

# From plebiscite to partition

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Kashmir

FOR President Musharraf to turn a page both on warfare and plebiscite in Kashmir may have come as a surprise, but is wholly understandable. He was the last of the generals who tried to wrest Indian-held Kashmir by force but could not.

Further, the obvious lesson that he has learnt from his five adventurous years in international politics — untrammelled by a parliament or diplomatic conventions — is that neither the United Nations nor the Muslim world he hopes to lead, not even Pakistan's best friends and allies, were prepared to lend support to a plebiscite in Kashmir.

Kargil was a covert and limited operation. The two operations preceding it were more covert and extensive but ended in a bigger fiasco. Soon after the partition of the subcontinent, as the Maharajah fled and his subjects grew restless, Brig. (later major general) Akbar Khan, under the inspiring *laskar* of General Tariq, led a tribal *lashkar*, which the Kashmiri dissidents and deserters from the Maharajah's forces were expected to join on its march, to capture Srinagar. The Indian army, however, landed in Srinagar before the ill-organized, assorted marchers, diverted by the lure of plunder could occupy its airport. That gave the Maharajah enough time and excuse to announce the accession of the state to India.

In 1965, too, a more elaborately planned covert operation commanded by Lt. Gen Akhtar Malik failed to convert a widespread simmering discontent in Kashmir against the Indian occupation into

them both by sending his political boss into exile and himself assuming absolute and stern control of politics and administration of the country. He shows but little sign of relenting that even after the elections.

President Musharraf's latest exhortation to look for a solution to the Kashmir dispute in ways other than military conquest or plebiscite has unleashed both hostile rhetoric and paeans. It deserved detached and critical consideration divorced from the politics and even the legality of his government. The solution that Musharraf has outlined rather imperfectly and in an off-hand manner should be viewed as just one of the many alternatives to plebiscite. The debate that ensues not in Pakistan alone but in India and in Kashmir might throw up some other solution more practicable and also acceptable to all three.

By rejecting it outright and threatening to resort to street agitation the opposition has sent a signal to the government and people of India that Pakistan would rather live with the Line of Control than seek a better dispensation short of plebiscite. Nothing would have suited India better. The Kashmiri leaders who have a much better understanding of the realities of life are prepared to consider any settlement which ends oppression and brings peace. If the people of Kashmir do not view Musharraf's idea or proposal as a betrayal of their cause why should the people of Pakistan?

By their thoughtless vitriol, the opponents of Musharraf have only provided an opportunity to India to restate its position that no proposal which calls into question the sovereignty of India over Kashmir can be considered. And

an open insurrection. Akhtar Malik was removed from the command just when he was in sight of the vital bridgehead of Akhnur across the ceasefire line. Indian forces then invaded Pakistan.

All the three operations were launched to secure the accession of Kashmir to Pakistan or, at least, to compel India to let the people of the state determine its future status. These operations, instead, produced negative results. India's military grip on Kashmir tightened, the Indians made it a part of the Indian Union, and the dissenters were either bribed or bludgeoned into submission.

Besides failing to achieve the objective, the three operations had two other common features: the commanders fell foul of their political bosses; and, second and more far-reaching, the army made deep inroads into the politics and civil affairs of Pakistan. General Akbar was cited as the principal accused and sentenced to the longest prison term in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy trial in 1951. That conspiracy, it was convincingly established years later by Hasan Zaheer, a former cabinet secretary, on the basis of official records, was no more than frustration expressed in drawing-room discussions on the government's Kashmir policy by some military officers joined by left-leaning intellectuals — Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Sajjad Zaheer among them.

General Akhtar Malik, after removal from the command, was sent off by Ayub Khan to a Cento sinecure job at Ankara. Both Akhtar and Akbar were widely held to be brilliant but maverick commanders who had the making of chiefs. That Akbar had some political inclination was borne out by his joining Z.A. Bhutto's cabinet some years after he was pardoned and released. Akhtar showed no such inclination but made no secret either of the contempt in which he held his superiors for conducting the 1965 war the way they did after sidelining him.

In soldiering, the mastermind of Kargil, General Musharraf, may be held somewhat in similar light as generals Akbar and Akhtar — the planners of the 1948 and 1965 operations — but in political skill, when it came to it, he outwitted

Musharraf's proposal despite all its gusto and many flaws does that. Even Pakistan's track-two columnist friend Kuldip Nayar has cau-

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tioned that all that Pakistan can hope for is softening of the Line of Control, for no Indian government would ever be able to muster the two-thirds majority in the two houses of the parliament required to abolish its sovereignty on any part of Kashmir. A Musharraf-like LFO does not work there.

Emotions on Kashmir and animus for the present regime aside, the opposition leaders should put forward their own proposals unless they wish to live in the vain-glorious hope of annexation. That would only impel the Kashmiris to seek their own settlement with India. In any case, life and liberty in Pakistan have not been an inspiring example for them. The aim is to end their agony. Any gain to Pakistan is incidental but important.

The politicians as a class have a selfish angle to consider: So long as the dispute on Kashmir lasts, the army will remain in the driving seat in Pakistan. For the nation their worry should be that with charges of terror and nuclear proliferation swirling around it, Pakistan will remain vulnerable to international blackmail or sanctions if we insist on playing truant.