

## A Distraction From Washington's Grand Design

Daily Telegraph. 11/09/2007

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore.

Nawaz Sharif is not part of the American script for the war on terror and the future of Pakistan, written by mandarins in the US State Department. He is considered neither fish nor fowl, too close to the fundamentalist mullahs and too unpredictable.

The real script is to save the beleaguered Gen Pervez Musharraf, and involves another former prime minister in exile - the fragrant Daughter of the East, Benazir Bhutto. When in a few weeks' time she repeats yesterday's homecoming saga from London, she will be welcomed by the very police that manhandled Mr Sharif and she will be allowed to lead a procession to her home town.

That is because the West is desperate to bring her and Gen Musharraf into a loveless marriage so that the general can combat the terrorists and the lady play democracy. This, they hope, can keep the crumbling edifice of military rule going for a few more years or at least until Osama bin Laden is winkled out of his home in the tribal regions of North and South Waziristan.

And that is where the whole plan falls apart because in a country like Pakistan, a failing state hovering over the abyss, there are too many loose ends to tie up.

Ms Bhutto's popularity has plummeted since it became apparent that she is trying to cut a deal with the army. The more she is seen as part of some Bush game plan, the more she is mistrusted by a populace that hates the army as much as it hates the Americans.

Then there is the crumbling morale in the army. Two weeks ago US and Nato forces in Afghanistan were shocked to discover that 300 Pakistani soldiers - their erstwhile partners in the war on terrorism - had surrendered to the Taliban in Waziristan without firing a shot.

Soldiers in the badlands controlled by the Taliban and al-Qa'eda are deserting or refusing to open fire. The White House is panic-stricken. That is because Gen Musharraf in his hubris has utterly failed to convince Pakistanis or the army that Pakistan has to fight not America's war, but its own war against ever-expanding extremism.

Pakistan's own Taliban are running wild in large parts of the country, beheading women, burning video shops, launching suicide bombers against army convoys and taking over law and order in towns just 100 miles from Islamabad.

On Sunday the Pakistani Taliban issued a letter warning legislators from the ruling Pakistan Muslim League that more than 300 suicide bombers were ready to kill them if they voted for another five-year stint for Gen Musharraf in the presidential elections.

The other loose cannon is the supreme court, which may well rule in the next few days that Mr Sharif has every right to return to Pakistan and that Gen Musharraf cannot stand as president and also remain army chief.

If that happens, Gen Musharraf's only course would be to impose martial law and dismiss the chief justice - which would almost certainly plunge Pakistan into an even deeper unknown.

The West would like to see an orderly transition to some kind of watered-down democracy headed by Gen Musharraf and Ms Bhutto, so that its two major concerns - persuading the army to confront the Taliban and keep its nuclear weapons under lock and key - are safeguarded.

However, that agenda looks increasingly at risk. By sending Mr Sharif into exile, Gen Musharraf and his Western allies have only bought themselves a little time but they may find that they have only speeded up the meltdown of Pakistan.