

Pakistan - Elite's Loss, Islamists' Gain

Military ruler Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf wants to give power back to the people, but Islamic parties and militants have a different agenda

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By Ahmed Rashid/ Khushab and Munara, Punjab

On a cold, windswept plateau 100 kilometres southwest of Islamabad, green Islamic flags bearing the word "Allah" flutter above a sea of khaki army tents. Thousands of Islamic militants, including dozens of retired army officers and hundreds of retired soldiers, have camped near the village of Munara for two months, waiting to march on Islamabad to force Pakistan's military regime to introduce an Islamic system of rule.

The growing role of Islamic groups and parties and increasing participation in them by retired military personnel represent a new challenge to Chief Executive Gen. Pervaiz Musharraf as he tries to lead Pakistan back toward democracy. The first steps in that direction took place on December 31 as 18 of Pakistan's 106 districts held local elections. Musharraf, who seized power in October 1999, promises national polls and a civilian government before October 2002.

The backdrop to the first polls, however, was hardly auspicious. The generals face continuing anger over their decision to pardon former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and allow him to leave prison for exile in Saudi Arabia on December 9. And on the plateau at Munara a bigger threat is brewing.

Ex-officers teach martial arts

Retired Col. Abdul Qayyum, who spent 32 years in the infantry and is now president of the Tanzeemul Ikhwan, an Islamic movement, declares: "We will besiege Islamabad and sit there until Islam is implemented. We have decided to do or die for Islam. Elections and democracy are no solution and Pervaiz Musharraf should realize that this is not a secular, but an Islamic, army and state." As he speaks, former officers teach the rank and file martial arts and parade basics. The Ikhwan were due to start marching on December 27 but delayed their departure to allow talks with the regime.

The local-level elections are part of Musharraf's drive for a "grassroots democracy" to depose Pakistan's traditional feudal elite, which has dominated politics for 50 years. Ironically, however, it's that same drive and the decline of mainstream parties that is encouraging Islamic groups and parties to try to fill the gap.

The Islamic parties, now better organized than they once were, see an enormous opportunity to change the country's political ethos toward militant Islam. They are widely expected to do well in the district elections. In addition, Musharraf's space for political manoeuvre and other reforms is largely limited by Islamic militants. "Our future has been mortgaged to the fundamentalists and the regime is too willing to be held hostage by them," says I.A. Rehman, director of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, a non-governmental organization in Lahore.

In what Musharraf says is a "revolutionary step," the local polls are supposed to "devolve power to the people." For the first time in male-dominated Pakistan, women have been allocated 33% of the 42,000 council seats, and district administrative, policing and financial powers will devolve to elected representatives instead of bureaucrats. Despite rain and biting cold, voters marked their ballots in unexpectedly large numbers. In parts of rural Punjab, the turnout was as high as 60%. Said voter Sakina Junego in a village near Khushab, west Punjab: "I don't understand Musharraf's complicated plan, but we are voting for more schools and clean drinking water."

Though the large turnout was a boost for Musharraf, the vote triggered public criticism because the army banned political parties from taking part and restricted candidates to minimal electioneering. No media campaign had been mounted to explain the complex voting system to a largely illiterate electorate.

Many politicians and the human-rights commission say the army will have ample opportunity to make sure its own supporters are elected as the powerful new nizams, or mayors, of district councils. The district elections will be staggered over the next six months, with the results of each batch delayed for a week. (The outcome of the

December 31 polls won't be announced until January 6.) And the councils won't take power until August.

Musharraf has insisted that disgraced old-style politicians shouldn't be allowed to return to power, especially Sharif and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who is also in exile. "This is not my personal view, this is the army's consensus and it's not an army of a banana republic," he told newspaper editors on December 22. But despite his determination to destroy the old political elite, the main winners in districts in west Punjab were expected to be Islamic candidates and close relatives of the major political families.

Islamic groups set the pace

With mainstream parties leaderless and fragmented, Islamic fundamentalist parties are jockeying for position. The most powerful of them, the Jamaat-e-Islami, staged protests across Pakistan on December 17 demanding Musharraf's resignation. Jamaat chief Qazi Hussain Ahmad urged other generals to replace him, telling reporters Musharraf had "failed on all fronts" and "jeopardized the country's security and honour."

Meanwhile, the Jamiat-e-Ulema Islam and brother parties have vowed to force the army to defy United Nations sanctions against the Taliban regime in neighbouring Afghanistan when they come into force on January 20. Pakistan is the only country that still supports the Taliban. Sunni Muslim extremist groups based in Afghanistan were responsible for a spate of killings in December of prominent Shia Muslims in Pakistan. But the army hasn't banned these sectarian groups and the Taliban refuse to extradite their leaders.

Lashkar-e-Tayyaba, the largest Pakistani "jihadi" group fighting in the disputed territory of Kashmir, has promised to sabotage recent peace moves between India and Pakistan, and has even told Musharraf to grow an Islamic beard. On December 22, Lashkar attacked New Delhi's historic Red Fort, its first assault in the heart of the Indian capital. Two Indian soldiers and a civilian guard were killed. Lashkar has pledged next to bomb the Indian prime minister's office.

Islamabad is trying to block the creation of a united Islamic front, but the Islamic parties all have supporters in the army and military intelligence services. They are also quietly encouraged by some generals who want Musharraf to choose Islam over democracy. According to a former army chief, the Ikhwan movement was closely linked to an abortive 1996 coup by fundamentalist mid-level officers. Based in the army's main recruiting belt on the Potowar plateau in Punjab, Ikhwan has since greatly increased its support among serving army officers.

Musharraf is adamant that he's in command, but his political, economic and foreign-policy options are restricted by the fundamentalist pressure.

Economic revival, peace with India and a return to democracy are threatened by growing unrest, fundamentalism and lawlessness. Says newspaper commentator Ayaz Amir: "Our generals are operating on a wavelength all their own. They are having a hard time grasping even the rudiments of politics."