

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Pakistan: When U.S. Policy Limits Public Diplomacy ^[1]

When a nation is busy devouring itself, in a manner that threatens the larger global peace, other nations' policies and public diplomacy will be complicated indeed.

In the case of a disintegrating Pakistan, American policy has tended to make effective public diplomacy virtually impossible and irrelevant.

Consider the assassination of the governor of the Punjab by a bodyguard who reportedly disliked his boss's anti-fundamentalist tendencies. Westerners will see this as another sign of how Pakistanis need to "get tougher" with the threat of extremism in that nation.

They are right, to a point, but miss crucial subtleties.

Pakistanis have an utter crisis of confidence in their leadership. Many Pakistanis also believe that their corrupt leadership was visited upon them as a curse by the Americans.

There is some truth to this. The U.S. allied closely with Pakistan's dictator Pervez Musharraf. As Musharraf lost legitimacy in the eyes of his public, Washington prodded him to bring back the disgraced Benazir Bhutto for a possible power-sharing arrangement, believing that Bhutto's popularity could help re-legitimize a pro-American Pakistani government.

There were several problems here. The glamorous Bhutto, romanticized in Western circles, wasn't as popular as Washington imagined. Many Pakistanis who liked the U.S. detested Bhutto and especially her husband Asif Ali Zardari, who was legendary for corruption.

And yet Washington urged the Pakistani government to set aside the corruption charges against Bhutto's family, believing that peace would blossom if everyone had a fresh start.

Benazir's assassination two years ago then led to machinations by her party and by Zardari to put him in power. Granted, democratic elections ratified this decision, but in a dysfunctional power structure in which viable alternatives couldn't be found and in which votes can easily be bought or manipulated, many Pakistanis blamed America for bringing the crooks back to town in the first place.

Washington could somewhat plausibly say, "Stop whining, Pakistanis. It's your country and you're ultimately responsible. We just offered some suggestions, but it was your own government and your own citizenry that ultimately made the decisions. Meanwhile, we've got a battle against jihadists that we're trying to fight, and if you had any sense, you'd be joining us with more vigor than you've showed."

The Pakistani citizenry might respond, "We know that we made our mess, but we still believe you played a role while trying to make your own lives easier. The Bhutto Cult wasn't the

answer for a prosperous and democratic Pakistan, and Zardari certainly isn't the solution. But all you cared about was having lackeys in place in Islamabad. And even still, you complain about not getting enough support from us while your predators bomb innocent civilians in our frontier territories."

One reason this view is unheard here is because the Western media tends to portray Bhutto and the Punjabi governor as martyrs against extremism, whereas many ordinary Pakistanis see them as satellites orbiting the Zardari death star.

In this environment, any American aid is pointless as a public-diplomacy maneuver. Any American public relations seeds are scattered on rocky soil.

There are a few jokes about Zardari making the rounds:

1. A man standing in a long line for food tells the others in the line that he is leaving the line to go to shoot the president. He returns after a few hours and rejoins the line.

"Did you manage to kill him", everyone asks him.

"No, that line is longer than this one", he replies.

2. Robber: "Give me all your money!"

Zardari: "Don't you know who I am? I am Asif Ali Zardari."

Robber: "OK. Give me all my money."

3. A TV anchor announces: "Terrorists have kidnapped our President Zardari and are demanding \$5,000,000 or they will burn him with petrol. Please donate what you can. I have donated five liters."

Zardari's reaction to these jokes was to threaten the jokesters with up to 14 years in prison.

That is the democratic Bhutto legacy that we have helped bring to Pakistan. In a sense, the joke is on us.
