



War on Iraq: Implications for Pakistan

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Pakistan is at present a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and also an important constituent of the US led War against Terrorism. Its internal political structure is precarious with a self appointed President coming to power through a debatable referendum, who is also the Chief of Army Staff. The Parliament, which is under the shadows of the Legal Frame Work Order (LFO) promulgated by the military regime, is hopelessly divided. Both the main liberal parties PPPP and PML-N have been deliberately kept out of power by political and legal manipulations. The main opposition comprises the religious parties, united under one banner - the *Muttahida Majlis Amal* (MMA), which came to power by exploiting the anti-American feelings.

The government, led by the PML-Q is seen as the King's Party and enjoys little real power. The opposition, especially the MMA, demands the active involvement of Pakistan in Iraq against the United States. The liberal-secular parties, led by the PML-N and PPPP remain silent with both their leaders outside Pakistan. What are the implications of War against Iraq on Pakistan, given these realities? Will the government's position assist Pakistan to achieve its interests? Will the present policy of Jamali's government provide internal political security? What would be the fallout in the social, economic and political spheres?

War on Iraq will impinge on the political stability of Pakistan

If the present policies of the government continue, it would make the polity unstable. The stance of the government before the war, according to the Prime Minister was that "should military action become inevitable, it be taken

within the framework of the UN". Later, in his first address to the nation through electronic media, he made it clear that it would "be extremely difficult for Pakistan to support war against Iraq." However, Pakistan decided neither to support nor oppose the second Security Council resolution introduced by US, UK and Spain, but to abstain. Why did it decide to abstain? The government was advised by the military that this was the only way out, given the precarious position, in which Pakistan was situated.

Pakistan is a main constituent in the US led war against terrorism which has resulted in yielded rich dividends. Had Pakistan not joined this war, it would have been bracketed under the category of 'rogue' states or the 'axis of evil'. By joining the coalition against terrorism, Pakistan was able to mobilize much-needed external economic support. Recently, George Bush lifted further sanctions that were imposed earlier on Pakistan. The US Senate, earlier this year had approved a package worth \$305 million for economic assistance of Pakistan to in 2003, while Bush has requested for \$389.25 million for the next year.

Apart from these political and economic incentives from abroad, there was enormous pressure on Pakistan to support the US efforts against Iraq. Pakistan is a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and the US expected it to vote in favour of its Resolution, as it was aware of the opposition from France, Russia and China. The fact that US Assistant Secretary of State, Christina Rocca flew to Islamabad during the last week of February, for a meeting with Musharraf was no coincidence. *The Los Angeles Times* has reported a Pakistani official saying that his country would support the Resolution, which was later denied by Pakistan.

On the other hand there is a growing opposition to

the country's support to the US, which is led by the MMA. The MMA has been organizing a series of 'million' marches, with two such big marches in Karachi and Rawalpindi. There is no popular support for the US war against Iraq or for Pakistan's policy towards it. According to a survey carried out by the *Herald*, before the war started, 68 percent of those surveyed wanted the Pakistani government to take an anti-war position, while 29 percent wanted it to remain neutral while 3 percent wanted the government to adopt a pro-war stance. (*Herald*, March 2003, pp.38-41.)

Being pressured by both sides, the government decided to abstain, as this was seen as the only way out to satisfy both sides. The government of Pakistan and the military had an option to placate both domestic opinion and external pressure. Had Musharraf pursued the Turkish model, in which Parliament was asked to take the decision, he could have addressed the internal opposition. By doing that, even if the outcome was against the war, he could have still addressed the US, that this was the decision of the Parliament and not his own. The US, being the 'protector' of liberal democracy and carrying the burden of introducing it in the Persian Gulf region, would have needed to accept this decision. However, Musharraf, did not want to take up this option, as it would have provided more powers to Parliament.

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might end up ultimately in destabilizing Pakistan. More importantly, Musharraf cannot afford the Parliament to set the objectives of Pakistan's foreign policy.

Thus, Parliament was kept out of the purview of an important decision, giving an opportunity and a

platform to the opposition for uniting against the government. Already "No LFO No" and "Go Musharraf Go" have become two major slogans inside Parliament. With Iraq providing an opportunity for the opposition to press against Musharraf, the latter will try to keep it under firm control, if not the entire Parliament under siege. Either way, this will be a recipe for political instability.

... and increase the support base of the MMA

The MMA, would undoubtedly be the main beneficiary of the US led war against Iraq. It had been mobilizing popular support against any attack on Iraq. The MMA is aware that it was able to garner political support during the October 2002 elections by its anti-US stand and by opposing Pakistan's involvement in the war against terrorism. If the anti-American sentiment could be whipped up again, it would be politically advantageous for the MMA.

Besides, if the war against Iraq can be portrayed as a war against Islam, it is sure to gain more political mileage. This was the main objective of its 'million' marches in Karachi and Rawalpindi. Invariably all the constituents and leaders of the MMA were present in these marches, which also witnessed posters of Saddam Hussain being carried and slogans for an Islamic Revolution being raised. Qazi Hussain Ahmed, the Amir of *Jamaat-e-Islami* and the parliamentary leader of the MMA, announced that, "an attack on Iraq will be considered an attack on Pakistan."

...and reduce the influence of liberal parties

If the MMA gains out of the war, then the liberal parties would proportionately lose their influence. A sustained effort by the MMA will eclipse the other political parties including PML-N, PML-Q and the PPP. For their own reasons, these secular parties have been keeping silent on Pakistan's support for the US, which will cost them dear in the long run. The Jamali government is seen as the puppet of the military, which is in turn being seen as US supporters. The PML-Q, for obvious reasons, cannot oppose the war openly. The PPP and PML N obviously need US support, if their leaders need to be let inside Pakistan. Hence Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have not made any statement against or favoring the war against Iraq. In the absence of any hint from their leadership, both

these parties have been keeping quiet inside Pakistan.

This silence would affect the liberal parties in the long run. Clearly a political vacuum has been created, which is paving the way for the MMA's onward march. The liberal parties have already become irrelevant in Baluchistan and NWFP mainly due to their silence against the US led war in Afghanistan. The war against Iraq will only increase their irrelevance and reduce their sphere of influence further in Punjab and Sind.

...and shift the political plane to the Right

Apart from the MMA gaining political mileage out of the war against Iraq, the other political implications would be the shifting of the political plane in Pakistan towards the Right. There may not be any unanimous approval of Saddam Hussain, but there is complete disapproval of the US efforts to remove him by force. A majority, irrespective of their secular or religious background sees the US attack on Iraq as being against a Muslim nation. This 'Muslim' factor is being exploited by the MMA; it would in future, pressurize even the secular and liberal parties to take up this cause. This has already happened in India, with the Ayodhya issue sponsored by the BJP shifting the political plane further to the Right, forcing even the Congress to shift its policies towards Right. The war on Iraq along with the war against terrorism, if continued for a longer period, would benefit the MMA, but affect the liberal base, or whatever is left out of it in Pakistan. In that case even the liberal parties such as the PPP and PML-N would be forced to lean towards the Right to adapt itself to these new realities.

...and affect the drive against Jihadi forces

Besides the MMA, another section that would benefit would be the jihadi forces. Although they do not have any sympathy for Saddam Hussain or Iraq, they definitely would exploit the anti-American sentiments in their favour. Both the military regime and the present 'elected' government have failed to curtail the activities of the jihadi organizations. The government has released more than 1000 activists belonging to the *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, *Lashkar-e-Jhangvi*, *Jaish-e-Mohammed* and *Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan*. Hafiz Saeed, the leaders of *Lashkar-e-Toiba* and Maulana Masood Azhar, leader of *Jaish-e-*

Mohammad were also released and have been allowed to move freely inside Pakistan. These *jihadi* organizations already started regrouping and it is feared that the military and the quasi democratic government has struck a deal with these organizations that they would focus only on the eastern side, meaning Kashmir, and not the western side, meaning Afghanistan and Pakistan.

With the *jihadi* organizations against the war on Iraq, the government in Pakistan may grant further concessions to placate them. Though such a policy may appear pragmatic, it is

bound to complicate the internal security situation for Pakistan in the long run. In fact this has been the precise argument, which was used in the early 1990s for using the Afghan *mujahideen* in Kashmir. That policy backfired, leading to a growth of the *jihadi* culture inside Pakistan.

The most serious implications for Pakistan's security will arise, once the war against Iraq is over. If the *al-Qaeda* emerged and became powerful, in the 1990s, it was mainly due to the post 1991 US policy towards the Gulf region, especially its stationing of troops in 'Muslim' soil. If Iraq is going to be administered, even for a short period by the US military, its substantial presence after the Second Gulf war in the region would multiply the supporters of *al-Qaeda* or may give birth to new communal forces. This phenomenon would surely comprises elements from Pakistan, irrespective of government's efforts to curb them.

...but may not affect the economy in a major way

The economic implications of War against Iraq will be on three counts. First, the war would result in increasing oil prices, as happened after the first Gulf War in 1991, thus increasing the cost of oil imports for Pakistan. Secondly, it would reduce foreign remittances, especially from the Gulf

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countries, as the Pakistanis working there are bound to return. Third it would affect Pakistani exports to Iraq, under the Food - for -Oil programme. In December last year Pakistan agreed to export 50,000 tons of wheat to Iraq, and in the previous fiscal year Pakistan had exported 100,000 tons of wheat. However, the aid inflow that has started pouring in after Pakistan's support for the US war against Terrorism will continue. With further such support in the pipeline, the war against Iraq may not have any significant effect on Pakistan's economy. Besides, Pakistan is also expecting a major share in the post War reconstruction of Iraq, which should benefit its economy.



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