

Pakistan - The Army Wins Again

The military regime did everything it could to ensure that democracy delivered the right results.

For the U.S., this is one troubling ally

Far Eastern Economic Review - 27/11/2002

By Ahmed Rashid/Washington and Islamabad

Despite a five-week delay in summoning parliament after controversial elections and hectic efforts by the military intelligence agencies to muster a thumping majority for the pro-army candidate to become prime minister, when it finally came down to the vote in the National Assembly on November 21, the army's candidate only just scraped through.

Mir Zafrullah Khan Jamali, a 58-year-old politician who has served military regimes in the past as a federal minister and has pledged to continue President Pervez Musharraf's foreign and economic policies, became the country's first elected prime minister since Musharraf seized power in a military coup in 1999.

The opposition remains a potent force. Jamali, a leader of the pro-army faction of the Pakistan Muslim League, mustered only 172 of 330 votes. Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the candidate from the six-party Islamic fundamentalist alliance, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), won 86 votes, while Shah Mahmood Qureshi of the secular Pakistan People's Party (PPP), led by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, won 70 votes.

Jamali's narrow win was made possible by the defection of 10 members of the PPP—a move organized by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency several weeks before the October 11 elections, according to military officers and PPP leaders. The PPP's Qureshi says the arrangement will backfire because "this government's survival depends on a few defectors so it will remain very fragile." The government's fragility was evident when six of the 10 PPP defectors were inducted into the new cabinet of 21 ministers on November 23: The army, having bought their loyalty with cabinet seats, will have to hope now that they don't defect again.

Not much of a democracy

In fact nobody is betting on the longevity of the Jamali government and nobody believes that the army is willing or able to take a back seat in order for democracy to take root. The self-effacing Jamali faces a fractured ruling coalition and the most aggressive anti-military opposition in the country's parliamentary history. He also has to deal with an all-powerful president who remains army chief, has the power to dismiss the prime minister and parliament and has an army-dominated National Security Council.

Jamali also faces economic pressures: Although donor agencies have praised Pakistan's macroeconomic reforms over the past three years, there is growing economic discontent as the reform process has yielded few benefits to the people.

Then there's the international uncertainty—regarding Afghanistan, India and Iraq—which is the key to Musharraf's own survival. Despite Pakistan's support for the United States in the war on terrorism and President George W. Bush's continuing public expressions of support for Musharraf, Islamabad faces mounting criticism from within the Bush administration. "Musharraf has made so many unfulfilled promises and pledges to the U.S. that his credibility here is at an all-time low," says a senior U.S. official in Washington. "There are too many contentious issues coming to a head and the [U.S.-Pakistan] relationship is skating on very thin ice."

For now, a rift between the U.S. and Pakistan is unlikely as long as the U.S. faces threats from Al Qaeda, a war in Iraq and tensions between India and Pakistan. Pakistani officials have warned Washington that with anti-American feeling on the rise across the country, Musharraf has no choice but to show some independence from the U.S.—even if it means pandering to Pakistan's fundamentalist lobby.

In doing so, Pakistan is courting danger. Several Western intelligence agencies have determined that though the

military is helping arrest Al Qaeda militants based in Pakistan, it is also harbouring exiled Taliban leaders and supporters of the renegade Pashtun militant Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who has called on his fellow Pashtuns for jihad against U.S. forces and the government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

"There is strong resentment in the ISI of the huge influence of India and Russia in Kabul and the loss of influence of the Afghan Pashtuns, who are alienated and angry," explains a retired general. "But it would be a very dangerous step to try and go back to what we were doing in the 1990s," he adds-referring to Pakistan's past support for the Taliban regime.

Moreover, after an audio tape made by Osama bin Laden was handed over to an Arab reporter in Islamabad in broad daylight on November 12, Musharraf faced severe embarrassment. Musharraf has repeatedly asserted that bin Laden is dead and that Al Qaeda has little presence in Pakistan. U.S. officials say that Al Qaeda maintains significant communications and logistics hubs in Islamabad and Karachi, and that they believe bin Laden is hiding either in Pakistan's tribal belt bordering Afghanistan or has escaped to Yemen.

At the same time the anti-proliferation lobby in Washington and some members of the U.S. Congress are demanding that Pakistan be punished for allegedly aiding North Korea's nuclear weapons programme. Pakistan has denied claims made in the U.S. media that U.S. intelligence believes cooperation between the two countries was taking place as recently as July. On November 25, American Secretary of State Colin Powell stated Washington's viewpoint loud and clear: "I have made it clear to [Musharraf] that any, any sort of contact between Pakistan and North Korea we believe would be improper, inappropriate and would have consequences."

The U.S. has other things to worry about as well: American officials say Pakistan continues to allow infiltration of Islamic militants into Indian Kashmir despite Musharraf's pledge in June to cease doing so-a charge Pakistan denies. U.S. officials have warned Pakistan not to underestimate India's possible military reaction if there are major militant attacks in Indian Kashmir this winter. Strife continues there: A recent weekend of violence left over 50 people dead.

Musharraf already has enough pressure from within his own country. The MMA is demanding that he retire as army chief if he wants to remain president, that he withdraw numerous amendments to the constitution and disband the National Security Council. Musharraf is overriding their objections. Maulana Rehman also demanded "a free and independent foreign policy" with no American interference, and "an Islamic system"-a clear indication of the direction the MMA will take in the weeks ahead.

The MMA, which openly supports the Taliban, now leads the government of the North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan, and will attempt to implement its hardline Islamic policies there. This is already creating grave apprehension in Washington and Kabul. "We are extremely concerned at the victory of friends of Taliban in the Frontier province," says Zalmay Rassoul, the national security adviser to Karzai, who was visiting Washington. "We want a declaration of noninterference from all our neighbours."

Jamali's narrow majority and the debt he owes Musharraf for his elevation mean he will have to depend largely on political support from the military rather than his own fragile political alliance. He has to take a vote of confidence from parliament in the next 60 days and both opposition groupings are threatening to cooperate to bring his government down.

The army's aim is to keep the opposition divided, which will require its continued interference in parliament. Warns the PPP's Qureshi, "Jamali has to decide whether power lies with the elected parliament or with the army."

For the moment Musharraf remains in charge. A few days before Jamali was elected, Musharraf issued an ordinance allowing security agencies to detain a terrorist suspect for up to a year without any charges or even the need to produce him in court. The move was immediately denounced by human-rights and lawyers' groups, who said the law would be used to harass the political opposition. Musharraf did not even bother to respond to their concerns, as the move was supported by Washington.