

Pakistan - Is Terror Worse Than Oppression?

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has profited from the American view that the world's greatest threat today is terrorism. But within his country there is growing anger that U.S. support is allowing his military regime to delay the promise of democracy

Far Eastern Economic Review- 24/07/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

FROM THE MOMENT last September that President Pervez Musharraf declared that his country would no longer support the Taliban, the world has wondered if Pakistan's own Islamic extremists would somehow rise and topple him. That threat echoed again on July 15, as extremist groups threatened to assassinate government leaders over the conviction and death sentence of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh for the murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl.

After a Hyderabad court sentenced him to death and three accomplices to life imprisonment, Saeed issued a direct threat to Musharraf through his lawyer: "I will see whether who wants to kill me will first kill me or get himself killed."

Police officials believe Saeed's supporters have even created a new terrorist group named after him-Lashkar-e-Omar, or the Army of Omar-with links to the Al Qaeda terrorist network and recruits from at least three Pakistani groups who have fought in Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Saeed's lawyers have appealed against the judgment, ensuring that tension over the case could go on for months. Security was tightened across the country, especially in Karachi and the capital Islamabad, where five terrorist attacks against Westerners have taken place in the past four months.

But there is little public support for Saeed, and the threat of assassination is nothing new to Musharraf. In fact, ask any citizen what the greatest threat is to Pakistan today and chances are they will say it is Musharraf himself.

Pakistan's entire political spectrum, its media and its middle classes are protesting against Musharraf's attempts to ensure a permanent political role for the military before general elections, mandated by the Supreme Court, are held on October 10. The question of whether civilians or soldiers are going to prevail in the new post-October political set-up will have far-reaching implications, not just for Pakistan but for the entire region.

As long as Musharraf can ignore his critics, he has little to fear. He and his military regime have so far been able to manage international pressures, and can bank on the continued backing of the United States because of its commitment to fighting terrorists like Saeed.

Of course, Washington is less concerned about Pakistani politics than it is about Al Qaeda, and ensuring that Musharraf prevents Islamic militants from crossing into Indian-controlled Kashmir and provoking a war. But the U.S., by backing Musharraf in his efforts to repress a small minority of extremists in Pakistan, is allowing him to ignore the pleas of the larger majority.

The military has introduced for public discussion new amendments to the 1973 constitution that will virtually turn Pakistan's parliamentary form of government into a presidential system headed by Musharraf, who won a controversial referendum in April making him president for five years. The amendments would give Musharraf the power to sack the prime minister and the cabinet, and make all senior appointments in the provinces, the judiciary and the bureaucracy. A National Security Council dominated by the armed services chiefs would override the cabinet and parliament. The U.S. State Department has not commented on the constitutional amendments.

As elections approach, Musharraf is determined that the army will prevail-putting his popularity at its lowest ebb since he seized power in a coup in 1999. Already, civil and military intelligence agencies are hard at work in the districts influencing the polls by offering their favoured candidates government support. Through a raft of new laws, known as presidential ordinances, the army can control who can stand for the elections.

The goal of the army's strategy is to ensure that former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif and their

followers do not stand for elections. The two largest parties in Pakistan today are Sharif's faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), even though their leaders are in exile and barred from returning home.

The new laws prohibit any prime minister from seeking a third term in office-effectively barring Bhutto and Sharif. More than half of the last parliament, which was dismissed in Musharraf after he ousted Sharif by a coup in October, 1999, will be ineligible to stand in the elections.

Every major political party in the country has vigorously opposed these moves. "It's the murder of democracy," Nawabzada Nasrullah, head of the 16-party opposition Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy, which includes the PML and the PPP, told reporters in Lahore recently. "The majority of the people now hate Musharraf and he should step aside."

Civic groups, lawyers and businessmen have joined the chorus. "Why bother having an election when the army sets the rules and the candidates and will rig the outcome?" asks Hina Jilani, secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

The media is almost entirely hostile. "The central problem facing the military is how to inject some enthusiasm into the charade being planned in the name of the October elections," columnist Ayaz Amir wrote in the Dawn newspaper.

Even the small group of minor parties that were once supporting Musharraf are now desperately trying to distance themselves from him. Three months ago the army cobbled together the National Alliance, a group of minor parties, to contest the elections; since then their leaders have either abandoned the alliance or left on long holidays in London to avoid being pressured by the intelligence agencies.

An attempt by the army to split Bhutto's PPP failed, and while Sharif's PML has split into many factions, Sharif's loyalists are holding firm.

Musharraf addressed the nation on television on July 12 in an effort to sway public opinion. "It's not enough just to restore democracy, you have to have a sustainable democracy," he said. "We need checks and balances." But his speech carried little credibility, given the amendments. Likewise, his claim that "I am not power hungry and I want to give power to the people and not take it away," prompted scathing editorials in the Pakistani press.

Public anger is not reserved for Musharraf: The Americans get their share as well, as in many peoples' eyes Musharraf is only getting away with his plans because of unstinting U.S. support due to his cooperation in tracking down Al Qaeda.

Islamic parties are taking advantage of public sentiment by beating the anti-U.S. drum. Qazi Hussain Ahmad, the head of the powerful Jamaat-e-Islami party, says Musharraf is allowing the U.S. to "de-Islamize, demilitarize and de-nuclearize Pakistan." The fundamentalists are fuming at attempts to bring the religious schools, or madrassas, under state control, and called the Pearl trial a set-up.

Even secular parties and civic groups believe that Washington is supporting the continuation of quasi-military rule after October. Secretary of State Colin Powell is due to visit Islamabad at the end of July, to try to cool down another bout of rising tensions between India and Pakistan.

Some politicians are privately urging the U.S. that Powell should also try and rein in the army's ambitions. "Powell's visit is going to be critical, not just for Indo-Pak relations but for the future of Pakistan and how the entire region is going to perceive America's role-propping up dictatorships or supporting democracy," says a European diplomat in Islamabad.