

Blair And Bush Must Take A Long Hard Look At Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Lahore

Here is the real dilemma faced by the Western alliance in its continuing war against terrorism. Pakistan's military dictator, General Pervaiz Musharraf, has been responsible for the arrest and deportation of the largest number of al-Qa'eda militants of any nation in the world - 422 have been shipped out to Guantanamo Bay since December. But Gen Musharraf is also holding a heavily rigged election tomorrow, which promises to plunge Pakistan into political instability.

No matter how blatantly rigged the election is, it will be endorsed by America and Britain, which consider security measures against terrorism more important than stability and democracy. At the same time, the political fallout of the West's war against terrorism is getting worse in the region around Afghanistan.

In the five Central Asian republics, the political opposition to dictatorship is becoming galvanised even as George W Bush and Tony Blair continue to throw their weight behind the dinosaur dictators from the Soviet era who lead all five nations. And in Iran, the West has backed away from supporting Mohammed Khatami's reformist agenda against the mullahs and hardliners.

But it is Pakistan's long-running domestic crisis, now reaching boiling point, that may have severe international and regional repercussions. A bellicose India is at the gates, while Pakistan's armed forces test new missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads deep into India.

Al-Qa'eda cells are firmly planted inside Pakistan, law and order is breaking down as militant Islamic groups kill foreigners and Pakistani Christians, the economy is in a sharp recession and unemployment is widespread. Politics is polarised between the secular democratic parties and the Islamic Right. At stake are not only the international obligations that Pakistan is committed to in the war against terrorism, but also the very future of the country.

Tomorrow's elections bring to an end three years of military rule. The supreme court had ordered that they should take place by October. But, like all of Pakistan's three previous military rulers, Gen Musharraf is interested only in regime preservation, rather than moving the country towards genuine democracy. On April 30, he held a heavily rigged referendum, which made him president for the next five years.

The controversy that has raged over the referendum and the dramatic slide in his own popularity have not diverted Gen Musharraf from consolidating his powers. He has changed the 1973 constitution to give the army a permanent political role, create a military-dominated National Security Council that will override any future parliament or prime minister, and give himself powers to sack any future government.

For the past few months, the army, the intelligence services and Gen Musharraf's senior aides have been browbeating politicians to support the army-sponsored candidates for the elections. Numerous new laws have ensured that hundreds of candidates not to the army's liking can be debarred from standing.

In a country of massive illiteracy, one new law allows only BA graduates to stand for election. Under this law, the founder of Pakistan, Jinnah, would have been ineligible to run because his qualification as a barrister from Lincoln's Inn would not have been accepted by Pakistan's election commission.

While the Islamic parties are united in their opposition to Gen Musharraf because of his alliance with America, secular democratic parties are united against him on the grounds that the new system will marginalise politicians and give the army a permanent veto over any civilian government.

Gen Musharraf's disfranchisement of the Pakistani people, and his short-sighted perpetuation of army rule in another form, is certain to lead to a political crisis just after the elections. Hundreds of disfranchised opposition politicians

will be outside parliament claiming that the new government is illegitimate, while opposition candidates who are elected will ensure that the military has anything but an easy time.

Both the army and Washington appear to have forgotten Pakistan's own sad history. In 1984, Zia ul-Haq held a referendum endorsed by Washington and London, making himself president. Zia then held elections on a non-party basis - only hand-picked individuals were allowed to stand. The selected parliament, led by Zia's hand-picked prime minister, Mohammed Khan Junejo, who was presumed by the army to be a political nonentity, declined to do the army's bidding and was ultimately sacked.

Gen Musharraf is unique among Pakistan's military dictators in having sought no allies among civilians - politicians, bureaucrats or businessmen. He holds them all in contempt. Even after September 11, when his support for the war against terrorism won him plaudits from secular parties and the middle class, Gen Musharraf refused to reach out to them.

As in Central Asia, Mr Bush and Mr Blair have turned a blind eye to the growing crisis in Pakistan. In a throwback to the Cold War, Western policy-makers prefer working with dictators rather than face elected leaders and parliaments. American officials say there is no alternative to Gen Musharraf - any other general would probably be more sympathetic to Islamic fundamentalists, while politicians would be too weak to go after al-Qa'eda.

Such short-sighted aims ensure that anti-Americanism will continue to grow in the region, Islamic extremism will find even more sympathisers and poverty and corruption will persist. The war against al-Qa'eda needs public support and the region's governments need to be representative if they are to succeed not just in dealing with Islamic extremism but also in reviving their moribund economies.

In the short term, dictatorships can catch terrorists as well as anyone, but they cannot rebuild trust in the state. Nor can these countries play a long-term role as part of the international coalition against terrorism. The West, through its short-sighted policies, is cutting off its nose to spite its face by locking the region into a downward spiral and ensuring that the war against terrorism will be never-ending.

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