

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AND
CHALLENGES TO PAKISTAN

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By addressing the joint session of the Parliament on 17 Jan 2004, General Pervez Musharraf at last fulfilled the obligation that had been due on him for 14 months. He had continuously been avoiding this duty under one pretext or the other – sometime he would dub the Assembly as ‘uncivilized’, and at times he would declare that this constitutional requirement was ‘unnecessary’ – or perhaps feeling compelled with the guilty conscience, as who else was more aware of the reality of the referendum on which the foundations of his presidency were raised!

But, Allah’s scheme prevails. With this delay, the Providence, perhaps, wanted to remind all and sundry that Parliament would remain incomplete and political process would not take off, until his presidency acquires, at least a degree of, legitimacy. Though we have now passed this stage, the question that remains to be answered is: Did the General and his colleagues learnt any lessons from this period of tiresome constitutional crisis? Is he really willing to be a part of the new and real democratic and constitutional process; or, he would still insist on running the affairs of the government and politics from his military headquarters? Does he want to work as President Works in a parliamentary system; or, he, despite being no longer the chief executive, would still try to continue in that role?

The address did not just pose a test and trial for him; it also provided him an historic opportunity. He could have given good tidings to the nation about the beginning of a new era, but we must say that he let a very precious occasion go waste. He added just one more lifeless and uninspiring speech to his record – which neither meets constitutional requirements, nor upholds parliamentary traditions; nor does it promises the change the nation is getting restive about!

According to the Constitutional Clause 56(3), it is incumbent upon the president to address the joint session of the Parliament at every new election of the National Assembly and at the start of Parliament’s New Year. The purpose of this clause is that President, at the behest of the Cabinet, presents government’s policy and strategy before the Parliament, which are then debated in both the houses of the Parliament so that a clear picture of the agenda for the year could emerge. This address consists of three parts, in general. First part focuses on the performance of the government in the foregoing year, the second one highlights government’s position on various issues and challenges during the on-going year, while the third one draws Parliament’s attention to ‘things to do’ – including legislation. The 35-minute speech of the General does have tunes and tones of ‘self praise’; it also contained some admonitions and advice; and, by his own reckoning, he also identified some challenges to the nation. But, it is silent on the performance of the Jamali government, policy on main issues, future program, and agenda for legislation during the whole year!

What is most alarming is that the issues he saw as challenges facing the country are in fact objections and ridiculous accusations of others. We do not know what fear or expediency made him accept these allegations without any 'reality check' and analysis and make the nation account for it. By avoiding giving a sound answer, he has lost a golden opportunity for declaring the national position before the international community. Whoever of his advisors counselled him for this approach has harmed him and his position a lot.

We want to say on record that he could not make use of the broad-minded approach of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) vis-à-vis the 17th Amendment, in spite of all its reservations, while ARD and other parties, too, had at least started participating in parliamentary proceedings. Availing this opportunity, he must have invited all for the sake of national unity. This was the time when he should have shown maturity and large-heartedness, and tried to achieve national consensus to meet the challenges of internal strife and external demands. Showing large-heartedness, he could have said that he did what he could during the preceding four years; and that with the coming into being of the new Parliament, he invites all peoples and parties to a new start and a new consensus for the beginning of a genuine and stable democratic process, for the supremacy of the Constitution and the Parliament, for the convergence of all ruling and opposition parties on the least common denominator – the real vision and rationale for the creation of Pakistan – establishment of a model Islamic, democratic, welfare, federal system of governance. All should gear up to do their bid in meeting this end. Ignoring all the bitterness of the past, he should have invited everyone to play one's due role in the building of the future. He should have declared in unambiguous words that the era of military's political role is over, that military is readying itself fully for its responsibilities of defending the borders of the country, and that the political system is now a trust with the elected representatives of the people. This 'trust' demands that elected representatives should get ready for playing their due role for the independence and security of the country, for the protection of its ideological and civilizational identity, for its economic and social development, for the solution of the people's problems, and for the realization of the aspirations of Muslim nation. He should have told that he as president, who is the symbol of the state and the federation, was going to take the route of discharging his duties and accounting for them; that the onus of running the government is now on the Prime Minister, Cabinet, and the Parliament - me being a part of it! Let's utilize all our energies and national resources for the supremacy of the Constitution, rule of law, strengthening the institutions, and well-being and welfare of the people. Let's get our act together for the realization of our great mission!

This was the call of the time. But what we get from the speech of the General? Some assertions that have nothing to do with reality some accusations and allegations that he owned himself some admonitions and sermons that were out of place. This speech makes no one feel that some change has taken place in the country after the elections, that a new elected government has sworn in with its own manifesto and some vision of the future for the realization of which it has some

program, set some goals, devised an outline, and charted a roadmap, and that it has an agenda for legislation. The speech makes no mention of the Prime Minister, Parliament, plans and policies, and legislation. Foreign policy, economic policy, education policy, health policy, guidelines for collective uplift, moral and ideological reconstruction found no place in the speech. There was no mention of the name of Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali, even as a formality, what to talk of reviewing his program that he had presented in his speech after assuming the responsibilities of the position of Prime Minister – what could be done and what has yet to be done. The speech was on an entirely different wavelength, and we should be pardoned to say that an atmosphere of fear, coercion and a kind of helplessness seems to have enveloped the entire speech. It seems that views are expressed in a condition of being under great pressure. It is devoid of any vision, has no message, gives no guidance towards the destination – it is a tragedy, and no amount of regret lessens the loss of a golden opportunity!

At the international level, almost all the countries, nations, and the concerned people are holding discussions and debates on important issues. The whole security system has changed after the incidents of 9/11. What the international community had achieved in the democratic struggle of 200 years has now been imperilled. Nations of the world are worried about the status and role of the United Nations. The very basis of the international law is being shaken, its settled norms and principles are being questioned; sovereign and independent nations are being ensnared in different traps; law, principles and norms are all being trampled in the name of war against terrorism; the trend of punishing without proving the crime is gaining in strength; nations and countries are being invaded under the pretext of shaky reasons and perceived threats or for such objective as regime change.

Under such circumstances, what should be the role of a really independent country? How can it find common ground with other peace-loving sovereign countries to save itself and others from the colonial trap? While international community is struggling at masses level for human values and protection of liberties, and humankind is trying to act together in the form of World Social Forum, at masses level, against colonial hegemony and violations of law – what should an independent country do? What should be the role of Pakistan, and the Muslims world, in all these circumstances? The speech fails to convey any realization of the gravity of the situation.

These days, drums of clash of civilizations are beaten aloud and Islam and Muslims have been made its easy targets. How can we face this challenge? Should we label ourselves with allegations for the sake of others? Should we mould and shape our views and beliefs trying to make others happy? Or, should we come out for our own defence and interpret and explain our views and beliefs – with the force of reason and integrity, with courage and determination? The speech is silent on this count, as well. There is no trace of vision or message in the entire speech of the General in this respect, too.

The way gross injustices are committed against the nations of the world in the name of globalisation; the way wealth is being concentrated in some countries and a few hands; and the way the developing countries and poor nations are being pushed backwards in the fields of economic development, industry and skills in the name of free trade – would result in a few countries' domination of the world and making it their grazing ground. How can we stop this from going to happen? The proportion of wealth between the developed and the developing countries, which was 1:30 in 1950, and had risen to 1:60 in 1980, has now reached 1:85. What this widening gap would result in? Is not it time to strive together for the change of circumstances and establishment of a just global order! All these issues demand reconstruction of the foreign policy and resetting of international relations. Is our leadership alive to and cognizant of the need?

With the recently concluded SAARC conference in Islamabad (6 January 2004), an extraordinary situation has developed with respect to the Pakistan-India relations. The strategic partnership of India, America, and Israel is a fact, and much is being done to raise India as a global power. America has not only declared that it would share nuclear and missile technology with India, it has gone much farther saying that if India signs the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it could be given the same position in Americas policy as is accorded to Israel. India has made defence purchases worth two billion dollars from Russia that includes an aircraft carrier Admiral Gvarshkov and a platoon of Mig-29 planes. This has adversely affected the balance of power in the region. But, this could not become subjects of General Pervez Musharraf's speech. Were not all these subjects important enough to be covered in the Presidential address, analysed? Should Parliament not be taken into confidence and invited to give policy outlines in this regard? But, the speech does not come even close to these issues!

Similarly, the question of Jammu and Kashmir, which is an issue of life and death for us, finds no place in the speech. Indian position has been repeated in our own words, in one sentence! Pak-Afghan relations, Pak-China relations, Pak-India relations, and, above all, Pak-America relations demand deep view, analysis, and free debate. Pakistan's one-sided concessions to India have been paid back in the form of increased violence in Kashmir – Indian army is brutally killing innocent and freedom-loving people, a wall of barbed wire is being erected along the Line of Control (LoC). We are avoiding giving a message of solidarity with this freedom struggle of the Kashmiri people, while being attentive to signals from Washington only. Is it what is meant by national interest and 'Pakistan First'?

General Pervez Musharraf claimed that he fulfilled his all promises with the nation, which also includes restoration of real democracy. Could there be any more flagrant example of being unashamed about one's wrongs? Restoration of the Constitution and supremacy of the Parliament are the first condition for the restoration of democracy. Through the 17th Amendment, one step – just one step – has been taken towards taking the country back on the road of Constitution and democracy. Parliament's real task is yet to be accomplished: to review some three hundred and

fifty laws and ordinances of the military era and to make them conform to the Constitution and principles of democracy. On the initiation of the Prime Minister, Parliament has decided to form a 12-member committee for this purpose, the speech does not mention as to what it has to do, though it is decisive for the restoration of democracy. Then, the General should relinquish the responsibilities of the army chief at the earliest and become a full-time civilian President for the discharge of his duties according to the demands of the Constitution. The imbalance in discretionary powers should be removed, so that every institution in the country, including the military, may get activated in its own area as laid down in the Constitution.

The claims about the health of the economy can only partly be accepted. Macro-economic indicators do not give a complete picture of economy. They portray just one side. Other aspects are important, as well – or even more. At the moment, the condition is that inflation is increasing continuously. According to the recently released fiscal policy statement of the State Bank of Pakistan, inflation is increasing since August 2003, and the prices of oil, transport, and, above all, daily consumer items and edibles have particularly increased. In December 2003, as against December 2004, prices of wheat registered a rise of 19.4 percent, while prices of meat and vegetables shot up by 22 percent and 15.5 percent respectively. Similarly, unemployment, which was just 3 percent of the total labour force ten years ago, has risen to 9 percent. Poverty, which had taken 20 percent of the population in its grip, has now reached the high level of 40 percent. There are many contradictions in official figures: while the finance ministry admits 32-33 percent poverty, independent experts and sources, Asian Development Bank and other foreign institutions are giving a figure of 40 percent, and this seems to be nearer to the facts on the ground.

By presenting just one side of the picture, General Pervez Musharraf has done justice neither to himself nor to the nation. The grossest cruelty that General Pervez Musharraf committed in his speech against the nation is his acceptance of the allegations of our opponents. For which demand of expediency did he accept them as such is not known. Instead of boldly analysing these allegations, it seems that General Pervez could not stand the floods of the US President Bush's falsehood and was carried away like weeds. If there was some truth about the allegations, he should have presented before the nation a program for change and reforming the situation. And, if there were assertions that were totally wrong and amounted to baseless accusations, he should have repudiated them and presented the facts with the force of reason and argument. If the American rightist fundamentalists (neo-cons) are dubbing Muslims as terrorists, our General also starts playing second fiddle to them. If Israel and India dub those who put their lives in danger for the sake of independence of their country, for the protection of their beliefs and faith, dignity and honour, our President's speech echoes the same. The irony has reached its peak: what the General said on 17th January promptly won L.K. Advani's applause on 18th January. His observation that if the General had said so in Agra, all the issues would have been resolved much earlier is worth pondering. L.K. Advani said this while addressing a conference of the All India Forces in Karnal.
