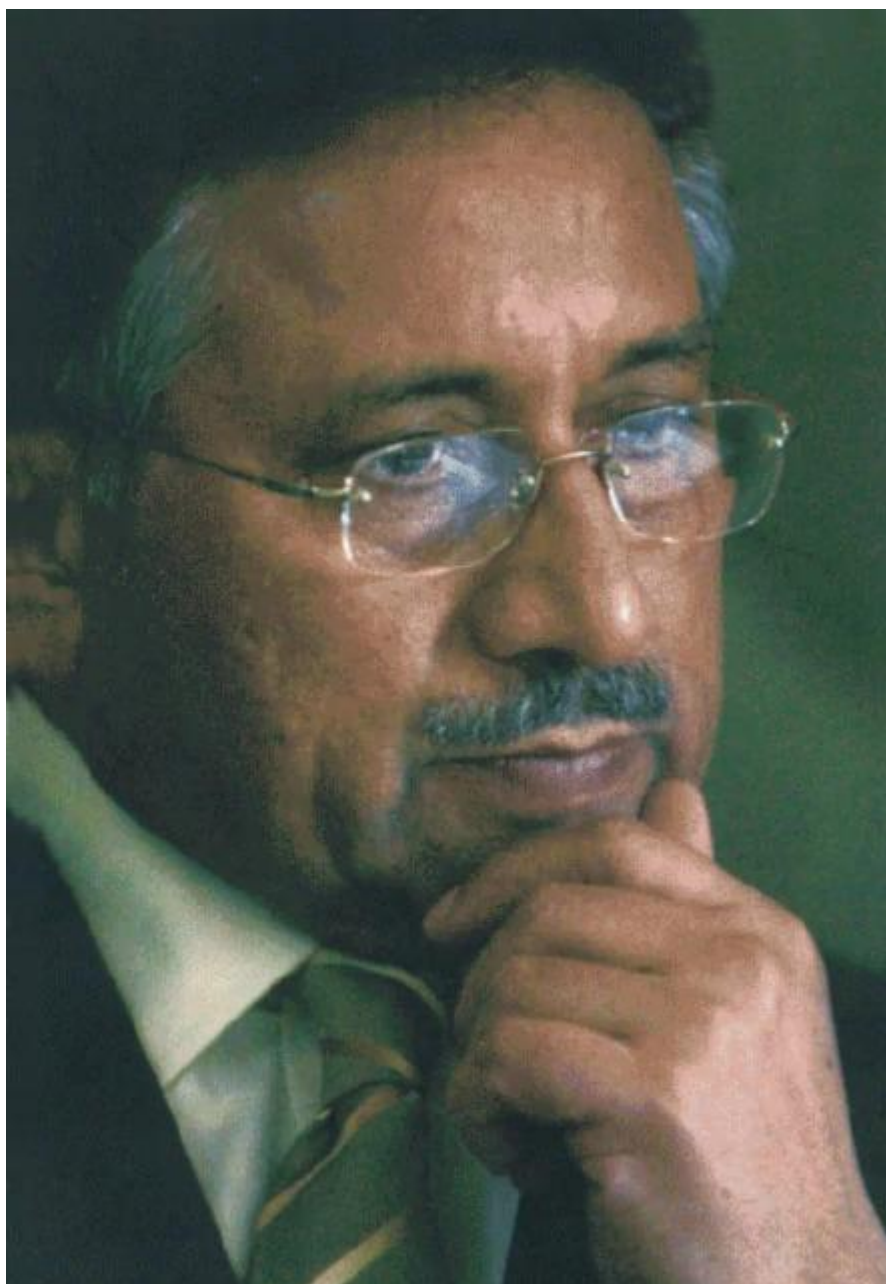


PERVEZ MUSHARRAF ON BENAZIR BHUTTO, THE TALIBAN, AND THE POTENTIAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF HIS RESIGNATION



Pakistan's president, Pervez Musharraf, spoke to Straits Times senior writer Anthony Paul in a wide-ranging interview in Musharraf's office in Rawalpindi on Jan. 9.

By ANTHONY PAUL

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A headline in one of this morning's Pakistani papers puts very succinctly what seems to be on the world's mind at the moment: Are the Americans coming here? Will the intervention in Afghanistan spread to Pakistan?

No. It will not. Nobody will come here until we ask them to come. And we haven't asked them.

But no fewer than four U.S. presidential candidates have said that an intervention in search of Osama bin Laden is on the cards. If the Americans came, would you treat that as an invasion?

Certainly. If they come without our permission, that's against the sovereignty of Pakistan.

But when you're talking about Osama bin Laden, any action against him will be free, if we know where he is, if we have good intelligence. The methodology of getting him will be discussed together and we'll attack the target together.

The United States seems to think that what our army cannot do, they can do. This is a very wrong perception. I challenge anybody to come into our mountains. They would regret that day. It's not easy there.

Are they operating well in southern Afghanistan? They're having difficulties. Here it's (also) a mountainous terrain. Minimal communications infrastructure. Every individual has a weapon and each tribe has its own armory and they don't like intrusions into their privacy at all. That attitude has been the case for centuries. The British never went in. Unfortunately for Pakistan over 50 years (of independence), we didn't change that method of governing our FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). It was only after we dealt with them and reached an agreement with them that we moved in the army in 2001.

We do operate in these areas. It's within the capacity of the Pakistan armed forces. And yet some people think U.S. or coalition forces from Afghanistan will come in and they will hunt him down. ... This is a misperception. It's better if they ask some military or intelligence commander of their own whether their army, their people, coming into our mountains will operate better than our army.

"I know that a bullet wound (is) a small hole and it always comes out somewhere."

The Pakistan People's Party now has another Bhutto at its head, a rather vulner-able-looking young man, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari. It would be truly perilous for Pakistan if either he or his father (party co-chairman Asif Zardari) were to be killed. Are you taking any special security precautions for them?

There are security measures adopted for all political heads. But we are not here to protect everyone and guarantee their security. As far as Zardari is concerned, let me tell you that he himself has provided his own security through his tribal people. Even during Benazir Bhutto's public address (on Dec. 27), other than the police who were deployed and the superintendent of police who was hand-picked by her to manage her security, there were many of her own people around her. And I agree with you that these two may be under threat. I'm under threat. How can we blame the government as if we have to guarantee their security? No sir. There is no guarantee of security against a suicide bomber.

While we're on the subject of Benazir, what's your judgment of her? Was she brave? Foolhardy? Both?

Well, she was brave. Certainly she was brave.

Foolhardy?

No. In the euphoria of public support at her fatal rally, when thousands of people are there to cheer you, you do get carried away. When people start waving, you do things that you might not otherwise do. But certainly I would say that getting out of the vehicle was an unwise thing to do at that time.

You've got Scotland Yard now investigating her murder, but there seems to be a lack of evidence. Is the world going to be left with yet another unsolved assassination, every bit as mysterious as President (John F.) Kennedy's in 1963?

We hope that this can be solved through technical means with all the photographs coming in. So many people with mobile telephones photographing everything. Hordes of people (are) sending photographs now.

So how did she die?

A lot of people talk of bullet wounds on the body and the neck. Obviously, I didn't see the body. But I know for sure what the doctors saw. One thing is very clear to me _ and I'm sure our people are speaking the truth. There appeared to be no bullet wounds anywhere other than possibly in the right side of the skull. Now a lot of people are saying there are bullet wounds in the neck.

The only possibility of establishing the truth is to exhume the body and see. Now, if that is not to be allowed by anyone, her husband Zardari has forbidden it, then we have to trust the photographs of the skull and other evidence that we have.

So photographs of the skull exist?

Yes. An X-ray.

External photographs taken at the hospital?

No. An X-ray of the head. Nobody was allowed to take photographs. Otherwise we must depend on freelance cameras.

People are saying that I said it was a bullet wound. I have not said that. I've said that that there is a massive portion of the skull that has been pressed in and there was a chip, a broken piece.

But whether a bullet (killed her)? I've been a soldier and I know bullet wounds. I know that a bullet wound (is) a small hole and it always comes out somewhere. Now here there is no small hole. So is it possible that a bullet just hit at such an angle that it ricocheted and went through. ... I don't know. I can't say that. So I can't say whether it was a bullet or anything else.

But you're suggesting an injury likely to have come from something that's a lot worse than being slammed against a vehicle's sunroof lever, as early government versions had it?

No. It depends on with what force. An explosive has a tremendous force. The body can get blown apart. So it's not as simple as if she was going down inside moving down through the vehicle's sunroof. It's not like that.

A question about the current situation within Pakistan. I'm somewhat astonished by the change towards a ferocity in the public debate since I came here to interview you for The Straits Times in 2004 ("Musharraf seeks radical solution for Kashmir," Oct 27, 2004.). A writer in Dawn (a prominent national newspaper) said on Jan. 6

that Pakistan has “a President who cannot now walk, unescorted, across any busy street of his own country for fear of being lynched.”

Does such ferocity concern you?

Nonsense! Absolute nonsense! I go to hotels, restaurants. I wish you could come with me once and you'll see what happens there. People come and want photographs with me. They cheer me. You must come with me once. Maybe I will take you to a restaurant. You'll see the people in the restaurant. This is absolute nonsense!

I go to play tennis. I go to opening ceremonies. My security people are very upset with me that I keep escaping from them. I'm going to Karachi to inaugurate a big industrial estate and there'll be hundreds, if not thousands, of people. The other day I went to the beach near Clifton Park in Karachi and a lot of people came to surround me.

A think-tank, the Pak Institute for Peace Studies, says there were as many as 1,442 terrorist attacks, incidents of political violence and border clashes last year. The result: 3,448 persons dead and 5,353 injured, 492 percent higher than the 2005 figure. Can Pakistan survive this level of turmoil?

It has to survive. It can survive. We have to defeat these people _ through unity, national consensus and political reconciliation.

Are you concerned about the economy? My hotel, normally popular with visiting foreign businessmen, has 35 percent occupancy this morning. Foreign direct investment is clearly drying up. Does this worry you?

Yes, it does. The hotels used to have over 90 percent occupancy. I've asked the prime min-ister to see that a strong macroeconomy is maintained. I'll be personally chairing a conference after the prime minister has studied the problem to see what corrective measures can be taken

“There may be economic difficulties ahead and we have to fight terrorism.”

ON DEALING WITH THE TALIBAN

There's a widespread perception in and outside Pakistan that your Inter-Services Intelligence like the CIA often during the Cold War _ contains rogue elements who don't really answer to you and your administration. Just how much control do you have over the ISI?

That is absolutely wrong. The ISI is manned by military officers. Military officers come under military law. A person can be fired today and out of a job tomorrow. The ISI is a very disciplined force. They do what we tell them to do. There are no rogue elements.

If at all, with a stretch of the imagination, there is one odd person in the whole of the organization who is following his own agenda, we'd trace him and remove him. I don't think that anyone conscious of his career progression can show disloyalty to government policy. That would be a very serious charge.

But are there any ISI personnel officially helping the Taliban operate?

Not at all. Absolutely incorrect.

You're on record as having advised Afghan President Hamid Karzai to negotiate with the Taliban. Do you still think that's a good idea?

Yes, it is a good idea. Anyone who is for militancy is a dangerous person. When we talk of negotiating with the Taliban, (we mean that) if there are senior elements within the Taliban who are for a negotiated political settlement, we should try to make inroads with them. If there are people that want coalition forces out for no rhyme or reason, without any solution of the main political issues ... no, that's not the way. But we have to gain access to the population to find some kind of political solution.

But to many people, negotiation with elements of the Taliban guilty of what most of the world views as barbaric behavior is all but unthinkable. I refer to such things as the gross limitations of women's rights and destruction of World Heritage artifacts. In Peshawar in your northwest, we learn of the burning of barbershops because they offer shaves.

Well, what are we doing in regard to such Taliban behavior? We are also following up on this. The military cannot provide the ultimate solution. The military can buy you time. The military can create an environment. But I think that a solution in such a crisis is a political solution.

But these people are terrible people. They have imposed their will on (many tribes). In tribal culture, for centuries it was the tribal “malik” (inherited or appointed leader) who held sway over the tribe. They were the people who held the tribe together.

It was only in 1995 that the Taliban emerged. And these Taliban were clerics, who never had had a position of authority. Now they are dominating the scene. Where are those tribal maliks? Have they vanished? No, they are there. So therefore, political interaction, reaching out to the population, weaning away the population through interaction with those people who are against militant Taliban. Help those people (who are for peace) stand up to the Taliban. This is the overall political strategy.

The problem unfortunately is that, in the West and the United States, if you are talking to the Taliban you immediately hear the accusation, “You are with the Taliban!” But we should try to talk. Even if you can reach 25 percent success, even if there are double-crossers, it does not mean that we should not move forward. So there is a total misunderstanding of what my strategy offers. My strategy is very clear: We are to move on the military front, on the political front and the socio-economic front. All three. Parallel.

Sounds like the classic CPM (a civil-police-military formula that evolved during the Malayan Emergency)?

Yes. You have to do it. We deal with people whom we think are for peace, including “maulvis” (mullahs). Not every maulvi is with the Taliban. Let’s think of some way of shutting the foreigners, al-Qaida out.

Now and then, maybe we’re talking to the wrong man. We’ll find out soon enough. We’ll correct course. But if someone says, “Don’t do that at all. Don’t talk to anyone,” and keep to military action alone? No. That is not possible.

Do you think that the U.S.-led coalition’s intervention in Afghanistan was premature after the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001?

It was not premature. We knew Osama bin Laden was involved in attacking the World Trade Center. I sent a delegation to (Taliban leader) Mullah Omar (asking him) to surrender Osama bin Laden, to expel him. But he would not agree. So the action against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan took place. (Oct 7, 2001, attack on al-Qaida’s Tora Bora redoubt.)

Let me disclose one more thing. We were criticized before Sept. 11 because we were the only ones who had a relationship with the Taliban. When I came on the

scene in 1999, I spoke to the Saudis, to the United Arab Emirates... they had also recognized the Taliban but had removed their embassies from Kabul. I told President (Bill) Clinton, who was visiting Islamabad, that we should accept the reality (of the Taliban in power in Kabul), have diplomatic relations with them and then change them from within. Had that happened, some things might have been different today.

ON PAKISTAN'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Sen. Hillary Clinton, who has just won the New Hampshire primary, has proposed joint American-British oversight of your nuclear stockpile. What's your reaction?

This is an intrusion into our privacy, into our sensitivity. This is a very, very sensitive matter. She must understand that any man in the street in Pakistan is very possessive about our nuclear strategic capability. They will accept no intrusions, no interference in our strategic capability. The whole nation sees the nuclear weapon as the guarantee of our security against all regional threats. She doesn't seem to understand how well-guarded these assets are. They are all under total custodial control.

The Pentagon must be aware how well-guarded they are. But you're a soldier and you must surely agree that the Americans would be now war-gaming the possible seizure by a fundamentalist regime of Pakistan's nuclear assets?

Will fundamentalists win the elections next month? No, they will not. So if that's not going to happen, it could only be fundamentalist terrorist groups coming and seizing those assets.

Now we must know that all our assets are under Army Strategic Force Command headed by a lieutenant-general. He's got two major-generals under him, from north and south. He's got brigadiers under him and lieutenant-colonels under the brigadiers. So it's like an army unit. I challenge anyone to take one rifle or the bolt of a rifle from any Pakistan army regiment. Our army processes are very, very strong. Same with these nuclear assets.

ON THE FEB. 18 ELECTIONS

It seems that a PPP landslide created by voters' sympathy for the Bhutto family is the most likely result. Do you worry that the PPP with a very big majority, possibly in coalition with the party of Nawaz Sharif (the prime minister Musharraf deposed in 1999), would have the two-thirds majority needed to call for your impeachment?

If that happens, let me assure that I'd be leaving office before they would do anything. If they won with this kind of majority and they formed a government that had the intention of doing this, I wouldn't like to stick around.

You would resign?

Yes, of course. If impeachment were their intention and they don't want to go along in a harmonious manner, I would like to quit the scene.

As you've mentioned, there may be economic difficulties ahead and we have to fight terrorism. To do this effectively, three people have to work in harmony _ the president, the prime minister and the army chief. If there is any disharmony among these three, Pakistan is going to be harmed.

Whoever is the prime minister, whatever the coalition, I don't mind. If there's a hung Parliament, they will have to form a coalition. If they want to form a coalition to defeat me, or to move against me, I would like to quit myself. If they don't want to have harmony with me, then they can get another president.

ON CHINA

Where do you see China fitting in in this part of the world? I get the impression that the Chinese are playing a rather quiet role these days?

China and for that matter even Japan, they understand our problems. Their views of our problem are quite different from Western media's views.

I would place the security of the nation, the nation's stability, as far more important than following media and human rights and democracy.

They understand this, while the West has an obsession somehow with democracy and human rights. And they want to impose their understanding of democracy and human rights on our developing countries, while China and other Eastern countries don't want to impose their understanding of democracy and governance on Pakistan.

They understand that we have our own environment and that we have to ensure that the country is secure. Everything else is secondary.