslims must surely perceive the War on Terror as an American Christian jihad against Islam. Right?

Astonishingly - and quite contrary to my initial expectations - it has not been this way. In most protests, the humanitarian and universalistic aspect has dominated the religious. Slogans, banners, and speeches follow, for the most part, more or less what one finds elsewhere in the world - "No Blood For Oil", "We Want Peace", "Bush-Blair Crimes Against Humanity", etc. To be sure, some are explicitly Islamic in character and call for jihad, blame Jews and Christians, and so forth. But these are far fewer than expected.

The reason is not difficult to fathom. People in Pakistan have been fascinated and touched by the tens of millions who protested in the streets of London, Washington, Rome, and hundreds of other cities around the globe. They see Christian France bravely taking on the US in the Security Council, the Pope condemning the war as a sin, Rachel Corrie standing in the way of an Israeli bulldozer and being crushed to death, thousands courting arrest in the US, and more.

To be quite honest, I did not think that these overseas protests would have much impact on our mullahs. After all, Pakistanis are born into xenophobia,

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taught to believe that they are surrounded by enemies, and subjected to horrifically poisonous textbooks in schools. But I am pleased to have been mistaken this time; it makes me more hopeful. I am even more pleased that there has been no repeat of extremist attacks on the Christian community in Pakistan. In previous months, anti-US feeling following the arrest of Al-Qaida members has sometimes translated into murders of Pakistan's terrified and helpless Christian minority.

But this salutary impact of the war, though pleasant to contemplate, is incidental. There are larger implications to follow for politics in Pakistan. One can, even now, clearly spot the losers and winners. Among the former are former prime-ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, both currently exiled, and hoping against hope that Washington will smile upon them and somehow restore their power and loot. But, because of their failure to forthrightly condemn the war, they have become increasingly marginalized in the public perception.

Unquestionably, the real gainer from the Iraq war will certainly be Pakistan's alliance of fundamentalist parties, the MMA. The MMA has come out, as expected, with a strident call against the US and the demand that Musharraf's government suspend its cooperation with the US in hunting down Al-Qaeda. The MMA is the only political party that has been able to mobilize huge numbers of people. However, for the moment, an unspecified combination of carrots and sticks appears to have persuaded them from pushing through a resolution in the National Assembly outrightly condemning the American invasion.

The MMA, which has successfully formed the government in two of Pakistan's four provinces is angling to get into the federal government as well by trying to cultivate a moderate image. However, it is firmly committed to the Talibanization of Pakistan. Almost immediately upon assuming office, the new government ordered a ban on the playing of music in public transport, required public buses to stop dead at the time of the 5 daily prayers, and closed down video shops and cinema houses. Folk singers have been threatened, abducted, and forbidden to sing in public. Cable television operators have seen their premises ransacked.

More lies in store. New laws, expected to be passed by the Frontier Assembly soon, will soon follow those of Afghanistan's former Taliban government, which the MMA admires and defends. For example, women without "hijab" and a chaperone may not leave their homes; shops shall not advertise sale of sanitary pads or undergarments; hair-removing creams and

lotions may not be sold; use of perfume and makeup will be banned; women will not be allowed to use male tailors; male doctors may not treat women patients; women guests at hotels will not be allowed in the swimming pool; coeducation has been identified as a cause of fornication and is to be phased out; family planning shall be declared un-Islamic; and sale of contraceptives banned.

General Musharraf, caught between popular sentiment against the Iraqi war and his regime's heavy economic and political dependence on America, has so far walked a tight-rope. Two months ago, in what appears to have been a characteristically thoughtless statement, Musharraf declared that Pakistan could very well be the next on US hit-list. He has refused to take a strong stand on the Iraq war. Whether out of fear, or hope of reward, as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, Pakistan refused to announce its outright opposition to Resolution 1441. It seems fairly certain that if it had been forced to vote, Pakistan would have abstained.

Today, General Musharraf provides but one example of the difficulty that the US will face as it sets about its messianic mission to change the world. Growing support for the MMA and the highest ever peak of anti-Americanism makes evident that the US can scarcely afford, must less work towards, representative democracy in most Islamic states. Although the stated objective in Iraq was claimed to be establishment of a democratic state, it is difficult to imagine that any popularly elected government in Pakistan, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iran, or Saudi Arabia would be acceptable to the US. Indeed, reviving monarchies and military dictatorships, backed up with awesome force, are currently Washington's best bet.

Imperial America's master plan calls for redrawing national boundaries in the Muslim world wherever necessary, and for recalcitrant nations to be forcibly occupied until they lose the will to resist. But this exercise of raw power, with a single-minded goal to subdue and subjugate, will not come cheap. The cost will go well beyond the expense of maintaining a dozen carrier groups and maintaining a million soldiers on five continents.

One cost is immediately apparent here in Pakistan. Most Americans have fled in spite of the fact that the Pakistani government is firmly allied with the US. The few who remain hide their presence, or move around in specially protected vehicles with tinted, bullet-proof glasses. I personally am sorry about this. Americans, as individuals, are among the finest of people and I have come to know America well. I am sad at not being able to invite my white-American friends and physicist colleagues to my country again.

Many have opposed the war. It is unclear if and when their security can be guaranteed. Tragically, the world - Americans included - will pay, and pay again, for Washington's imperial adventures.