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President Musharraf's European Visit and Situation of Pakistan

1. Background Details:

President Musharraf's European visit came at a time when Pakistan is facing a bitter uncertainty on a majority of its domestic and international fronts. At home the nation faces political and administrative mismanagement on wheat flour, electricity, inflation, water, law and order, terrorism, constitutional and judicial crises while the country is lacking the much needed confidence of the international community, particularly the West. Unresolved issues on the international front include Pakistan's cooperation with NATO/US forces in Afghanistan on War on Terror, hunting Al-Qaeda leaders/activists at home and safeguarding the nuclear assets. The pro-government camp is bent upon citing the importance of President's visit to Europe while critics term his visit as an escape from the problems at home. "A cascade of events has really upset the people of Pakistan...and this is no time to travel outside of the country," says the prominent analyst Lt. Gen. (r) Talat Masood.[1]

While the official news agency, Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) said that Musharraf would visit Europe to "further enhance cooperation in commercial, economic, trade and defense areas with these countries," a large section of the Pakistani society saw his visit as his bid to once again portray himself as West's only option in Pakistan against terrorism and extremism. The popular perception in Pakistan was that Musharraf undertook this journey to garner support from the important Western Capitals which is seen one big reason for his continuity as the President of Pakistan. "It is yet to be seen what his visit produced for Pakistan but Pakistanis want their and Pakistan's situation improved and they see Musharraf as the source of their country's instability both at home and abroad[2]."

2. Situational Analysis:

Till March 8, 2007, President Musharraf exuded command and exhibited control on the issues facing Pakistan. It involved his grip on affairs from the emergency repair work of the huge Sukkur Barrage in Sindh to the movement of the troops in FATA. On March 9, he "forwarded" a reference of Chief Justice of Pakistan's (CJP) alleged corruption and misdeeds to the Supreme Judicial Council and suspended the CJP. He defended his step as his constitutional duty but the civil society, opposition parties and a huge part of the population saw this as his effort to solidify control on the government in a dictatorial way. The situation in Pakistan has never remained stable after March 9 and the domestic instability has set in motion the international concerns about Pakistan's viability as a stable and responsible state having capability to safeguarding the nuclear assets and fighting – and winning – the war against terror.

Musharraf's visit came at a point when he has clearly been seen as drifting away from Washington on many policy matters including an American military operation on Pakistani soil. Musharraf, on more than one occasions, stated that any such action will be taken as an act of aggression and "those who come to our mountains will regret." Watching carefully the sentences, stances and statements coming in from various think tanks, political and government officials, "Musharraf felt that he was being made the punching bag despite extending the best possible cooperation to the US on the War on Terror and therefore, he reacted against the reported US designs to operate independently in the FATA region[3]."

Musharraf's visit came at a time when there will be election on February 18, 2008, Taliban religious movement making inroads and staging high-pitched resistance against Pakistani forces in FATA and settled northern districts of Pakistan and growing suspicions about Pakistan's ability to safeguard nuclear assets. In the recent past, West has shown clear and visible interest in Pakistan's domestic political affairs and has clearly lobbied with the opposition political parties to pressure the government to hold elections in free and fair manner. This was an issue Musharraf faced tough questions on and the EU's Foreign Policy Chief, Javier Solana clearly stated that these elections must be "free and fair[4]." He also added that EU's future cooperation depended on these elections. With very few people to believe, President Musharraf repeatedly assured his Western audience that the elections will be held free and fair as the system to hold these elections was "inherently transparent." Despite his repeated assurances that

the elections will be held in a free and fair environment, the skepticism lingers both domestically and internationally. The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is yet to take action against the government officials who were favoring the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam Faction (PML-Q) and the main opposition party, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in mid January 2008 produced documents where the former Chief Minister of Punjab was still proclaiming himself as the sitting Chief Minister. This being only a part of the bigger "rigging scheme^[5]," is seen as a ploy to buy votes mainly from poor masses in the Southern Punjab province. Media in the past has carried pictures of the policemen installing banners and fixing political advertisements of the PML-Q candidates. With such practices going unabated, few believe the elections in Pakistan will be free and fair.

Political wisdom of a vast population of Pakistan questions the benefit of President Musharraf's European tour with militants trying to blast off the crucial Kohat Transit Tunnel, occupying government buildings, capturing and killing army personnel only 35 kilometers from the NWFP provincial capital; unprecedented price hike, shortage of energy, water, flour and declining investments and job cuts. "This has all happened under whom? Hasn't Musharraf been ruling Pakistan over the past eight nine years?" an opposition party leader asked. Worth noting is the fact that the International Crisis Group has called Musharraf as "a serious liability^[6]" and is also "seen as complicit" even in the murder of Benazir. Musharraf, speaking at Royal United Services Institute assured his audience and the world that Pakistan's nuclear program was "jealously guarded...and the possibility (of Al-Qaeda getting nukes) is zero, multiplied by zero and divided by zero." Addressing a press conference after meeting the British PM, he said that Pakistan was not "failing to defeat" the militants but the "battle would be a long one...and...we have to win on both sides." But the population and civil society questions if this means that Pakistanis will continue suffering the horror and terror of suicide bombings?

Although, his appeal in Davos to attract foreign investment "has been well-received...and a statement of support from the French President^[7]," are termed as his success but at home analysts and a majority of the citizens are calling his trip as "a public relations exercise^[8]." On the terrorism front, he referred to the statement of NATO commanders in Afghanistan that the cross border movement from Pakistan had reduced by 42% but "we have failed in our campaign to fight terrorism^[9]," he said. This call may motivate his European audience but has worried his people at home.

3. Recommendations of CRSS:

Keeping Musharraf's European visit in perspective, CRSS strongly recommends the following:

1. The EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, should constitute a special office to monitor the elections and the handing over of power to democratically elected representatives of the people of Pakistan.
2. The EU must continue pressuring Musharraf government to hold free and fair elections and the EU should increase her interaction with the Pakistani civil society and political parties.
3. The EU should make all monetary assistance conditional to the holding of free and fair elections.
4. The EU must closely watch the performance of the ECP keeping it from becoming partisan in the electoral process.
5. The EU and NATO must increase the intelligence sharing with Pakistan and provide technological assistance in combating the domestic terrorism.
6. The government of Pakistan must improve the law and order situation to hold the elections in a terror-free environment and should engage the military to provide security to the voting process.

[1] The Christian Science Monitor. January 28, 2008.

[2] Interview with Director (news) of a major private news channel.

[3] Ibid.

[4] BBC News.

[5] PPP's Senator quoted in print media. January 20, 2008.

[6] ICG.

[7] The Christian Science Monitor. January 28, 2008.

[8] Ibid.

[9] The News. January 30, 2008.