

Open your eyes, Dave

Fatima Bhutto

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In his haste to embrace the new pro-western government of Pakistan, the British Foreign Secretary has ignored reality



“Criminals shouldn’t run countries”: Bhutto

Open your eyes, Dave

Dear David,

I hope this letter finds you well. Do you mind if I call you David? "Mr Miliband" sounds so formal, given your affectionate relationship with my country. It was such a lovely surprise to have you over. It warmed our hearts, really it did. I especially enjoyed your faith in our new government (you know, the one headed by two former ex-cons?). The CIA and Nato have both praised Pakistan's new regime for its enthusiastic assistance in the war on terror, and now you've chimed in. I find it's always nice to have supportive friends when you're at war with your own citizens.

But back to you, esteemed Foreign Secretary (maybe I could just call you Dave?). You welcomed the "reforming zeal" of Pakistan's present government, adding that under Asif Zardari's stewardship Pakistan has been turned into an outward-looking force. Flogging an extremely dead horse, you went on to say that Britain was keen fully to support Pakistan's "democratic" government. The quotation marks are mine, not yours, clearly. Let's talk about some of that reforming zeal you were so impressed by.

In a push to inaugurate as many chums as possible into high-powered federal posts, the Zardari government last month named Mir Hazar Khan Bijarani as the education minister. Does the name ring a bell, Dave? It should. In 2007, the former chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry - you remember him surely? - ordered Bijarani's arrest for a small matter.

The small matter was this: to settle a feud between two families, Bijarani, then a Pakistan Peoples Party national assembly member, sat at the head of a local jirga and ordered that five girls be handed over to the family of a murdered man as compensation. The five girls were Aamna, aged five, Bashiran and Meerzadi, both aged two, Shehzadi, six, and Noor Bano, three. But thanks to the reformist zeal of our new and, might I add democratic, government, the former chief justice's condemnation of Bijarani's barbarism is null and void. The criminal is cleansed and blessed with a promotion allowing him to preside over a substantial federal ministry. What happened to the five girls - to Bashiran and Meerzadi and the others? Who cares? Their country is an outward-looking force.

Throughout your time in Pakistan, and I hate to be a pain about this, Dave, you used the phrase "civilian government" ad nauseam. "Pakistan's civilian government must stop the drones"; "I welcome the reforming zeal of the civilian government"; "Britain supports the civilian government of Pakistan". But what you seem to be forgetting is that civilian governments can be authoritarian, too. Case in point: because of a most inconvenient deluge of criticism aimed at the civilian government, the civilian government has introduced the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Ordinance.

Threatening text messagers and satirical emailers through the Federal Investigation Authority was not enough; now parliament is going to get serious. Under the ordinance, anyone found guilty of "cyber terrorism" and who thereby "causes death of any person" will face the death penalty. The only problem is, again, a small one - that no one is clear as to what exactly constitutes cyber terrorism. The definitions put forth by the civilian government are ludicrous. They do not follow internationally recognised standards. The ordinance includes many more ambiguities, for crimes such as "spoofing" and "spamming", for instance, that will be punished with imprisonment.

Does this article count as an electronic crime? It might. According to the decree, I've just spoofed by making suggestions of an obscene nature - that criminals shouldn't run countries. I could, therefore, be found guilty under section 13, which prohibits cyber stalking. Yes, I know they aren't related. I didn't stalk anyone. It's just that kind of law. If I forward this article to my mailing list, I could be charged with "spamming". Anything is possible under the reformist zeal of our new civilian government.

A few days ago, the senate standing committee on the interior admitted the presence of "countless hidden torture cells" across the country. What exactly has changed since the civilians took power from the generals? Nothing. Torture remains unabated. The press is more muzzled, and the economy is prostrate, at the mercy of the International Monetary Fund's lending conditions.

By next July, according to the stipulations of the IMF, subsidies for electricity, gas and petroleum products will be eliminated. Agricultural subsidies will most likely be cut, and by 2015 the ratio of tax to GDP will increase from less than 10 to more than 15 per cent. The poor will have to pay for Pakistan's corrupt governance, Dave. The poor, already burdened by extreme food inflation and power and water shortages, will bear the brunt of our civilian government's "reformist zeal".

Covering both Afghanistan and Pakistan on one trip in two days, and now having the issues in India to respond to, is a hell of a lot of work. You must be dreadfully exhausted by all your recent politicking. I know we are. I trust you had a safe flight home. We'll miss you.

Best wishes,

Fatima