

Military Tightens Its Grip

The go-ahead for a military-led National Security Council, President Musharraf's ambiguity over his future and the jailing of an opposition leader heighten fears that democracy is in reverse

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By Ahmed Rashid in Islamabad

In recent weeks, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has made it a point to meet all visitors in his military uniform, sparking concern that he will renege on a pledge last December to step down as army chief of staff by the end of this year. Musharraf gave added weight to these fears on April 13 when he told the British Broadcasting Corp. that he was still undecided about whether to relinquish control over the armed forces. "This is a very contentious issue. We have to see. We have to wait and see," he said. The government quickly insisted that the president would keep his word, but many local and foreign critics and analysts see Musharraf's dress sense as yet another sign that the military is working to strengthen its control over a fledgling democracy and sapping the power of parliament and the elected civilian government of Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali. They note that a district court in Islamabad on April 12 jailed leading opposition politician Javed Hashmi to a total of 23 years for allegedly trying to incite the army to mutiny last year. The unprecedented punishment was read as a strong signal that the army will not tolerate criticism from any quarter. It has been widely criticized, including by a key Musharraf ally, the United States, which has called for Hashmi's appeal process to be more open than his closed trial. "have been made in the past year, it is not too late to correct the past mistakes and make best use of this opportunity," she added.

Further evidence of a shift away from democracy came two days later, when amid an opposition boycott a bill was rammed through parliament to set up a 13-man National Security Council (NSC). The new body, to be chaired by the president and gathering leaders of the armed forces, will give the military control of all strategic policymaking in Pakistan. The ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and an alliance of Islamic parties had agreed in December in exchange for Musharraf's pledge to put away his uniform to back a constitutional amendment allowing for the creation of the NSC, enhancing the president's powers and validating the 1999 coup that brought Musharraf to power. Meanwhile, Musharraf has been sitting in on some cabinet meetings alongside Jamali and chairing other ministerial meetings, all of which are normally the prerogative of the prime minister.

"Members of parliament have never felt more powerless, useless and sidelined," says a PML member of the Punjab provincial assembly. Members of the bureaucracy, who hoped to be reinstated into the power structure after the general election in 2002, are equally frustrated, as some 600 retired and serving military officers still occupy top slots in ministries, state-run corporations and even universities.

But Musharraf's tactics are alienating many. His revelation that he had not decided whether or not to step down from the military divided the cabinet and stunned many parliamentarians in the PML, while the opposition erupted in uproar. Even the Islamic fundamentalists, erstwhile allies of the military, were appalled at Musharraf's apparent backtracking. "If he manipulates the constitution to extend his unjustified rule, he will be subverting the constitution and his oath of military service," Qazi Hussain Ahmad told a meeting of his Jamaat-e-Islami party in Lahore on April 20. losing support Meanwhile, several senior retired generals told the Review they feared that the overwhelming influence of the military and its refusal to make room for the elected government were eroding public support for both Musharraf and the armed forces as an institution. Others spoke of uncertainty and falling morale within the ranks.

Senior presidential aides insist there is no power grab and say Musharraf is

just frustrated at what he sees as the failings of the government and

parliament. Ironically, analysts note, Musharraf and the military are in a secure position. The major opposition parties inside and outside parliament are weak and divided, while Islamic parties that control two provincial governments on the border with Afghanistan are torn between their alliance with the military and opposition to Musharraf's war on terrorism. Moreover, the president is credited with brokering a thaw in relations with India and overseeing economic growth. Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz-a Musharraf nominee-says Pakistan will register 5.8 % GDP growth this year, or about double the rate when the army took over in 1999. And on April 22, the European Parliament ratified an important trade and cooperation agreement with Pakistan, which will dramatically increase

textile exports to Europe. Musharraf's firm support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism has also won the country huge amounts of aid and debt relief.

Some analysts believe Musharraf's present strategy is as much motivated by mistrust of civilian leaders as by a desire to retain the support of both the U.S. and his major constituency-the Pakistan army. He cannot afford to be seen as a lame-duck army chief nine months before he is due to take off his uniform. But some critics and analysts believe Musharraf and the military are playing a risky game. "The military's central role in politics in Pakistan is at the heart of the country's troubled prospects," writes former U.S. diplomat Teresita Schaffer, in a report released in April by the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies. The report predicts that "the army is likely to retain its dominant role in politics for at least another 5-10 years and possibly longer."