

Appeasing West And Militants Has Failed

Daily Telegraph, 13/07/2007

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Analysis

President Pervez Musharraf again finds himself in the eye of the storm.

Al-Qa'eda is baying for his blood as a result of the carnage inside the Red Mosque and Western powers and most Pakistanis are demanding that he finally take on Islamic radicals and militant madrassas.

Since the September 11 attacks, General Musharraf has survived by riding two horses, at times bending to Western pressure to hunt down al-Qa'eda and its Pakistani protectors, while allying himself with Pakistani Islamic parties in an attempt to placate extremists.

It has been a rocky time and Pakistan is paying the price, but Gen Musharraf has preserved the three-decade old nexus between the army and the fundamentalists, which has helped to keep him and the military in power.

As a result al-Qa'eda has found the space and support to regroup in Pakistan's tribal areas, the Afghan Taliban leadership has found a safe refuge in Balochistan province, foreign radicals like the 2005 London bombers have found easy access to al-Qa'eda central while Pakistani extremist groups have multiplied.

US and Nato forces fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan have become extremely frustrated at Gen Musharraf, but they have dared not put great pressure on him fearing even greater chaos, while Pakistan's middle class has despaired at its president's courtship of the fundamentalists.

His two-track policy has come to the end of the road. Pakistani extremists such as those who were holed up in the Red Mosque have read the army's laxness towards them as a passport to defy the state and bring about an Islamic revolution.

Pakistani Taliban have taken over vast tracts of North West Frontier Province to establish a new base for global jihad. The army slaughtered the Red Mosque militants and Pakistani extremists and al-Qa'eda now wants Gen Musharraf's head. He is faced with two stark choices: either go for the extremists in a consistent manner or once again succumb to them and try to appease them, putting the future of Pakistan at risk.

If he takes the first path he will need a new political mandate and support from secular national parties such as Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, which he has treated with contempt since he seized power in a coup in 1999.

But striking a deal with Ms Bhutto will also mean holding a genuinely free and fair election by the end of the year, allowing an independent judiciary and press and sharing power with the politicians - something Gen Musharraf has been loathe doing.

He will have to reinvent himself not just rhetorically, but practically and genuinely as a democrat and liberal.

The other path is that Gen Musharraf and the army again strike controversial peace deals with the Pakistani Taliban in the NWFP, jeopardise Afghanistan's future by allowing the Afghan Taliban to continue wreaking havoc there, allow the continued mushrooming of militant madrassas - but live with the constant risk that one day he will be targeted by the extremists.

The second path would also mean an abandonment of any pretence of democracy, the imposition of martial law and a further distancing from the West.

To ensure that Gen Musharraf takes the first path, Pakistan's liberal politicians have to show sagacity and flexibility and Western powers must exert pressure so that he does the right thing.

The first choice carries immense risks but it is the only way that Pakistan can be saved the fate of Afghanistan and Iraq.