Pakistan’s voice of reason

Two Pakistani scientists are known throughout the world. Disgraced engineer A. Q. Khan helped the country get the bomb. By contrast, Pervez Hoodbhoy has spent more than 30 years opposing it. A professor of physics at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Hoodbhoy is a long-time critic of religious extremism, irrationality and military rule. With the regime of President Pervez Musharraf facing an uncertain future, Hoodbhoy has emerged as an unlikely pioneer of the pro-democracy movement. Ehsan Masood caught up with him during a meeting of the Academy of Sciences for the Developing World in Trieste, Italy.

There are daily demonstrations in universities across Pakistan. What are the students and faculty members demanding? They want the restoration of the constitution and the rule of law, and an end to the state of emergency imposed by General Musharraf on 3 November. They want to address issues of the supreme court to be reinstated. Pakistani campuses have been closed and members of the supreme court to meet or take part in conferences. On the other hand, it would be wrong to ban or discourage Pakistani scientists and students from visiting the west or its institutions.

Do you share the concerns of many in the international community about what would happen to Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal if the present government were toppled? The government says there is absolutely no danger. But I wouldn’t be so sanguine, because extremists have penetrated into the depths of the army and the intelligence agencies. You live in a part of the world where nuclear weapons are regarded by many as an article of faith. What is your view of Pakistan’s nuclear capability? I take a moral position: there should be no nuclear weapons anywhere in the world. But nuclear weapons in the possession of India and Pakistan are particularly dangerous because of the countries’ proximity to each other and the fact that an accident can happen with no chances of controlling the consequences. Those of us who opposed the test-for-test nuclear tests of 1998 were absolutely right in thinking that this would be the beginning of an arms race. The arms race is definitely on. We in Pakistan are making as many warheads as possible. In spite of this, Pakistan is in greater danger today than it was in 1998. The threat is from within.

Your anti-nuclear stance is not a popular one in Pakistan. It is that nuclear weapons have not put Pakistan in the ranks of technologically advanced countries, nor made it wealthier or better regarded. In fact, nuclear weapons are being developed in a race with a great deal of nervousness, in particular by the US and many of its allies. Musharraf has transformed Pakistan’s science and higher education, with higher professors’ salaries, more PhD students and a 10-fold increase in the science budget. One in two people now has a mobile phone. These are concrete achievements. There is a lot of showbiz here. Yes, mobile telephone use has increased, but that has nothing to do with indigenous technology. It is largely because of the entry of multinational companies: the size of the market means that they are not exactly making a loss. But in terms of science development, I’m afraid there is very little good news. PhDs are being handed out to those barely literate in their fields. It’s true that science funding has gone up, but so has the wastage. For example, vast amounts are being spent on importing scientific equipment, but very little use is being made of it. Yes. A Van de Graaff accelerator, worth some $7 million, was ordered for my university in 2001, but very little use is being made of it. Science funding has gone up, but so has the wastage. For example, vast amounts are being spent on importing scientific equipment, but very little use is being made of it.

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Are you optimistic about the future? Absolutely. We are seeing positive changes throughout the country. I presented a series of popular science programmes for Pakistan Television. The response was phenomenal and very, very heartening. I received thousands of letters, some from remote villages. Dozens of students came to my department, even after having been in the military. There has also been a massive university expansion programme. I think that must be a good thing. What is most alarming is the speed at which new universities are being created. Over the past six years, some 50 new universities have come into existence. Many have been unable to recruit teaching faculty and the standards in some are so low that they should not be called universities at all. It is sad to see an institution being called a university and not be called universities at all. It’s sad to see an institution being called a university...