

Pakistan's problems start at the top

Musharraf's military rule has damaged his country's ability to fight Islamist insurgents.
by Pervez Hoodbhoy, Los Angeles Times, November 18, 2007

Gen. Pervez Musharraf seized power in Pakistan eight years ago, claiming that the army had to step in to save the country from corrupt and incompetent politicians. Since then, he has run both the army and the government himself, with the connivance of a rubber-stamp Parliament put in place through rigged elections. His rule has proved to be a dismal failure, creating more problems than those it set out to solve.

Earlier this month, with opposition to his regime growing and the courts about to rule that he could not legally be president, Musharraf chose to suspend the constitution and impose emergency rule. He dismissed the Supreme Court and arrested the judges, replacing them with judges who will bend to his will. He blocked all independent television channels and threatened to punish the news media if it disparaged him or the army. His police arrested thousands of lawyers and pro-democracy activists. He ordered that civilians be tried in closed military courts. This is what is necessary, he said, to save Pakistan from a rapidly growing Islamist insurgency.

But no one should believe him.

It is true that over the last decade Islamist militants -- Pakistani Taliban nurtured in *madrasas* along the Afghan border -- have grown stronger and widened their reach. Each day brings news that the government's security forces have surrendered to Taliban fighters without firing a shot. Flaunting its strength, the Taliban has released many of these soldiers -- and even paid their way home. Other prisoners, especially Shiites, have been beheaded and their corpses mutilated.

Musharraf's government and his army have been woefully unsuccessful at handling this insurgency. They have lost control in many areas bordering Afghanistan and in the North-West Frontier Province. Earlier this month, the militants took over a third town in the Swat valley, only half a day's ride from the capital, Islamabad, while others captured the Pakistan-Austria Training Institute for Hotel Management in Charbagh.

Across the country, Islamists have taken over public buildings, forced local government officials to flee and promised to bring law and order. A widely available Taliban-made video shows the bodies of criminals dangling from electricity poles in the town of Miranshah, the administrative headquarters of North Waziristan.

The militants have even made their first major foray into the capital. From January to July of this year, the government allowed heavily armed extremists sympathetic to Al Qaeda and the Taliban to freely function out of Islamabad's Red Mosque. It is less than two miles from Musharraf's official residence at President House, from parliament and from the much-vaunted Inter-Services Intelligence headquarters. But the authorities were

nowhere to be seen as armed vice-and-virtue squads sent out by the Islamists kidnapped prostitutes, burned CDs and videos, forced women to wear burkas and demanded that city laws be bent to their will. The government sent in clerics and politicians sympathetic to the militants as negotiators, and made one concession after another.

Amid growing public and international demands to act, Musharraf finally sent in special troops. The military action turned Islamabad into a war zone. When the smoke from rocket-propelled grenades and heavy machine guns had cleared, more than 117 people (the official count) were dead, many of them girls from a neighboring seminary. Mullahs promised revenge, and it began shortly afterward in a wave of suicide bombings across the country that has claimed hundreds of lives.

Why has Musharraf failed so dramatically to stop the insurgency? One reason is that most of the public is hostile to government action against the extremists (and the rest offer tepid support at best). Most Pakistanis see the militants as America's enemy, not their own. The Taliban is perceived as the only group standing up against the unwelcome American presence in the region. Some forgive the Taliban's excesses because it is cloaked in the garb of religion. Pakistan, they reason, was created for Islam, and the Taliban is merely asking for Pakistan to be more Islamic.

Even normally vocal, urban, educated Pakistanis -- those whose values and lifestyles would make them eligible for decapitation if the Taliban were to succeed in taking the cities -- are strangely silent. Why? Because they see Musharraf and the Pakistan army as unworthy of support, both for blocking the path to democracy and for secretly supporting the Taliban as a means of countering Indian influence in Afghanistan.

There is merit to this view. Army rule for 30 of Pakistan's 60 years as a country has left a terrible legacy. The army is huge, well-equipped, armed now with nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and has perhaps the world's richest generals. Sitting or retired army officers govern provinces, run government agencies, administer universities, manage banks and make breakfast cereals.

Military rule has also created a class of dependent politicians who understand that cutting a deal with the army is the passage to power. For them, public office is an opportunity not to govern but to gain privilege and wealth for themselves, their relatives and their friends. Meanwhile, barely half of Pakistan's people can read and write, and one-third live below the poverty line.

The ties between the military and the Islamic militants are also well known. For more than 25 years, the army has nurtured Islamist radicals as proxy warriors for covert operations on Pakistan's borders in Kashmir and Afghanistan. Various army chiefs honed a strategy that juggled their relationship with the U.S. against the demands of local intelligence chiefs, and of mullahs, tribal leaders, politicians and fortune seekers who have contacts with the militants. Radical groups are encouraged. As they grow and start to slip out of control, these groups are tolerated and appeased to keep them loyal. When interests inevitably clash, a military crackdown follows. The innocent are caught in the

crossfire.

If Pakistan is to fight and win the war against the Taliban, it will need to mobilize both its people and the state. Musharraf's recent declaration of emergency will only make this much harder.

In the short term, Pakistan's current political crisis may be managed by having Musharraf resign -- both as president and as head of the army. And before he does so, he must also restore the judiciary and constitution, lift the curbs on the media, free all political prisoners and set up a caretaker government. These are the necessary conditions for holding free and fair elections.

Credibility of elections requires that former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif -- whatever one might think of their personal integrity -- both be included among the contestants. Bhutto loudly announced in Washington that she will take on Al Qaeda and the Taliban as her first priority, whereas Sharif is closer to the Islamic parties. But, as their past tenures suggest, if elected, realpolitik will force both to act similarly.

Only a freely chosen and representative government can win public support for taking on the Taliban. But to do this, it will need to begin addressing the larger, long-term political, social and economic problems facing Pakistan. The country must seek a more normal relationship with India. Only then can the army be cut down to size and Pakistan free itself from the massive military expenditures and the nuclear weapons that burden it. It must address the grievous regional inequalities that feed resentment against Islamabad. The government must push to provide basic needs and sustainable livelihoods to the rural and urban poor. It must offer people hope.

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