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Dear General

A hundred beats

By Fatima Bhutto

Dear General,

I like many other Pakistanis, sat in front of the TV on Monday night to hear you speak to 'ace anchorman' Kamran Khan, who parlayed his brief television ban into a world exclusive with you days after the Geo office in Islamabad was ransacked and raided by the police. It was not an interview as such, there were few prickly questions, and it was telecast more like 'an audience with Pervez Musharraf'.

Looking dapper in your grey flannel suit you appeared amiable and comfortable with the nation's eyes upon you. It was a total charm offensive. Dear General, it was completely insidious. Any military dictator worth his salt sees it as his indisputable right to appear brash and authoritarian. In Zimbabwe democratic activists are being jailed and tortured for their criticisms of Mugabe's political and human right's record. When the world press raised their voices in fury at the dictator's cruel treatment of his people, Robert Mugabe responded simply "Let them hang". Speaking on television in simple, accessible language and convivially joking with your interviewer your abrogation of the Pakistani constitution seems far less threatening, but far more dangerous in the long run because though your actions are perpetually dictatorial your pose is considerably well thought out. You are far smarter than a sub Saharan dictator. Congratulations.

When asked about the spate of politically motivated disappearances since 2001, the highest estimates placing the number of disappeared activists and intellectuals at 4,000 Pakistani citizens, you expressed outrage. Mock outrage, perhaps. You asserted that your government does not have a 'victimization agenda' and insisted that no officials of yours are running around the country placing people in trunks of cars in the middle of the night. You said that you would be the last man to ever approve of such a tactic. You explained it all for us right there on TV. Thank you. You said that the people who have been wrongly labelled as 'disappeared persons' had actually left their families and homes of their own free will. They snuck away to join the global jihad movement. They ran away to become suicide bombers. What a shame, but it's true. They make videotapes before they blow themselves up, you'd seen them. They're not disappeared. They're terror recruits and invisibility is part of their cloak. Speaking so confidently on the matter, you were almost believable.

But it's not true dear General, it simply is not true. I wonder if you've had a chance to read 'Enemy Combatant' a book heralded as a "fascinating prison memoir" by The Times of London. Its author, Moazzam Begg, a Briton of Pakistani origin spent three years shackled in Guantanamo Bay after being hooded and handcuffed at midnight by Pakistani and American officials who turned up at his house in Islamabad. Begg recounts pleading with a Pakistani

official, insisting that he had done nothing wrong and asking that he be released from his illegal detention. "You are here because of the Americans" Begg's guard told him. He was never charged with any crimes but spirited away from Islamabad to Camp Echo, Guantanamo Bay. Moazzam Begg didn't leave his home of his own will; he was not fleeing to join a jihadi camp. He was disappeared.

When Khan brought up the attack on his station, Geo, you condemned it. You have always been a champion on the free press. You have always been an advocate of free expression and free thought. That is good to know as I write you this letter, thanks again in advance. You promised the police inspector in charge of the assault on the freedom of the press would be punished. Where is he? Oh, he's missing. He has since been 'found'. I would love to hear his thoughts on 'Aaj Kamran Khan Kay Saath'. Perhaps you could put a good word in?

Then there came the meat of the matter -- your removal of the chief justice. Again, you insisted that no wrongdoing had been committed on your part. You told Khan that you handled the matter legally and constitutionally. The problem, you said, was created on the ground. It was the political opposition that made a big mess out of the situation by raising slogans and creating a public disturbance. Look at the pictures of the crowd surrounding the chief justice's car, you pointed out, look at the political parties flags that surround it. I must confess, dear General, the pictures I saw were of your police force -- they're everywhere these days -- lathi-charging lawyers. I saw pictures of men being kicked in the open street and being tear gassed until they dispersed.

But I'm trying to understand your point, and perhaps there is one -- why don't we see lawyers taking to the streets to protest the thousands of children held in our jails? Or to protest the many detentions made without charges? Or to take a stand against the accepted torture of prisoners by the police? The lawyers we've seen these past two weeks may be politically motivated; their protests may not be totally humanitarian in spirit. But your removal of the chief justice remains unconstitutional. Your peers have been removing elected prime ministers for decades now, perhaps chucking out a CJ isn't that much of an escalation of events.

"I'm not a legal man" you said, "I'm just a simple soldier". Bless you. The people of this country have a tremendous respect for the simple soldiers that fought for Pakistan in 1965 and 1971, and for those simple jawans who worked tirelessly in the aftermath of the 2005 earthquake after losing so many of their own. But you're not one of those simple soldiers anymore. The reason I cannot address this letter to you as 'Dear President' is because, as I have said many times, I did not vote for you. Even those who may have wanted to vote for you were not afforded the right to. You told Kamran Khan that there would be no emergency imposed, no martial law declared. I beg your pardon, but are we not living under martial law?

This is not a democracy. You did not stand for elections in 1999 or in 2002 and in the elections that you promised Khan would be held this year, you will not run as a candidate for the presidency. Dear General -- this is not acceptable to the people of this country. Enforced disappearances are not acceptable to the people of this country. Constitutional truancy is not acceptable to the people of this country. Your last two predecessors, once mortal enemies but now better known as Bhain Bhai, are also no longer acceptable -- do not think this letter is aimed

only at you, but also at those who preceded you with dirty politics of their own. The eleven years of so-called democracy before you were rife with extra judicial murders and mass corruption, we both know that. But your actions are not more tolerable than theirs.

Restore the rule of law in this country, restore a separation of powers, and return the thousands of disappeared -- for any wrongdoings they may have committed they can stand trial. That is their due.

Looking forward to your next televised interview.

Fatima Bhutto