

WEDNESDAY, MAY 26, 2004

## COMMONWEALTH CHARADE

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THE DECISION BY the Commonwealth to readmit Pakistan is merely a formal acknowledgement of a situation that has existed on the ground since 2001. The 53-nation grouping of former British colonies suspended Pakistan's membership in 1999 following the coup by General Pervez Musharraf that ousted a democratically elected government in Islamabad. In doing so, the Commonwealth invoked its 1991 Harare Declaration for the protection and promotion of democracy and democratic processes among its members. But the readmission has less to do with democracy than with Pakistan's emergence as one of the frontline allies of the United States and the United Kingdom in their "war against terrorism." Since 9/11, the Commonwealth's "big two" — Britain and Australia — never once permitted the suspension to come in the way of building bridges with Pakistan and accepting General Musharraf's leadership of his country. Instead, in order to legitimise the growing relationship, both countries actively lobbied the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), a nine-nation suspension review committee that met bi-annually, for readmission of Pakistan. Also, it is no secret that India, which was in the CMAG and opposed the re-entry until as recently as last September, dropped its objections in the interests of its recently revived dialogue with the Musharraf Government. This is in line with New Delhi not objecting to Pakistan's recent entry into the Association of South East Asian Nations Regional Forum either.

For sure, President Musharraf took steps towards restoring democracy in his country, including holding parliamentary elections in 2002. The Pakistan National Assembly ratified his election-by-referendum and adopted his controversial amendments to the Constitution, reasons the CMAG has cited for revoking the suspension. But the Commonwealth cannot pretend that these were a result of its isolationist moves. Rather Pakistan's transition to democracy, for all its slowness, owes more to a policy of engagement pursued by the international community, with

prominent Commonwealth members acting individually against the suspension. It is worrying that the group persists with the charade by attaching conditions to the readmission. True, there are concerns in Pakistan that General Musharraf may backtrack on his promise to step down as the Chief of Army Staff. The enactment of legislation for a National Security Council designed to give the military overarching control over policy and the Government's actions against Opposition politicians have also raised doubts about his intentions. The CMAG has said it is "seized" of these concerns, giving the impression that the Commonwealth may reverse its decision if it does not see more progress towards democracy. But it is obvious that such a reversal is unlikely given that important members of the group need General Musharraf more than Pakistan, on which the U.S. recently pinned the "major non-NATO ally" label, needs the Commonwealth.

The whole episode, from start to finish, raises questions about the Commonwealth's even-handedness in dealing with its members. The same members of the group who pushed hard for Pakistan's re-inclusion prevailed on it — on the eve of the 2003 Commonwealth summit in Abuja, Nigeria — to keep Zimbabwe out, much against the pleas of African member-states for engagement with President Robert Mugabe. The move saw Zimbabwe walking out of the association but it has not resolved the leadership crisis in that country. Also in question is the relevance of the Commonwealth and the benefits that member-countries get out of it beyond the privilege of association and the dubious bond of a shared colonial past. It is time the Commonwealth gave serious thought to how in a changed world it can offer constructive help to its member-states, many of them poor, developing countries, instead of acting purely as an instrument of Western interests. As for India, its foreign policy should in future adopt a positive attitude towards engaging Pakistan imaginatively and encouraging it to play its due role in regional and international fora.

THE HINDU

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# 'Pakistan re-entry into Commonwealth unjustified'

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By B. Muralidhar Reddy

**ISLAMABAD, MAY 23.** Even as the Pakistan Foreign Minister, Khurshid Mehmood Kasuri, has described the re-entry of Pakistan into the Commonwealth as a victory for all Pakistanis, a majority of the Opposition denounced it as 'unjustified'.

The chairman of the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and senior Pakistan Peoples' Party leader, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, said the Commonwealth's decision made no sense as there was no real democracy in the country. Two days ago the ARD had written to the Commonwealth Secretary-General arguing against the re-admission of Pakistan into its fold. A government spokesman had denounced it as unpatriotic.

"Pakistan's readmission into the Commonwealth with immediate effect is yet another victory for all Pakistanis irrespective of party affiliations since foreign policy should be a bipartisan issue. It is a victory for our pro-active foreign policy anchored in the immutable principle of sovereign independence," Mr. Kasuri said in a written statement from London. "The decision of the Commonwealth Minister Action Group (CMAG), restoring Pakistan's membership, comes in the wake of the ratification of the Pakistan-European Union Third Generation Agreement, invitation to Pakistan to join the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the United States' decision to notify Pakistan as a major non-NATO Ally. These far-reaching positive developments vindicate Pakistan's democratic credentials, as well as reflect the international community's recognition of our pivotal role on the world stage in promoting regional and international security," Mr. Kasuri said.

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# Commonwealth lifts Pak suspension

London, May 22 (Reuters): The Commonwealth readmitted Pakistan today, citing the country's progress on democratic reforms since its suspension after a military coup five years ago.

The decision ends the exclusion imposed after President Pervez Musharraf seized power in 1999 and seals Pakistan's reintegration into the international fold.

Pakistan, which has one of the world's biggest Muslim populations, has already been embraced by the US as a major ally, widely seen as a reward for its support in the America-led war against terror.

"The (Commonwealth) welcomed the progress made in restoring democracy and rebuilding democratic institutions in Pakistan," secretary-general Don McKinnon said.

"(It) decided, therefore, that Pakistan should no longer remain suspended from the councils of the Commonwealth."

But the group of 53 mostly former British colonies said after a meeting of foreign ministers and diplomats it would monitor further reforms and expect Musharraf to meet a pledge to stand down as chief of the army by the end of this year.

If the nuclear power fails to continue along the road to democracy or if Musharraf does not stand down as army chief the Commonwealth will consider fresh action, officials said.

Many analysts had predicted the Commonwealth would lift the suspension.

"The fact that Pakistan has been accepted by other countries and institutions would have put the Commonwealth out on a limb if it had not made this decision," said Gareth Price, South East Asia expert at the Royal Institute of International Affairs.

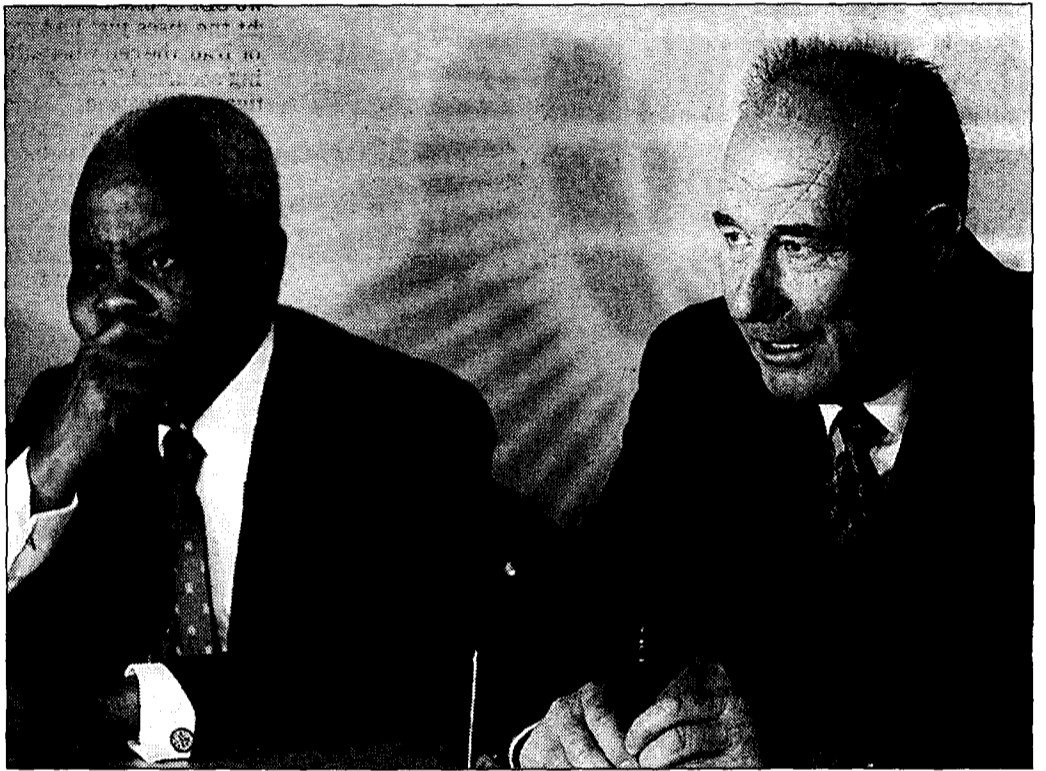
Pakistan, which has a population of 149 million, had long argued it had met Commonwealth demands.

"This is our moral victory. We deserve it," said Pakistani information minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed.

Pakistan's high commissioner to London, Maleeha Lodhi, said Musharraf would stick to his undertaking to resign as army head.

"Let's remember he has stood by every commitment he has made, that's his track record," she said.

Musharraf was made army



Commonwealth secretary-general Don McKinnon (right) and Nigerian foreign minister Olu Adeniji at a press conference in London. (Reuters)

chief in 1998 and ousted the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup a year later.

Diplomats said earlier an apparent softening of his pledge to give up his army uniform and the deportation earlier this month of Nawaz Sharif's younger brother Shahbaz Sharif had raised concerns.

Critics accuse Musharraf of building up a personal power base by strengthening pro-military groups before quitting as army chief and point out that top Opposition leaders including former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have been in exile for several years.

Farhatullah Babar, spokesman for Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, said: "The decision is not surprising as western countries, taking General Musharraf's promise to fight against terror on its face value, wanted to reward his government."

Emeka Anyaoku, a former Commonwealth secretary-general, said it was "a tragic blow to the hard earned credibility of the (Commonwealth) as a force for promoting its fundamental principle of democracy".

Representatives from Nigeria, India, Canada, Tanzania, Lesotho, the Bahamas, Malta, Samoa and Sri Lanka made the

decision in the name of the Commonwealth.

McKinnon said the decision had no direct impact on Zimbabwe which withdrew from the Commonwealth last December after its suspension was extended.

## Pipeline attack

Suspected tribesmen fired 16 rockets at a state-run natural gas facility today in southwestern Pakistan and damaged a main pipeline, disrupting gas supplies to several areas, officials said.

The attackers also fired automatic weapons at paramilitary troops guarding the facility at Sui, 400 km east of Quetta.

# Pakistan back in C'wealth

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PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

LONDON, May 22. — Ending over four years' of suspension, Pakistan has been readmitted into the Commonwealth today, with a caution that Islamabad implement fully the 17th Amendment to its Constitution, including the issue of the separation of the offices of President and Chief of Army Staff.

A decision in this regard was taken at the two-day meeting of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) which ended here this afternoon.

"CMAG welcomed the progress made in restoring democracy and rebuilding democratic institutions in Pakistan as well as the restoration of the 1973 Constitution, as amended by the 17th Amendment, and decided therefore that Pakistan should no longer remain suspended from the Councils of the

Commonwealth," Secretary General Mr Dor McKinnon told reporters. However, he said the CMAG noted continuing concerns in regard to strengthening of the democratic process in Pakistan and "separation of the offices of President and Chief of Army Staff," he said.

Welcoming its readmission, Pakistan today said the lifting of the suspension was "long overdue". Reacting to the decision Pakistan High Commissioner to UK, Ms Maleeha Lodhi told *PTV*: "The lifting of the suspension is unconditional and with immediate effect," she said adding that the decision to keep Pakistan on agenda was only procedural."

Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth in 1999 after Army Chief Pervez Musharraf toppled the country's elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup.

# C'wealth capers

## Islamabad positively dislikes reinstatement

General Musharraf's slamming the Commonwealth soon after the Commonwealth took the decision to re-admit Pakistan reveals the compulsions on both sides. Pakistan's suspension followed Musharraf's coup in 1999, but it is not as if it has made large strides in restoring democracy since. There is a bogus parliament, which can be dissolved at the will of the National Security Council, an unelected body staffed by Musharraf men. He himself wears two hats, President and army chief. What has happened, rather, is that Musharraf is the current blue-eyed boy and "strategic ally" of the Anglo-Americans, and there was the need to reward him for co-operation against Al Qaeda. Not surprisingly the British, together with the Australians who tend to be junior partners in the Anglo axis, have argued strenuously for Pakistan's inclusion. Delhi is not inclined to stand in the way, given the current peace moves with Pakistan. Objections came from African countries, since Zimbabwe didn't receive the same kid-glove treatment. The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group has resolved the issue by placing Pakistan on notice — that Musharraf, must also keep his promise to step down as army chief by the year end.

Musharraf's prickly reaction to the conditions suggests he fully intends to break that promise. Given that enmity to him now extends within the army ranks — it is revealed that the murderous attacks on him last December were forces insider jobs — his instinct for self-preservation in a land run de facto by the army and the ISI tells him to stay on as army chief, promise or no promise. No doubt, that would also be found to be congruent with the interests of "strategic allies" in Washington and London — the Al Qaeda will still be around at end 2004. Musharraf has started arguing already that fundamentalist parties haven't kept up their end of the bargain, so he is under no obligation to step down. We make two statements. One, Musharraf won't do a Sonia Gandhi. He will remain in the saddle as army chief *and* President come 2005. And two, the Commonwealth isn't going to re-suspend Pakistan over the issue.

THE STATESMAN