

HOW MUSHARRAF SURVIVES

by
Pervez Hoodbhoy

General Pervez Musharraf, president of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, has few friends and many enemies. The major political parties in Pakistan are opposed to him. For the religious right, the mullahs, he is an agent of the great Satan, America, and has betrayed the cause of Islam. Somewhere out there, gunning for him, are Islamic militants furious at being dumped after they fought his covert wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Many in his own army despise him for this. For Pakistan's small and embattled liberal and left -wing, he is yet another military dictator who has seized and held on to power by force, undermining the development of democracy in their country. So how does he survive?

In large part it is the 9/11 miracle. Faced by a United States bent upon bloody vengeance, Pakistan's military establishment scurried to join the US-led coalition and take up arms against its former creation, the Taliban. This straightforward betrayal was resisted only by a few senior officers with an Islamic bent. They were quickly rendered irrelevant, drawing praise from Washington.

With US help, an economy that had nearly run aground before 9/11 suddenly righted itself under the influence of international aid and loan write-offs. Even more important was the channeling of expatriate Pakistani earnings through official banking channels, made mandatory in the hope of choking off funds to extremist groups.

In a curious way nuclear weapons, are crucial to Musharraf's survival. They create conditions that distract Pakistan's highly ideological army away from its objective of war with India. Indeed, the Kashmir dispute had occupied the minds of military planners for all of Pakistan's history, and war had been the *raison d'être* for maintaining the eighth largest standing army in the world. But nukes, a belief in deterrence, and growing realization that Kashmir is a lost cause, have freed the army from the hard life of the trenches. Ideology is increasingly irrelevant as the officer class scrambles to build vast personal fortunes.

A look at Pakistan's economic landscape tells all. The CEOs of many, if not most corporations, public and private, are retired military officers – many fairly young. The military owns airlines and freight companies, petrochemical factories, power generation plants, sugar mills, cement and fertilizer plants, road construction, banks and insurance, advertising companies, and more.

Vast tracts of prime real estate in cities, sold to officers for a pittance, have turned into mega housing developments. Musharraf defends the military acquisitions, claims that they are economically efficient, and angrily dismisses criticism as the ranting of unpatriotic Pakistani pseudo-intellectuals.

Last month, Musharraf infuriated Pakistan's Islamists yet again when he ordered his foreign minister to initiate the first official contact with Israel. But the Islamists' call for nation-wide protests flopped miserably. The military, after decades of rule, has successfully dismantled all forms of political organization – political parties, trade unions, and student unions – leaving a society apathetic and incapable of articulating its preferences.

As the anger of Islamists increases at Musharraf's betrayals, so does his global stock price and image as a world statesman. Scenes of wild eyed mullahs demonstrating in the streets of Pakistani cities are a boon. Surely this speaks of a Pakistani public that needs taming by a strongman. And, no harm done if it is an army general.

But the truth is more complex. Musharraf flits effortlessly between his existence as a newly established world leader – who speaks charmingly to the international media about moderate Islam – and his life as a cunning conspirator who rigs elections, destroys political opponents, breaks promises of relinquishing power, and enters into mutually beneficial symbiotic relationships with mullahs. He castigated NGOs who defend human rights as “Westernized fringe elements” which “are as bad as the Islamic extremists.”

In Pakistan today, there is nothing to suggest that radical change is imminent. To forestall the possibility of a coup, the process of cleansing the army of hardline Islamists has already begun. Soldiers charged with mutiny have received the death penalty. But this has further deepened pro- and anti- US divisions within the army, both among commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

More incidents of global terrorism associated with Pakistan, as in the case of the London bombings, will surely bring new pressures. When the inevitable happens, the US and Europe will make their usual demands to close down the country's hate-spewing madrassas, and to change a public school system that – unhindered by the government – churns out young militants burning to kill and die for Islam. For Musharraf, this means that to keep hunting with the hounds and running with the hares might get a wee bit harder. But, barring the unforeseen, the current constellation of forces suggests that he is likely to be around in 2007 – and for years beyond.

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