

OP-ED: Thomas Houlahan on Hillary Clinton

How credible is Hillary Clinton on Pakistan?

Last weekend after returning to my office from the television studios of a major network where I had done a brief segment on the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, I turned on CNN to watch their coverage of the Bhutto assassination's aftermath.

Sen. Hillary Clinton was telling Wolf Blitzer that she didn't think "the Pakistani government at this time under President Musharraf has any credibility at all."

She then said something that betrayed a serious lack of knowledge about Pakistan and called her own credibility on the subject into serious question.

"If President Musharraf wishes to stand for election," she told Blitzer, "then he should abide by the same rules that every other candidate will have to follow."

My immediate reaction was: "Did I hear that correctly?"

As a Pakistan analyst, I know for a fact that Pervez Musharraf doesn't wish to stand for election any time soon.

The upcoming elections are for the next parliament. Musharraf was just elected president of Pakistan, overwhelmingly, by popularly elected electors on Oct. 6. He's just begun his five-year term as the president of the country. Why would he ever want to run for one seat in parliament? It wouldn't make sense.

However, I checked the transcript of the interview later. That's exactly what she said.

My next reaction was: "Maybe she misspoke. Candidates do a lot of interviews. Not every sentence comes out the way they want it to."

After all, Sen. Clinton is a candidate who is running claiming big-time foreign policy knowledge and experience that she says her closest opponents in the Democratic Primary don't have.

Pakistan? A nuclear power? A front-line ally in the war on terror? A country that's been in the news an awful lot in the past few months? "C'mon," I told myself. "A candidate with all of those advisors has got to know at least the basics about Pakistan's political system."

No such luck.

Sunday morning, ABC's This Week ran an interview George Stephanopoulos had done with Sen. Clinton on Friday.

The interview produced this gem:

Referring to a possible delay in the elections, Sen. Clinton said: "I think it will be very difficult to have a real election. You know, Nawaz Sharif (leader of the PML-N, an opposition party) has said he's not going to compete. The PPP is in disarray with Benazir's assassination. He (President Pervez Musharraf) could be the only person on the ballot. I don't think that's a real election."

And then it hit me:

Sen. Clinton really didn't know that the upcoming elections were for individual seats in Pakistan's parliament. She actually believed that Bhutto, Nawaz and Musharraf would be facing off as individual candidates for leadership of the country in the upcoming elections.

Sen. Clinton didn't know that Nawaz Sharif isn't allowed to run for office in Pakistan because of a felony conviction. She didn't know that President Musharraf won't be on the ballot because he's already been elected.

Sen. Clinton, a candidate for the leadership of the free world, apparently doesn't know the first thing about the country referred to by some as "the most dangerous place on earth."

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