

As Afghanistan Goes

The government of Afghanistan was rightly condemned and redress demanded of it for its sponsorship of the assault on the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul. The mob which stormed the embassy, killing a Pakistani and injuring, among others, Ambassador Qazi Humayun was neither spontaneous nor unexpected. The guardians of our national security were napping at the moment of danger.

When the Taliban captured Shindand's strategic air base on September 3, Kabul was quick to blame Pakistan's hand in it. When Herat fell to the Taliban two days later, Kabul's allegations carried portents of revenge. Our officials remained unmindful. The families of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani and associates who lived in Peshawar and Islamabad/Pindi area departed from Pakistan before the mob struck. Somehow our all-seeing official eyes failed to notice their exit until after Islamabad decided to expel the departed families. If our government was in the business of governance, there will be a serious inquiry and fixing of responsibility for this lapse of security-related intelligence.

The outrage that has been widely expressed over the violation of Pakistan's diplomats is justified. But outrage does not substitute for analysis; nor can it compensate for failure of policy which, given our investments in Afghanistan, has been colossal. To begin with, consider the extraordinary reversal of our relations with President Burhanuddin Rabbani and his Defence Minister Ahmed Shah Masoud. They are two of the earliest recruits to our Afghan 'game plan' conceived and initiated in 1973. Its authors were Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto and his adviser on Frontier affairs, General Naseerullah Khan Babar, successively the Commander of the Frontier Corps and Governor of the NWFP, and now Pakistan's Minister of Interior. I heard the story in 1985 from General Babar who was most thoughtful about aiding a scholar's research. In those days, Mohammed Ziaul Haq was taking undue credit for sponsoring the successful jihad. General Babar's revelation helped deflate Zia's claims. A brief recapitulation follows:

In a tit-for-tat against General Mohammed Daud Khan's sponsorship of the Pakhtunistan movement, Mr. Bhutto and his aides proceeded to sponsor an Islamic insurgency in Afghanistan. There were two sets of Afghan dissidents to choose from - Communists and Islamists. Pakistan preferred the latter. They were contacted, seemed grateful to find a sponsor, and moved to Pakistan where training camps were set up for them. When ready, their Islamic uprising was launched in the Panjshir Valley which remains to date the stronghold of Rabbani and Masoud. The Mujahideen's first forays into Afghanistan were military muddles. Failure notwithstanding, General Daud got the message, made conciliatory gestures to Pakistan, and with the patronage of Iran's Shah began cautiously to mend relations with us.

The rebels remained as guests and proxies, Pakistan's bargaining chips. Among Islamabad's other rebel protégés were Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Abdur Rasul Sayyaf who would change his name to Abdur Rab later, on being converted to Wahabism. This is where things stood when taking advantage of Mr. Bhutto's political crisis, Ziaul Haq broke his soldier's oath, violated the Constitution, and staged a coup d'état. It is logical that after the Saur Revolution occurred in April 1978, the first person the United States' CIA contacted for information on, and introductions to, Afghanistan's Islamic revolutionaries was General Naseerullah Khan Babar who obliged the best he could. As in many other instances, the dictator picked up the policy where Mr. Bhutto had left off and carried it to its logical extreme.

At the expense of diversion, I should mention that Maulavi Sayyaf is the only Pakhtun Mujahid leader to be part of the government in Kabul. But alliances can change overnight in Afghanistan too. After all, horse trading and dog eating are not a Pakistani

monopoly. So do not be surprised if Abdur Rab Sayyaf changes loyalties in the coming weeks. That would indicate a hardening of the tragically growing ethnic divide in Afghanistan.

I have recalled this story for the lessons it holds. One is that policy calculations should be based on estimations of interests of countries and peoples, not of loyalties of Individuals or groups. For, the latter can and do change loyalties. Thus, individuals and parties we supported for a quarter century have become hostile to us and bitterly complain of our hostility to them. In the Pakistani media and official statements, Rabbani and Masoud are portrayed as turncoats who have ungratefully become anti-Pakistan and pro-India. This is a misleading conclusion which can hinder rational formulation of policy.

There has been a process to this embitterment. Several Afghanistan watchers had forewarned over the years of its consequences. Some weeks ago I recalled in this space the defensive reactions our highest officials had to these warnings. But the habit of playing favourites persisted. Today there is reliance on the Taliban, Hekmatyar, and Dostum as though the sum total of Pakistan's alliances with these warlords will be a viable policy. Recently, a very thoughtful senior soldier wondered aloud: "What can happen to our Afghan posture if Abdur Rashid Dostum pulls out?" He was right. The Taliban Hekmatyar edifice on which we are so precariously perched will collapse if this formerly communist warlord changes position. He might, notwithstanding the complicating entry of Uzbekistan into the Afghan equation.

Pakistani decision makers have had a lasting proclivity to substitute manipulation for policy and gamesmanship for statesmanship. They focus on immediate gains and do not make long-term calculations of a policy's fall-out. This tendency is an extension of their style in domestic politics whereby there is a premium on buying support of Individuals and groups irrespective of the long-term costs to the country and the state. Thus to accommodate a petty need of the moment, Mr. Azam Tariq, the bate-mongering leader of the Anjuman-i-Sipahi-Sahaba was moved with a flick of authoritative finger from prison to parliament. Never mind the price to the rule of law, to threatened minorities, and to social peace in the land! Is it a mere coincidence that two weeks later a fourteen-year-old and her school principal are being hounded on charges of blasphemy? This mind-set of petty opportunism is also reflected in the conduct of our foreign policy.

Take for Instance our current posture - denials notwithstanding - of favouring the Taliban. With our help they installed themselves in Qandahar, and promptly banned music and games as un-Islamic. We were interested merely in adding a chip on our chessboard. But our position in Afghanistan is similar to America's in Pakistan whereby our smallest gesture takes on grand significance. And so it did in Kabul; and also in Teheran, Tajikistan, and Russia - countries which view Pakistan's policy apprehensively as seeking unitary Pashtun control of the Afghan state, and a monopoly of Pakistani domination there. The Taliban's dramatic gains this month, which include the capture of Herat, the Persian speaking city on Iran's border, has greatly augmented Iran's and Tajikistan's concerns and Russia's interest. Dostum's entry on our side has merely accentuated the problem. Unless we make amends - Pakistan's Foreign Minister's visit to Teheran may have been a step in this direction - we may win enemies to our north and west also.

"Uzbekistan shall never misunderstand and always support our policy" says a high official who nourishes a friendship with the Uzbek dictator Islam Karimov. Uzbek warlord Abdur Rashid Dostum's recent co-operation with the Taliban is seen in Teheran and Dushanbe as an entente between Pakistan and Uzbekistan. The Tajiks identify with their nearly four million brethren in Afghanistan and nourish historic resentment and fear of the Uzbeks. Hence Rabbani's Jamiat can count on Tajikistan's support if Dostum has Uzbekistan's backing. Such alliances can have little military significance. They underwrite protracted Afghan violence, greater regional tension, and distortions in Pakistan's social and political life.

Nowhere is the distortion of political life more severe than here. Drugs, guns, sectarianism, violence and crime. We experience them all. They can get worse. The Taliban's successes for example will hurt this country deeply. Products of Pakistani madaris, they have links here and spawn here. Harkat-ul-Ansar, their Pakistani counterpart, is already born and growing. Like the Taliban, they too are a rabid anti-Shi'a party with an Islamic agenda the Holy Prophet (PBUH) would have found repugnant. The chickens of proxy wars and manipulation politics always come home to roost. If we keep going this way we cannot ensure peace or our place in Afghanistan. But as surely as night follows day we shall lose ourselves and what is left in Pakistan of decency and civilisation.

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