

Waiting for democracy

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Now that Iraq has become a quagmire and a leading test of endurance, the United States is bound to be rethinking its strategy in Iraq as well as the Middle East. Whether the speech that President Bush delivered last week on the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy was a part of this exercise or not, it has prompted widespread comment as a possible shift in the US foreign policy. Essentially, it called for a democratic transformation of the Middle East and President Bush pledged new momentum to foster change in the Muslim countries of the region.

We, in Pakistan, should carefully analyse this message for very obvious reasons. In the first place, President Bush has asserted that Islam and democracy are not incompatible — something that our leaders have long maintained. Hence, any political change that takes place in Muslim countries will have great relevance for us. Then, any transformation in the American policy will have a meaningful impact on our own fortunes because we are a very close ally of the US in its war against international terrorism.

This, incidentally, was again underlined on Thursday by Nancy Powell, the US ambassador to Pakistan, in an important speech she made in Karachi. We may also decipher an echo in her remarks of the policy statement that President Bush had made in Washington. There were pointed references to the democratic imperative and the establishment of "a stable, moderate Islamic state".

First, however, we need to attend

to the pronouncements made by President Bush. One problem here, though, is that the messenger himself does not inspire much confidence or trust. Still, the message, calling for the democratisation of the Arab world, is very significant in the light of how the US has conducted its policy in the Middle East in recent decades.

In redefining the US agenda in the Middle East, the leaders of the world's only superpower has made this confession: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the cost of liberty". And he went on to say that "the United States has adopted a new policy" for the Middle East. Observers have noted that he did not single out America's traditional adversaries but also referred to Egypt and Saudi Arabia as countries that must change.

If the focus had not entirely been on the Middle East, perhaps because of the flaming situation in Iraq, would President Bush have also included Pakistan in this category? After all, President Hosni Mubarak, recipient of massive American aid, considers his government as democratic and he does not wear military uniform. But President Bush seems to be very pleased with how President Pervez Musharraf has conducted himself in the wake of our U-turn two years ago.

Not only that, the Pakistani leader is generally projected as an advocate of a moderate and progressive Islam to counter the lethal urges of extremism and fanaticism. Still, the fact remains that the US has in the past not only tolerated military dictatorship in Pakistan but has also propped it up. In any case, a "forward strategy for free-

dom" that President Bush has announced in the context of promoting democracy in Muslim Arab countries should not keep Pakistan out of its sphere.

Naturally, questions have been raised about the seriousness of the new American resolve, with reference to the realities that exist on the ground. President Bush has not elucidated the line of action that America would adopt. Observers are also discouraged by the record, so far, of the Bush administration. We have not seen

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much evidence of the promised 'Marshall Plan' for Afghanistan and the 'road map' for an Israeli-Palestinian peace has seen little movement. *The Washington Post* said in its editorial: "A policy to promote democracy in the Middle East, even if defined as the work of decades, will require not just soaring speeches but far-reaching changes in US practices and substantial costs".

Nonetheless, President Bush has pledged new momentum to foster broad change comparable to the end of communism in Eastern Europe. He said: "As long as the Middle East remains a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment and violence ready for export. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo".

Pakistan, come to think of it, figures almost as prominently as any Arab country in the context of 'exporting' religious militancy and its linkage with the Taliban has had a direct bearing on developments in Afghanistan. So let us return to remarks made by Nancy Powell in Karachi during a review of the US policy towards Pakistan. As I said, she has apparently reinforced the message delivered in Washington by President Bush.

For instance, she said that America

wanted to see strong Pakistani democratic institutions and practices, including a National Assembly that played a vigorous and positive role in governance and an independent judiciary that promoted rule of law. What America wants to see, we may judge, is not exactly there. She also spoke about the Javed Hashmi case and hoped that "the judicial system will be handled in a fair and transparent manner and with due regard for fundamental rights, including those of speedy public trial and access to counsel and family visitation".

In addition, she projected her government's concern that the banned militant groups were re-establishing themselves under new names and said that these groups posed "a serious threat to Pakistan, to the region and to the United States". This is something that has generated very

ambivalent feelings in the US about Pakistan's sense of direction, in spite of the professed American commitment to build a strong, long-term bilateral relationship with this country.

Strangely, both the US and Pakistan have a credibility problem with regard to translating rhetoric into action. If it is to be argued that Islam as a force is compatible with democracy, as President Bush has emphasised, then Pakistan should truly aspire to become a role model. Thus, the real issue is whether democracy can genuinely take root in Pakistan and if the US would play a proactive role in this transformation.

This question about the future of democracy in Pakistan in the light of its history of military intervention has reverberated in the minds of national and international analysts. Since American policies and perceptions are important in this deliberation, it may be useful to quote Stephen Cohen, who has for long been studying Pakistan and South Asia. He has also written a book about the immediate future of Pakistan in the context of the rise in religious militancy.

In an interview to *The Times of India* last week, he said: "There are deep divisions both in Pakistani society and its military on India. There are many generals who feel that the country must focus on domestic threats like extremism and poverty. I see only a small chance of real democratisation in Pakistan, a small chance that will go the Islamic extremist way, a small chance of it breaking up and a very great chance that military rule will continue. I would be really surprised to see democracy happening there".

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