

Pakistan - Give Me More

The country's military ruler faces criticism as he tries to extend his presidency for five more years

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf will hold a national referendum in the first week of May to gain a mandate to continue as president for the next five years before he holds national elections in October.

The move will ensure that the military continues to run the country, as Musharraf will also remain army chief of staff. But it is fraught with political risks and has been strongly condemned by all the major political parties.

United States President George W. Bush's administration is unlikely to criticize the referendum due to America's need for the military regime's support in the war against terrorism, but Musharraf's honeymoon with the West appears to be on the wane as he soft-pedals on his promised crackdown on religious extremism in Pakistan.

Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in October 1999, took the decision late last month after conferring with senior generals and army commanders, who approved the move. The federal cabinet and newly formed National Security Council, which is dominated by the military, rubber-stamped his request on April 3-indicating the kind of democracy that is expected to be ushered in after October.

"Am I required for Pakistan?" he asked in a nationally televised speech on April 5. "I want you, the people the Pakistan, to tell me if there is a requirement for me. I need your strength to tell me that I am not alone. That is why I have decided to hold a referendum," he said stridently.

Voters are expected to give Musharraf what he wants, but a low turnout-Pakistan's last general election saw only 33% of voters show up at the polls-would do little for the president's credibility.

According to the 1973 constitution the head of state is allowed to hold a referendum on national issues, but the president can only be elected by parliament. Musharraf said he would hold provincial and national elections by the October deadline mandated by the Supreme Court, but he clearly does not want to take the risk of depending on parliament to elect him as president.

All Pakistan's major political parties have condemned the move. Labour and lawyer unions and human-rights groups have called for a boycott of the referendum. "A general in uniform should lead armies and not nations. He cannot pursue political legitimacy through illegitimate means," says leading Pakistani commentator Ayaz Amir. "The people may be powerless but they have a keen eye for the ridiculous."

On April 2 a new alliance of the country's six largest Islamic parties declared they would organize a mass boycott of the referendum and reject its result if Musharraf gets a "yes" vote.

'morally perverse'

Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party said in a statement that "it is constitutionally wrong and morally perverse for the general to make his lust for political power a national issue on which the opinion of people is sought through a referendum."

Musharraf is unlikely to take such domestic criticism seriously. He has long argued that only he and the army can sustain the economic reforms his government has initiated, continue support for the war against terrorism and the crackdown on extremist Pakistani Islamic groups.

Nevertheless, there is growing criticism from Western diplomats that Musharraf is refusing to clamp down effectively on Islamic militants, and that he is even trying to appease them before the referendum. Some 2,000 militants

arrested after Musharraf's banning of five extremist groups in January have mostly been freed after a time limit passed for holding prisoners without charges. Islamic political leaders have also been freed from house arrest, even though terrorist acts have increased in Pakistan during the past two months.

"Musharraf's honeymoon with the West is being questioned because of his growing closeness to the fundamentalists," says Hussain Haqqani, a visiting scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington.

But the U.S. is unlikely to turn against Musharraf, unless they see widespread opposition to the referendum on the streets of Pakistan. After three years of military rule, Pakistan's political process has begun again. What happens next is unpredictable.