

Playing Roulette in Pakistan

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It was a very good week for Saudi Arabia. The royal family's favored Pakistani "president-in-exile," Nawaz Sharif, returned in a triumphant homecoming, throwing down a major challenge to the rule of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who's still favored, for the moment, by the United States.

Although Sharif can claim to be the true pro-democracy choice, given that he was deposed as prime minister by Musharraf's 1999 military coup, the U.S. is hoping to throw the deeply corrupt but Westernized Benazir Bhutto into the mix out of fear that Sharif is soft on Muslim fanatics in his own country as well as on the Taliban.

Those fears are well founded, given that Sharif, inspired by Saudi-style Wahhabism, attempted to introduce sharia, Islamic law, in his last years in office. It was his administration that green-lighted the test of the Muslim nuclear bomb and condoned bomb builder A.Q. Khan's nuclear proliferation efforts, which aided the nuclear weapons programs of North Korea, Libya and Iran. Finally, it was Sharif who strongly supported the Taliban, sponsors of Osama bin Laden, in securing power in Afghanistan.

Now, to be fair, Musharraf and Bhutto also favored Pakistan's nuclear program and actively supported the Taliban. I am not referring to the fact that Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were the only countries to extend full diplomatic recognition to the Taliban. No, Pakistan's sponsorship of the Taliban, under all three leaders, goes far deeper than that, as revealed by the release in August of declassified portions of seven years' worth of cable traffic between the U.S. State Department and its embassy in Pakistan. As the National Security Archive, based at George Washington University, summarized the new information, "The declassified U.S. documents ... clearly illustrate that the Taliban was directly funded, armed and advised by Islamabad itself ... including the use of Pakistani troops to train and fight alongside the Taliban inside Afghanistan."

That support for the Taliban is traced in the declassified documents back to 1995, when Bhutto was Pakistan's prime minister. One cable on Dec. 22, 1995, states that "Pakistan has followed a policy of supporting the Taliban" in its effort to seize power. On Oct. 22, 1996, again with Bhutto very much Pakistan's prime minister, the U.S. Embassy warned Washington that "U.S intelligence indicates that the ISI is supplying the Taliban forces with munitions, fuel and food." ISI refers to Pakistan's hugely powerful and secretive Interservice Intelligence Agency. By the end of Bhutto's tenure, a U.S. cable reported, "Pakistan's ISI is heavily involved in Afghanistan," but the cable added that the mostly Pashtun Pakistan Frontier Corps was also pitching in: "These Frontier Corps elements are utilized in command and control; training; and when necessary—combat."

Those Frontier Corps fellows are the same folks that Musharraf and Bush are now counting on to capture bin Laden and his gang, operating on Pakistan's frontier with Afghanistan. The good news, I suppose, is that the religious militant Sharif acted not much differently from U.S.-supported wonders Bhutto and Musharraf. The bad news is that they have all provided decisive support for the Taliban, which harbored bin Laden. But all was forgiven by the Bush administration after 9/11, when President Bush dropped the sanctions against Pakistan (imposed in reprisal for its testing a nuclear bomb) as a reward for Musharraf letting American forces use his air space for the invasion of Afghanistan. We also gave him \$10 billion in aid as an incentive to help us catch bin Laden, but that hasn't quite worked out yet.

In addition, we rewarded the two Arab oil sheikdoms that had supported the Taliban by knocking off their nemesis Saddam Hussein. As a result, the world is much safer, democracy has spread throughout the Muslim world, and the price of oil is so high right now that the Saudis are ordering \$20 billion of American-made military hardware.

It's been a good deal all around. Dick Cheney's old company, Halliburton, profited so much from the Iraq war that it could afford to relocate its world headquarters from Texas to Dubai. And this Tuesday, the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority agreed to help salvage Citigroup by becoming the beleaguered bank's largest shareholder. Probably not a very smart financial move, given the unknown depths of Citigroup's liabilities in the sub-prime mortgage scandal, but what are friends for if they can't help out in tough times? It's not the sort of thing Saddam Hussein would ever have done—and that's why he's now history.



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The contenders: Benazir Bhutto (left) and Nawaz Sharif (right) are both determined to take power from President Pervez Musharraf, but would they be better for Pakistan and the West?

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