

A Second Coup In Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid

President Pervez Musharraf's declaration of emergency rule this weekend will only encourage further civil strife, nationwide protests and greater territorial gains by the extremist Pakistani Taliban. Never before in Pakistan's sad history of military rule has a general so reviled invoked martial law to ensure his own survival.

Musharraf and his coterie of advisers -- which includes military officers; Inter-Services Intelligence; Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz; and the ruling Pakistan Muslim League's doyen, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain -- decided on this plan days ago but waited until the weekend so the Supreme Court would not be in session and Western officials would be out of the office.

Musharraf's chief aim was to "cleanse" the Supreme Court. Its judges have been forced to resign, and several, including Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, have been arrested. The court, which had become a major irritant for the regime, had been due to rule on whether Musharraf could remain president for another five-year term.

The other prime targets were not the extremists terrorizing major swaths of northern Pakistan but the country's democratic, secular elite. Dozens of judges, lawyers and human rights workers have been arrested. Others have gone into hiding. Asma Jahangir, Pakistan's leading human rights activist, is under house arrest. She appealed yesterday for the Bush administration "to stop all support of the unstable dictator as his lust for power is bringing the country close To a worse form of civil strife."

Musharraf has increasingly treated the Supreme Court with contempt - with devastating implications for relations between the army and the public, which wants an independent judiciary, the rule of law and respect for the constitution. Musharraf has again decided that he is above the law and international obligations, even though his political support collapsed long ago. Lawyers, middle-class professionals and his political opposition have been protesting in the streets for months, demanding that Musharraf hold elections and return the country to civilian rule.

Eventually the United States persuaded him to allow former prime minister Benazir Bhutto to return from exile in the hope that Musharraf and Bhutto together could fight extremists by restoring democracy. But Musharraf's heart was never in such a deal. The massive public turnout for Bhutto when she returned last month convinced Musharraf and the army of the need to avoid a handshake with Bhutto if they wanted to remain in power.

Bhutto, her credibility in tatters, has been forced to do an about-face and condemn the generals. It seems that Musharraf once again took the Americans for a ride.

The government should focus its battle against extremism on northern Pakistan, where a resurgent Pakistani Taliban helped by al-Qaeda, Afghan members of the Taliban and several foreign terrorist groups are conquering territory and expanding the boundaries of their "liberated" sharia state. The army has lost hundreds of soldiers in a wave of frontal and suicide attacks, and at least 400 troops are being held hostage.

Despite U.S. expectations it is unlikely that Musharraf will use his new powers to step up a military offensive in the north. His first concern is political survival. More likely are a flurry of truces and shaky peace deals with the Pakistani Taliban that will leave them in place. As a timely sop to the Pentagon, the arrests of a few high-level leaders of the Afghan Taliban and perhaps an al-Qaeda leader are possible. But the extremists know that the Pakistani state has been irretrievably weakened and that this is the moment to push their offensive.

The key question Musharraf faces is how long the army will continue to back him. Rank-and-file soldiers are keenly aware of the widening gulf between them and the public they are supposed to protect. The army,

already demoralized, is unwilling to fight a never-ending war against its own people.

For now, the judges are gone, the media has been censored, the opposition and lawyers jailed and curtailed. But Musharraf's emergency is not sustainable. Ruling by force without any political support will prove impossible.

The international community has only belatedly realized that Pakistan is a haven for terrorism, nuclear proliferation and Islamic radicalism. Afghanistan's stability and the fate of 40,000 U.S. and NATO soldiers depend on what happens in Pakistan. The spread of anti-Western feelings and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism have been fostered by a U.S. policy that has sought to prop up Musharraf rather than forcing him to seek political consensus and empower a representative civilian government that would have public support for attacking the extremists.

The world cannot afford to let Musharraf's second coup go unchecked. So far, the response from Washington and European capitals has been tepid. Unless the international community acts decisively, Musharraf's emergency will plunge Pakistan even more deeply into chaos.