

Musharraf, A Key US Ally, Faces Isolation In Pakistan

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By Ahmed Rashid/Washington and Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, one of the most important allies in the U.S. campaign against the al Qaeda terror network, stands in almost total political isolation at home, having alienated Islamic militants on one side and democracy advocates on the other.

Angered by Pakistan's cooperation with the U.S. and Monday's conviction of Islamic militant Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh for the murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, armed Islamic militants are threatening Gen. Musharraf's ability to rule.

At the same time, almost every major political party in the country has distanced itself from the president, over what they regard as his abandonment of promises to restore democracy.

Gen. Musharraf took power almost three years ago in a bloodless coup. At the time, the Supreme Court ordered new Parliamentary elections and the transfer of power to a civilian government within three years. But, after a April referendum that extended his rule by five years, he unveiled a plan last month to rewrite Pakistan's constitution ahead of the required Oct. 10 elections in a way that critics say would give the military permanent political authority. It would do so by establishing a supervisory National Security Council dominated by military officers, and, while there would be a prime minister, Gen. Musharraf would remain president and Army chief.

"It's the murder of democracy," says Nawabzada Nasrullah, head of a 16-party opposition political alliance. "The majority of the people now hate Musharraf, and he should step aside."

When he took power, international acceptance eluded Gen. Musharraf. But his low-key style earned broad public acceptance at home after 11 years of the scandal-ridden rules of Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. In televised addresses at the time, Gen. Musharraf promised a break from what he described as corrupt and excessively partisan politics.

Now, the situation is nearly reversed. Gen. Musharraf enjoys broad praise abroad and promises of international funding for his key role in the U.S.-led war against al Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups. But Pakistani liberal, centrist and right-wing political leaders all speak against him, and an alliance of five major Islamic parties accuses him of being an American tool and vows to overthrow his government.

Secretary of State Colin Powell is due to visit Islamabad on July 27, and some Pakistani politicians privately are urging the U.S. to try to persuade Gen. Musharraf to rein in the army's ambitions.

In a nationally televised speech Friday, Gen. Musharraf said his planned constitutional changes "are meant to ensure unity of command and a sustainable democracy ... unless there is a unity of command, unless there is one man in charge on top, the government will never function."

Meanwhile, the war against terror has come to Pakistan's own backyard. Angered at Islamabad's abandonment of Afghanistan's Taliban regime after the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S., and by Gen. Musharraf's banning of five militant groups, militants have launched five attacks against foreigners in the country this year. The abduction and murder of Mr. Pearl has been followed by two dozen more deaths -- a grenade at a church that killed two Americans, a suicide car-bombing of a bus that killed 11 French Navy engineers, and another bombing at the U.S. consulate in Karachi that killed 11 Pakistanis. In the most recent, Saturday, a grenade injured several European tourists.

Analysts say these groups could make the country appear more and more ungovernable. Mr. Saeed, the convicted mastermind of Mr. Pearl's kidnapping-murder, issued a statement on Monday that some government officials regard as a threat against Gen. Musharraf's life. On Tuesday, authorities increased already heavy security in the cellblock where Mr. Saeed is being held after they received a letter threatening retaliation if the government carries out his death sentence.