

Emergency For Pakistan - And The World

Musharraf, clinging to power, embitters the electorate and threatens regional instability.

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By Ahmed Rashid

MADRID: President Pervez Musharraf's brutal crackdown on Pakistan's legal and other professional classes has upended the Bush administration policy on the war on terror - opening the door to the rise of extremist Pakistani Taliban as a national force and pushing the country's hitherto pro-Western, educated middle class to a sympathetic stance toward Islamists with greater antagonism for the US.

Washington's policy of relying on a military dictator to defeat terrorism has produced the opposite result. Just weeks before, Washington had counted on a deal between former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and Musharraf to ensure political stability, strong ties with the West, the illusion of free elections and ongoing support for the US war on terror.

But Musharraf's recklessness, his determination to hang on to power, has made any such deal all but impossible, bringing nuclear Pakistan to the precipice of an unprecedented crisis, with global repercussions.

Musharraf's imposition of a state of emergency on 3 November suspended the constitution, eviscerated the judiciary, banned public gatherings, led to the arrest of political workers and senior lawyers, and shut down the local electronic media. More than 6000 people have been arrested, with many prominent lawyers and activists charged in military courts for treason.

The brutal crackdown, pointedly one-sided, aims at the country's secular civil society and political parties rather than the Islamic extremists and the Pakistani Taliban, who continue to seize territory and towns in northern Pakistan as they extend their writ in alliance with the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda. Indeed, the same day the emergency was imposed, the army freed 28 jailed Pakistani and Afghan Taliban - including two right-hand men of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and two convicted suicide bombers.

Musharraf's emergency has dismantled the entire legal order. During the past year the senior judiciary tried to establish its independence from the army. Tens of thousands of lawyers staged unprecedented demonstrations throughout the summer to reinstate Iftikhar Chaudhry, the chief justice of the Supreme Court whom Musharraf had sacked. After being reinstated, Chaudhry became the symbol of the struggle for constitutionalism, the rule of law and an independent judiciary.

On 3 November Chaudhry was deposed again and placed under house arrest; then 14 of the 17 judges on the Supreme Court bench refused to take the new oath of loyalty promulgated by the military under its Provisional Constitutional Order and were placed under house arrest.

In a press conference on 11 November Musharraf announced that elections would be held by 9 January, but the emergency rule would continue. He set no date for giving up his second job as army chief. He said he would set up a caretaker government to conduct the elections.

In a Kafkaesque statement, Musharraf said the emergency "would ensure absolute, fair and transparent elections," warning anyone who "disturbs law and order and wants to create anarchy in the name of elections and democracy, we will not allow that."

Pakistan lies on the fault line of a global crisis. Successive regimes have harbored terrorists, sold nuclear weapons technology to rogue states such as Iran, Libya and North Korea and fostered Islamic radicals to gain advantage vis à vis India. Pakistan is the only Muslim country with nuclear weapons, and the chaos heightens international fears about

them falling into the hands of extremists.

Moreover according to US intelligence assessments, the country is now command and control center for leadership of Al Qaeda, the Afghan Taliban and groups from Central Asia. The army is deeply demoralized, and more than 600 soldiers have surrendered to militants in the past few months rather than fight.

Multiple intelligence services participate in jailing and, according to reports from Pakistan's Human Rights Commission, torturing lawyers rather than hunting down terrorists.

Yet the US response is muted. President George Bush continues to support Musharraf, saying on 11 November that his election date was "positive" and that he trusts Musharraf. Musharraf asserts that he expects no cuts in more than \$1 billion of annual US foreign aid, 80 percent of which goes to the Pakistani military.

Washington has presented its dilemma over Pakistan in a naïve "either-or" paradigm - either the US supports the democratic process and civil society or it supports the army to battle terrorism. Sadly, the Bush administration has co-opted much of the mainstream US media to accept that options are few and the US must side with the army.

In reality, no government can conceivably wage a successful war against terrorism without stability, a degree of political legitimacy and the support of a majority of its people. Political stability is the sine qua non for fighting terrorism, but Musharraf's actions have destabilized Pakistan like never before while Bush has overturned common sense and long-term US interests with his support for Musharraf.

The Americans tried to broker a deal with Bhutto, who returned from nine years of exile to a rapturous public welcome in Karachi on 18 October, marred by a suicide bombing that killed 152 people and wounded 500. Washington calculated that, if elected as prime minister, she would provide Musharraf with legitimacy that he lacked.

However Musharraf's heart is not in power sharing, and the emergency leaves her in a difficult position: Her Pakistan Peoples Party and the public demand that she unite the divided opposition and lead a campaign to topple Musharraf, while the Americans insist she cooperate with Musharraf. If she dithers, she will lose public support and her vote bank.

Anti-Americanism now runs rampant in Pakistan - most markedly in the educated middle classes who have borne the brunt of the crackdown. With local and foreign TV news channels off the air, the brutalization of women and students in the streets, spiraling inflation and a dramatic economic downturn, the middle classes who should be the government's natural allies in the war against terrorism become sympathizers of the Islamists.

The most serious threat comes from several heavily armed militias led by Pashtun mullahs who call themselves the Pakistani Taliban. Fostered by Al Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, linked to Pakistani and Kashmiri extremists in the major cities, the Pakistani Taliban now control large parts of the Pashtun tribal belt adjacent to Afghanistan. This month the militants have virtually conquered the entire Swat valley north of Islamabad, home to the country's largest tourist resort.

Such militias take advantage of the political chaos in the country to spread tentacles in the heavily populated areas of the North West Frontier Province. They have also provided training and safe havens for hundreds of foreign militants from Central Asia, the

Middle East and Europe. German intelligence is tracking 11 members of a group of German Muslims who were trained in Pakistan's North Waziristan tribal agency and planned to bomb US bases in Germany.

Much depends on the army and whether it continues long-term support for Musharraf. Senior professional officers had hoped that elections and civilian rule would remove them from the political firing line. But Musharraf's action puts them back in the firing line, abused by an angry public.

US pressure, mass mobilization of civil society and pressure from the army remain the main tracks for convincing Musharraf to step down. US Senator Joe Biden has suggested increasing non-military aid without conditions to rebuild the nation's education and health sectors, while placing strict conditions on military aid to fight terrorism.

Without greater international pressure to restore normalcy, Pakistan's growing instability is likely to affect the entire region and eventually the safety of nuclear weapons.