

(Unedited and unrefereed. Do not circulate or cite without  
authorisation from the author)

## **ASIA UPDATE - PAKISTAN**

**Amin Saikal**

**Australian National University**

Pakistan is once again in the throes of a national crisis. The US-backed military rule of President Pervez Musharraf is under siege from widespread opposition, spearheaded by its political, judicial and religious critics. This has been manifested in increasingly public unrest over Musharraf's attempted dismissal in early 2007 of Pakistan's Chief Justice, Iftikhar Ahmad Chowdhry, who has now been reinstated by the Supreme Court and has emerged as a credible opposition figure. It has also taken the form of nationalist militancy, especially in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier and Baluchistan provinces. Musharraf's military suppression of a challenge by a radical Muslim group in the Red Mosque in Islamabad in early July this year and Islamic militants' subsequent violent responses have further underlined the gravity of the situation. These developments have fostered the conditions for weakening his position substantially.

The Pakistani leader has lately sought desperately to reach an accommodation with the exiled former Prime Minister and leader of one of Pakistan's largest political parties, Benazir Bhutto. His aim is to secure with her a rapprochement whereby he could win parliamentary support before the end of 2007 for another five-year term and put a civilian face on his concealed military rule. Yet depending on the exact circumstances, his machinations may not pay off even for him, let alone save Pakistan from further instability and the world from deeper anxiety about a nuclear-armed Pakistan. While Musharraf is largely to blame for the predicament in which he and Pakistan are placed, the Bush Administration cannot be exonerated over the role that it has played in the process.

Musharraf's seizure of power in a coup on 12 October 1999 came at a time when Pakistan was facing daunting domestic and foreign policy challenges. Pakistan had been

transformed into a source of Islamic extremism, largely nurtured by Pakistan's military intelligence (ISI) as a foreign policy tool to promote national cohesion and boost Pakistan's regional position. The ISI had successfully backed the medievalist Islamic rule of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and had covertly supported a separatist movement through an array of radical Islamic groups in India-held Kashmir. It had also forged a mutually supportive relationship between them, the Taliban and Al Qaeda, transforming Afghanistan into a hub for international terrorism and augmenting cross-border operations into Kashmir.

Meanwhile, Pakistan and India had officially been confirmed as nuclear powers following their May 1998 nuclear tests. This had brought international condemnation of both sides, but confronted Pakistan in particular with some difficult military and economic sanctions, given Pakistan's position as the weaker of the two in terms of its capacity to cope with those sanctions.

These developments had caused growing concern for the US, which had backed Pakistan as a close ally during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. However, Washington had remained fairly mute, partly because Islamabad had sold its Afghanistan and Kashmir policies to it well, and partly because it feared that any serious pressure on a nuclear-armed Pakistan could entail serious consequences.

Musharraf had personally been involved in most of these developments as Army Chief of Staff for the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which he overthrew. He had been an active participant in all of the government's major policy decisions, including Pakistan's Afghan and Kashmir adventures. After seizing power, he could not claim that he had nothing to do with the difficult domestic and foreign policy circumstances that had befallen Pakistan. Nor was he in a position to deflect the condemnation by the US and many of its democratic allies within the Commonwealth for ending democracy in Pakistan. Despite promising to return Pakistan to 'genuine democracy', he was isolated in world politics and confronted with serious policy dilemmas. He was badly in need of an external stimulus to enable him to break the circuit.

Al Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attacks, masterminded from Afghanistan, provided that stimulus, much as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979

had done for an earlier Pakistani military ruler, General Zia ul-Haq. They provided Musharraf with unexpected but welcome opportunity to shore up his own position, and to transform Pakistan from being a producer of extremism and terrorism to becoming an actor without whose cooperation the US and its allies could not combat these phenomena. Musharraf could now seek, with more vigour and apparent credibility than ever before, to combine the politics of opportunism with that of regime preservation within an approach that would link his political survivability to that of Pakistan. He would become indispensable to what was required to save Pakistan, and Pakistan would become critical to what was needed to defeat international terrorism.

Confronted with an ultimatum from the Bush Administration either to join the US or to side with Al Qaeda, Musharraf shrewdly threw in his lot with Washington and declared Pakistan a US partner in what President Bush called the 'war on terror', commencing with 'Operation Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan in October 2001. In effect, he forged a new and robust alliance with the United States. He turned his back on Pakistan's Taliban client and their Al Qaeda allies, and displayed a willingness to moderate Pakistan's support for cross-border violence in Kashmir and a commitment to lead Pakistan on a policy path free of religious extremism.

He knew from the start that this new alliance was based on the politics of mutual vulnerability and leverage, which if craftily managed could be highly advantageous to his regime and Pakistan. He needed Washington's partnership to help him consolidate his power and lead Pakistan out of the dire predicaments in which it was placed. The Bush Administration needed Pakistan as a key state for successfully executing its 'war on terror' strategy with wider aims than those it wanted to achieve in Afghanistan. The benefits that Musharraf was able to extract from the new alliance proved to be instrumental. He was able to build rapidly an externally-driven basis of legitimacy for his military rule and to gain a degree of international acceptability that otherwise would not have been within his reach.

He was no longer a pariah, but a trusted and much-needed ally for the US and its allies, which rapidly dropped all sanctions against Pakistan. While exalting him as a close friend, the Bush Administration showered Musharraf's regime with massive economic and military assistance, with the total American military, economic and development

assistance to Pakistan from 2002 attacks to date amounting to more than \$10 billion. In 2005 Washington elevated Pakistan to the position of a major non-NATO ally, mirroring Musharraf's personal friendship with President Bush.

Musharraf was now able to use American aid to strengthen the military and ISI as the main instruments of his rule on the one hand, and to generate a level of economic activity that could win him support from those secularist elites and segments of the population which would mostly benefit from the development on the other. Meanwhile, he further formalised and expanded the role of the military in the political and economic life of Pakistan by enlarging its share in the National Security Council of Pakistan and allowing many influential military personnel to buy vast tracks of land, especially in the province of Baluchistan, at very low prices, and to secure an even greater stake in the country's new economic life.

Musharraf was suddenly placed in such a comfort zone that he could act more in terms of what he saw as fit for Pakistan under his rule than what the US's 'war-on-terror' interests dictated. He was no longer required to keep his original promise of returning Pakistan to democracy soon. Nor did he find it compelling to come totally clean on Pakistan's meddling in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Whatever measures he adopted in the name of democratization, they ultimately amounted to surface rather than structural changes. He skillfully and manipulatively focused on achieving a number of double-edged self-serving foreign policy priorities and objectives.

On the one hand, he declared full support for the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, and a commitment to fight the Al Qaeda and the Taliban and reform religious education, especially in Pakistani madrasas, at all levels. To this end, from time to time, Islamabad captured and handed over to the US some Al Qaeda operatives as 'high value targets' in a blaze of publicity. Similarly, in relation to Kashmir, he scaled down Pakistan's support for cross-border violence, and agreed to a number of confidence building measures with India.

On the other hand, while maintaining his domestic reforms largely at a non-structural level, he made sure that his foreign policy actions were in line with maintaining the support of the military and ISI as his real power base. He was careful not to invite a serious backlash from conservative Islamic forces. He found it expedient to sustain

continuity between Pakistan's pre- and post-11 September 2001 foreign policy postures. Hence, his strenuous efforts to walk a tightrope on Afghanistan, Kashmir and Pakistan's wider region, requiring the Bush Administration to play its regional politics more in tune with Musharraf's priorities than according to US needs. His government constantly argued to the Bush Administration and the Congress that if the US failed to remain sensitive to the complexity of Pakistan's positions under Musharraf, Pakistan could easily fall prey to serious instability that could undermine America's 'war on terror' operations in Afghanistan and beyond, and confront Washington with an even greater nightmare: the collapse of Musharraf's regime and Pakistan's implosion.

However, all this has now returned to bite Musharraf and his US supporters. Although he still has the backing of at least the top echelons of the military and ISI as well as a loose alliance of a few Islamic parties (PML-Q) within parliament, a majority of the Pakistani people has evidently grown very impatient with his politics of deception and double games. They have grown resentful of and frustrated with Musharraf's failure to put Pakistan's new alliance with the US to good use to democratize Pakistan and to play a constructive role in promoting an early resolution of some of the destabilising problems in the region. The Musharraf regime and for that matter Washington are now faced with serious Pakistani popular discontent.

As for future directions, one can look at a number of options. Three deserve attention as more plausible than others.

One is that Musharraf could hang on to power, based on reaching a power-sharing agreement with one of the main civilian political parties - either Benazir Bhutto's PPP or Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League or even both - to enable him to put an acceptable civilian face on his rule. Since Nawaz Sharif has ruled out any accommodation with Musharraf, the PPP has been left as the obvious choice. Bhutto is not only politically ambitious, but also acceptable to the US given her strong public stand against terrorism. Washington has been keen to see this option of military-civilian rule materialise. However, such an option is most likely to benefit Musharraf rather than Bhutto, given the military's pervasive control of power and politics, and Bhutto's weakness. Further, it would do little to open the space for the kind of structural political, economic and security reforms that are needed to ensure Pakistan's transformation into a stable democracy. It would simply

amount to Pakistan's reversion to the turbulent decade of quasi-democracy that preceded Musharraf's coup.

Another option would be for Musharraf to be displaced by elements within the military if they come to the conclusion that he has become a serious liability, or eliminated by his enemies from outside the military. With a sudden removal of Musharraf, the US – irrespective of who is the occupant of the White House – might find itself with little choice but to stand behind Pakistan's military as the most robust actor in Pakistani politics. But in this the US would once again be backing the perpetuation of military rule, while knowing that such rule has done little to stabilise Pakistan in the long run. It would also fly in the face of Washington's promotion of democracy as the best system of governance, and this would complicate its stand on Afghanistan and Iraq, where Washington has zeroed in on the electoral legitimacy of governments.

The third option would be for the US and its NATO allies pull their forces out from Afghanistan and call off the 'war on terror', sooner rather than later. This could cause a serious crisis for Musharraf and in US-Pakistan relations, as it would for the Karzai leadership in Afghanistan. If there is an early exit from Afghanistan and an early end to the war on terror, Pakistan could easily lose much of its strategic importance to the US and its NATO allies. This could seriously affect the fortunes of Musharraf and Pakistan, plunging the country into even a greater crisis than it has faced so far. This is a scenario that Washington wants to avoid at all costs.

## **Conclusion**

Both the Musharraf regime and Pakistan face as uncertain a future as the US-Pakistan alliance. The crisis of direction and viability in which they are grounded is more serious than the military can manage effectively any longer. Pakistan cannot afford to muddle through for much longer, drifting between the poles of authoritarianism and quasi-democracy, Islamism and secularism in its domestic politics, with exploitative and double-edge postures in its regional and international relations, as it has done up to this point. It is badly in need of enduring foundations that could ensure its stability, security and prosperity as a responsible actor in world politics. It requires institutionalized processes of change and development, and publicly mandated governments.

The US and its allies bear a special responsibility in this respect. Instead of playing on Pakistan to realize their short-term goals, they need to work out a strategy whereby the Pakistanis could put their house in order on enduring bases. It is now in no one's interest to see a nuclear-armed Pakistan either becoming a weak state or disintegrating, with far reaching consequences for world politics. The sooner Pakistan is moved on the path of democratic transformation the better. The emphasis should not be on whether or not Musharraf's regime should survive, but rather what is imperative to transform Pakistan into a viable state.