

MUSHARRAF'S COUP – SEVEN YEARS LATER

by
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Some had feared – while others had hoped – that General Pervez Musharraf's coup of October 12, 1999, would bring the revolution of Kemal Ataturk to a Pakistan firmly in the iron grip of mullahs. But years later a definitive truth has emerged. Like the other insecure governments before it, both military and civilian, the present regime also has a single point agenda – to stay in power at all costs. It therefore does whatever it must and Pakistan falls further from any prospect of acquiring modern values, and of building and strengthening democratic institutions.

The requirements for survival of the present regime are clear: on the one hand the Army leadership knows that its critical dependence upon the West requires that it be perceived abroad as a liberal regime pitted against radical Islamists. But, on the other hand, in actual fact, to preserve and extend its grip on power, it must preserve the status quo.

The staged conflicts between General Musharraf and the mullahs are therefore a regular part of Pakistani politics. This September, nearly seven years later, the religious parties needed no demonstration of muscle power for winning two major victories in less than a fortnight; just a few noisy threats sufficed. From experience they knew that the Pakistan Army and its sagacious leader – of “enlightened moderation” fame – would stick to their predictable pattern of dealing with Islamists. In a nutshell: provoke a fight, get the excitement going, let diplomatic missions in Islamabad make their notes and CNN and BBC get their clips – and then beat a retreat. At the end of it all the mullahs would get what they want, but so would the General.

Examples abound. On 21st April 2000, General Musharraf announced a new administrative procedure for registration of cases under the Blasphemy Law. This law, under which the minimum penalty is death, has frequently been used to harass personal and political opponents. To reduce such occurrences, Musharraf's modified procedure would have required the local district magistrate's approval for registration of a blasphemy case. It would have been an improvement, albeit a modest one. But 25 days later – on the 16th of May 2000 – under the watchful glare of the mullahs, Musharraf hastily climbed down: “As it was the unanimous demand of the ulema, mashaikh and the people, therefore, I have decided to do away with the procedural change in the registration of FIR under the Blasphemy Law”.

Another example. In October 2004, as a new system for issuing machine readable passports was being installed, Musharraf's government declared that henceforth it would not be necessary for passport holders to specify their religion. Expectedly this was denounced by the Islamic parties as a grand conspiracy aimed at secularizing Pakistan and destroying its Islamic character. But even before the mullahs actually took to the streets, the government lost nerve and the volte-face was announced on 24 March, 2005. Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said the decision to revive the religion column was

made else, “Qadianis and apostates would be able to pose as Muslims and perform pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia”.

But even these climb downs – significant as they are – are less dramatic than the astonishing recent retreat over reforming the Hudood Ordinance, a grotesque imposition of General Zia-ul-Haq’s government unparalleled both for its cruelty and irrationality.

Enacted into the law in 1979, it was conceived as part of a more comprehensive process for converting Pakistan into a theocracy governed by Sharia laws. These laws prescribe death by stoning for married Muslims who are found guilty of extra-marital sex (for unmarried couples or non-Muslims, the penalty is 100 lashes). The law is exact in stating how the death penalty is to be administered: “Such of the witnesses who deposed against the convict as may be available shall start stoning him and, while stoning is being carried on, he may be shot dead, whereupon stoning and shooting shall be stopped”.

Rape is still more problematic. A woman who fails to prove that she has been raped is automatically charged with fornication and adultery. Under the Hudood Law, she is considered guilty unless she can prove her innocence. Proof of innocence requires that the rape victim must produce “at least four Muslim adult male witnesses, about whom the Court is satisfied” who saw the actual act of penetration. Inability to do so may result in her being jailed, or perhaps even sentenced to death for adultery.

President and Chief of Army Staff General Musharraf, and his Citibank Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, proposed amending the Hudood Ordinance. They sent a draft for parliamentary discussion in early September, 2006. As expected, it outraged the fundamentalists of the MMA, the main Islamic parliamentary opposition. MMA members tore up copies of the proposed amendments on the floor of the National Assembly and threatened to resign en masse. The government cowered abjectly and withdrew.

Musharraf’s government proved no more enlightened, or more moderate or more resolute and behaved no differently from the more than half a dozen civilian administrations, including two terms of Benazir Bhutto as Prime Minister and several ‘technocrat’ regimes. None made a serious effort to confront or reform these laws.

But the pattern is broader than deference to the mullahs. General Musharraf has been willing to use the iron fist in other circumstances. Two examples stand out: Waziristan and Balochistan. Each offers instruction.

In 2002, presumably on Washington’s instructions, the Pakistan Army established military bases in South Waziristan which had become a refuge for Taliban and Al Qaeda fleeing Afghanistan. It unleashed artillery and US-supplied Cobra gunships. By 2005 heavy fighting had spread to North Waziristan and the army was bogged down.

The generals, safely removed from combat areas, and busy in building their personal financial empires, ascribed the resistance to “a few hundred foreign militants and terrorists”. But the Army was taking losses (how serious is suggested by the fact that casualty figures were not revealed), soldiers rarely ventured out from their forts, morale collapsed as junior officers wondered why they were being asked to attack their

ideological comrades – the Taliban – at American instruction. Reportedly, local clerics refused to conduct funeral prayers for soldiers killed in action.

In 2004, the army made peace with the militants in South Waziristan. It conceded the territory to them, which had made the militants immensely stronger. A similar “peace treaty” was signed on 1 September 2006 in the town of Miramshah, in North Waziristan, now firmly in the grip of the Pakistani Taliban.

The Miramshah treaty met all demands made by the militants: the release of all jailed militants; dismantling of army checkpoints; return of seized weapons and vehicles; the right of the Taliban to display weapons (except heavy weapons); and residence rights for fellow fighters from other Islamic countries. As for “foreign militants” – who Musharraf had blamed exclusively for the resistance, the militants were nonchalant: we will let you know if we find any! The financial compensation demanded by the Taliban for loss of property and life has not been revealed, but some officials have remarked that it is “astronomical”. In turn they promised to cease their attacks on civil and military installations, and give the army a safe passage out.

While the army has extricated itself, the locals have been left to pay the price. The militants have closed girls’ schools and are enforcing harsh Sharia laws in all of Waziristan, both North and South. Barbers have been told ‘shave and die’. Taliban vigilante groups patrol the streets of Miramshah. They check such things as the length of beards, whether the “shalwars” are worn at an appropriate height above the ankles, and attendance of individuals in the mosques.

And then there is Balochistan. Eight years ago when the army seized power, there was no visible separatist movement in Balochistan, which makes nearly 44% of Pakistan’s land mass and is the repository of its gas and oil. Now there is a full blown insurgency built upon Baloch grievances, most of which arise from a perception of being ruled from Islamabad and of being denied a fair share of the benefits of the natural resources extracted from their land.

The army has spurned negotiations. Force is the only answer: “They won’t know what hit them”, boasted Musharraf, after threatening to crush the insurgency. The Army has used everything it can, including its American supplied F-16 jet fighters. The crisis worsened when the charismatic 80-year old Baloch chieftain and former governor of Balochistan, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, was killed by army bombs. Musharraf outraged the Baloch by calling it “a great victory”. Reconciliation in Balochistan now seems, at best, a distant dream.

Musharraf and his generals are determined to stay in power. They will protect the source of their power – the army. They will accommodate those they must – the Americans. They will pander to the mullahs. They will crush those who threaten their power and privilege, and ignore the rest. No price is too high for them. They are the reason Pakistan fails.

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