

Pakistan - Beset On All Sides

Pervez Musharraf finds his presidency under heavy fire from foes and allies alike

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf hasn't been very successful at making or keeping friends these days. He is facing tough opposition at home because of his embrace of the United States as an ally after the September 11 terrorist attacks 20 months ago. At the same time, the U.S. isn't pleased about Islamic militants using bases in Pakistan to launch attacks in Afghanistan and Kashmir and wants Musharraf to crack down. And even Musharraf's supposed allies in the country's civilian government are unhappy that the general seems to be placing himself above the law with constitutional amendments by fiat.

Oddly, given the two countries' typically stormy relationship, Musharraf must currently consider improved relations with India as one of his government's few foreign-policy successes. But that sliver of hope in Kashmir doesn't make up for a litany of problems that are increasingly putting the president in no-win situations: If he pleases the U.S. and cracks down on militants, he alienates influential Islamic parties in Pakistan. On the other hand, bowing to domestic pressures places him in hot water not only with Washington but also in Kabul, where Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai wants Pakistan to deal with the Taliban, and in New Delhi, which continually seeks Pakistan's cooperation to stop Kashmiri separatists.

Musharraf will be hard-pressed to do what Washington wants--rein in remnants of the Taliban. Those remnants are backed by the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties that now rules North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. The MMA has the largest block of opposition seats in the National Assembly, 68 out of 342 seats, and it has refused to allow parliament to function.

As a result of the stalemate, the government of Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali, who was voted into office by a slim majority last October in a deeply controversial general election, is unable to enact legislation or govern. Jamali's people are also unhappy because they are relatively powerless next to Pakistan's powerful army and Interservices Intelligence organization. Many members of Jamali's ruling Pakistan Muslim League are infuriated because these forces have refused to give up one iota of power, and their political allies have withheld support for Musharraf in parliament when the MMA disrupts proceedings.

Pakistan's twin crises--foreign and domestic--are partly the legacy of September 11, when the army shifted ground tactically to side with the U.S. in the war against Al Qaeda but failed to make strategic decisions to seek peace with India and rein in Islamic militancy at home. On April 30, the U.S. placed three Pakistan-based Kashmiri groups on its terrorist watch list. The largest of the three is Hizbul Mujahedin, the military arm of Pakistan's dominant Islamic party, Jamaat-e-Islami.

When Jamali called his Indian counterpart, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, suggesting talks, it was at least partly an effort to pre-empt further U.S. pressure in advance of a trip by American Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage to the region beginning on May 5.

On April 22 and 23, Karzai visited Islamabad to present Musharraf with a list of Taliban commanders who are living in Pakistan and conducting guerrilla attacks in Afghanistan. Afghan officials admitted that Karzai's blunt move was prompted by a tougher line being taken by Washington. Four U.S. and more than 30 Afghan soldiers were killed in April in clashes with the Taliban.

"We have given the names of some top Taliban leaders for the Pakistani authorities to take action on," Karzai told the Review in Islamabad. "Pakistan has to address this issue of extremism . . . This has to be done for the sake of Pakistan also. The actions of these extremists, if they continue, will have implications in Pakistan."