

Pakistan and Musharraf: Surrounded by Uncertainty

A series of unrelated events have badly undermined the credibility of President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. The death of Baluch leader Akbar Bugti, demonstrations after the botched firing of the country's chief justice, fighting involving Taliban sympathizers and Uzbek guests, and a brazen kidnapping in the capital all cast doubt on his political savvy and, more importantly, his ability to control events. As the time for elections approaches, both qualities are likely to be tested, and the likelihood of trouble in the streets has increased. Thus far, Musharraf's relationship with the United States has been both an asset and a liability. Musharraf could weather this storm, but each outburst increases the odds that he will come to look like part of the problem instead of the solution.

A death in Baluchistan: An early sign of trouble came from Baluchistan, long the most alienated of Pakistan's provinces, the scene of intermittent insurgency dating back decades, and reportedly a center of Taliban activity. Last August, tribal chief and Jamhoori Watan Party (JWP) leader Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti was killed in a Pakistan Army operation against his hideout in Baluchistan. Bugti was noted for his resilience and sophistication, and he and his tribe had been relatively close to the government during earlier periods of unrest in Baluchistan. The reasons for the operation and its details are unclear. Officially, this was portrayed as an accident or a muddle, and Bugti was described as an obstacle to the government's hopes to bring development to the province. Among those in Pakistan who believe that Indian intelligence had been supporting the Baluch insurgency, some believe that Pakistani troops descended on Bugti in order to prevent his extraction from Pakistan, presumably by Indian agents. The killing drew condemnation from members of Parliament belonging to many political parties. The way the army handled the killing and its aftermath, refusing to return the body to Bugti's

family, has certainly deepened resentment against Musharraf.

Worn out their welcome: In September 2006, Pakistan announced an agreement with the tribal chiefs in Waziristan (see *South Asia Monitor*, November 2006). The agreement at the time seemed unenforceable. In the next six months, it became apparent that it had not stopped the movement across the Afghan border. In February 2007, following the visit of U.S. vice president Richard Cheney to Pakistan, a series of pitched battles took place in Waziristan, pitting the locally recruited Frontier Corps Scouts against reported Uzbek militants who had been taking refuge in Pakistan's tribal region and were suspected of fomenting violence across the Afghan border. President Musharraf has confirmed reports that the army has been providing assistance to local tribesmen in the hunt for Uzbek militants. The Waziristan agreement had required the tribal chiefs to expel "foreigners" unless they were living law-abiding lives, so this operation was at least in part an attempt to enforce the terms of the deal. However, the army was put in the position of firing on Pakistanis, a development that has created widespread unease both in the army and among the general public.

In his own backyard: In March, trouble came to Islamabad, normally a placid town with a suburban feel, detached from the turbulence of Pakistani street politics. A group of women from the Jamia Hafsa madrassa, located only a few blocks from major government offices, including the headquarters of Inter-Services Intelligence, kidnapped an alleged brothel owner and two other women. The shock to many observers—Musharraf generally keeps a close eye on happenings in his capital—was deepened by the aftermath. The principal kidnapping targets were released after they made a public apology, but the police have yet to press any charges in the incident. Senior politicians from Musharraf's party called on

the leadership of the madrassa and the mosque associated with it, but with no apparent effect. Since the kidnapping, Jamia Hafsa leader Maulana Abdul Aziz has called for a shari'a court to administer Islamic justice, and senior government personalities have been quoted as supporting his demand for shari'a. During a Friday sermon in the weeks following the incident, Aziz stated, "Enforcement of Islamic system is the job of the government, but it will be done by the people if the government fails."

The Jamia Hafsa incident presented Musharraf with unattractive options. If he cracked down on the madrassa women, he risked retaliation from their sympathizers as well as the public relations disaster of punishing a group of veiled women. If he let the incident go unpunished, he would create the impression that he could not keep order in the capital and would also risk disappointing the moderates in Pakistan, the natural constituency for the "enlightened moderation" that he has stressed in his dealings with the West. The dilemma was underlined by the demonstrations in Karachi in April, when an estimated 100,000 people took to the streets to demonstrate against Jamia Hafsa's threat to set up a parallel court based on the Islamic sharia legal code. In a follow-up demonstration, women's rights organizations marched through the capital denouncing religious extremism and calling for the closure of Jamia Hafsa. Rally leaders called the actions of Jamia Hafsa "un-Islamic, immoral, and illegal" and called for government action against the religious organization.



Source: Pakistan Government

Suspending the chief justice: Musharraf's March 9 decision to suspend Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and refer him to a judicial body for disciplinary action took place against this background. The events in Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and Islamabad all pitted Musharraf and the army against conservative opponents generally sympathetic to a larger and more rigorous Islamic role in public life. The suspension of the chief justice, on the other hand, brought into the

streets the lawyers, a generally prosperous group often opposed to the government but not given to demonstrations. The uproar started in Punjab, the province that has dominated Pakistani public life since the country was founded, rather than in the often alienated smaller provinces. The recent crackdown on two of Pakistan's major private television networks for their coverage of the street demonstrations suggests that Musharraf, who often prides himself on maintaining the freedom of Pakistan's press establishment, has become less tolerant of his critics.

Moving toward elections: None of these incidents is sufficient to shake Musharraf's hold on power, especially since the army remains disciplined, hierarchical—and his. Nor has any clear leader of the opposition emerged. But both secular and religious Pakistanis have taken to the streets, something the army finds most distasteful. Musharraf's power has been diminished.

Musharraf's five-year term and that of the national and provincial legislatures expires later in 2007, and Musharraf's political maneuvering for the past year has been driven by the desire to have the election simply ratify his inevitable continuation in power. This was almost certainly the main reason for the suspension of the chief justice, a man who had challenged the government on some sensitive rulings. Ironically, however, that decision may have made the election a more uncertain affair than anyone thought it would be. Musharraf's desire to hold the presidential election before those of the legislatures, and to remain in uniform, would have inspired only ineffectual grumbling six months ago. Today, Musharraf's political maneuvering may be the focus of more intense protest and he, as well as the army, is likely to be more careful about giving rise to political demonstrations.

Striking a deal: The political turbulence has also given a new impetus to rumors of political deal-making between Musharraf and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) leader and former prime minister in exile Benazir Bhutto. The PPP was among the largest vote-getters in the 2002 elections and has retained important sources of strength in Sindh and in southern Punjab. Inconclusive talks have taken place off and on between Bhutto and Musharraf for at least three

years. Musharraf's interest in a deal has evidently been strengthened by the events of the last eight months. From his perspective, an agreement that secured PPP support for his reelection would divide the opposition, give him a secular ally, and make him less dependent on the religious parties that have become much less willing to carry his water in recent months. Not surprisingly, however, Bhutto appears to want to drive a harder bargain under present circumstances, and Musharraf's political party is not keen on sharing power with her. She has said that she would not make any deals with Musharraf unless he resigned from the army.

The view from Washington: The United States has treated the suspension of the chief justice with kid gloves, avoiding any criticism of the Pakistani government and noting that Musharraf was "acting in the best interests of Pakistan and the Pakistani people." Similarly, it has said little about the Jamia Hafsa incident. Departing ambassador Ryan Crocker referred to Pakistan as a "democratic country."

These events coincide, however, with a period of intense anxiety in Pakistan about the impact of events in Afghanistan on Pakistan and on Pakistan's relations with the United States. Public criticism by senior administration officials stung the Pakistani government, and resentment of U.S. high-handedness is very widespread in Pakistan. The success of U.S. objectives in the region continues to rely on Musharraf's commitment to stability along the border with Afghanistan. Closer scrutiny of Pakistan's role in Afghanistan is likely to become the norm. The U.S. House of Representatives has passed legislation requiring the president to certify Pakistan's cooperation in preventing the Taliban from operating in areas under its sovereign control, in order to continue aid to Pakistan. Pakistanis of all political persuasions find such conditionality infuriating and insulting.



Source: The White House

For the past year or so, Afghanistan has been the main issue between Pakistan and the United States. The

main questions about Musharraf's future, however, are internal to Pakistan. After more than seven years of governing, his grip on keeping order has loosened, and the question of his legitimacy is reasserting itself. His recent efforts to manage domestic politics and the Afghan tangle have backfired. His effort to walk the fine line—keeping militant Islamic forces under control without confronting them—may be an impossible task. It is probably too soon to write his political obituary, but many, in Pakistan and elsewhere, are wondering at what point his control over events will slip below the critical level. In a country with weak political institutions, the key player to watch is the army.

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