



For Which It Stands: Pakistan

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A portrait of a president, and a troubled U.S.-Pakistan relationship

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Hamesh Gul claims he has looked more closely at Barack Obama than anyone else in Pakistan. And he might just be right.

In a cramped gallery in Islamabad's oldest crafts bazaar, Gul is working on his sixteenth oil on canvas portrait of the American president-elect. Using magazine photos, he has painted Obama as a child swinging a baseball bat, in his mother's arms, in church and in profile.

"He has soft features — it's a very gentle face," Gul says while lightly touching up the blue background around Obama's ears, a cover photo from Ebony magazine clutched in his left hand. "And he's young," he pulls back and cocks his head to get a wider view of the canvas. "When you're young, you can afford to travel off the beaten path."

Many Pakistanis like Gul are sifting through the tiniest details of America's next president, searching for clues on how he might bring change to the relationship between Pakistan and the U.S. It is a critical and complicated relationship for both countries, and lately it has also been turning sour.

While Pakistan remains a linchpin in America's war on terror, the country also reels from regular U.S. air strikes on its soil. America blames elements in Pakistan for supporting international terrorism, while the second largest Muslim country in the world remains a prime target for terrorists from all around the world.

Gul is blunt about one thing: There is no real demand for Obama portraits in Pakistan. His customers are expatriate Americans. A large majority of Pakistanis don't trust America to be a true ally in a world where the country seems to have fewer than ever.

Sinister words such as "double-crossing," "exploitative," "selfish" and "untrustworthy" pepper most conversations about America's attitude towards Pakistan. This air of perceived treachery has driven many Pakistani politicians and activists from the strictly secular to deeply religious and people from across demographics lines to become what might be described simplistically as "anti-American."

The half-century-old relationship between the two countries is "like a marriage between an old man and a young trophy wife," says Tariq Fatemi, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States who served as a diplomat in America for many years through the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. "The old man just wants a young girl around to serve his needs,

and she sticks around because she wants the estate," he laughs. Mr. Fatemi, who has worked with many of the players in Obama's new foreign policy team, says the two countries have been "engaged in this charade" for decades. But it may now be time for change.

The need to clear the air has never been more sorely felt in Pakistan, and also in the United States. A few months ago I watched the first presidential debate between Obama and John McCain on a big screen in a tightly-packed bar in Brooklyn. It was the first time Pakistan had become a major election issue in America and Pakistan was mentioned a couple of dozen times that night by the candidates.

Obama has always talked tough on Pakistan, and at the debate in Mississippi he again spoke about maintaining a close relationship with Pakistan and then in the same breath suggested possible military strikes against it. Most Pakistanis, like many Americans, are left searching for clues about what he thinks of Pakistan. Is it friend or foe?

Former ambassador Fatemi points out Obama's willingness to discuss the Kashmir issue and link its resolution to a success in the war on terror as a sign "of a thinking man" who is willing to take a balanced regional approach. In Obama's decision to use his Muslim middle name in his oath-taking ceremony, Hamesh Gul sees strength of character.

Others pin their hopes for a better diplomatic dynamic on more personal reasons, after hearing local media reports about Obama's mother's five-year stint as a social-worker in Pakistan, or reading excerpts from his book where he talks about his close Pakistani friends from school.

In one painting, Gul points to Vice President-elect Joseph Biden watching over Obama's right shoulder. For those following U.S. politics closely here, Biden is an important part of the new equation as well. He has long been known for his interest in Pakistan and the "Biden-Lugar" bill currently in the U.S. Congress proposes to triple non-military aid to Pakistan to a whopping \$15 billion to be parceled out over the next 10 years. Biden calls it "a bold new strategy for Pakistan," a "commitment to help improve Pakistan's democracy" and a way to help "in the continued fight against the Taliban and al-Qaida."

The Obama administration's policies will reverberate in Pakistan on a range of issues from the delivery of this aid, to the return of Pakistani prisoners in Guantanamo, to American cross border air strikes in Pakistan, and the handling of the conflict in Indian Kashmir, and even between the Palestinians and Israel.

But for now, Hamesh Gul resists too much hope. "He is just a man like me, there's only so much he can do on his own," he says and after a few light strokes of his brush and without taking his eyes off Obama he prays: "May Allah guide him to do what's best."