

Musharraf At The Exit

WASHINGTON POST - 22/03/2007

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

In the rapidly unfolding crisis in Pakistan, no matter what happens to President Pervez Musharraf -- whether he survives politically or not -- he is a lame duck. He is unable to rein in Talibanization in Pakistan or guide the country toward a more democratic future.

Since March 9, when Musharraf suspended the chief justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, public protests have escalated every day -- as has a violent crackdown by the police and intelligence agencies on the media and the nation's legal fraternity.

The legal convolutions about Chaudhry's dismissal boil down to one simple fact: He was not considered sufficiently reliable to deliver pleasing legal judgments in a year when Musharraf is seeking to extend his presidency by five more years, remain as army chief and hold what would undoubtedly be rigged general elections.

Musharraf's desire to replace Chaudhry with a more pliable judge has badly backfired. After just 10 days of protests, lawyers around the country have made it clear to the senior judiciary that they will not tolerate further legal validations for continued military rule or tolerate Musharraf remaining as president. At least seven judges and a deputy attorney general have resigned in protest.

Across the country, in law offices, in the media, among the opposition parties and other organized sections of civil society, the feeling is growing that Musharraf will have to quit sooner rather than later. After eight years of military rule it appears people have had enough.

Moreover, Musharraf is losing control of three key elements that have sustained his rule but are now either distancing themselves or turning on him completely. The first is the ruling Pakistan Muslim League Party, which has acted as the civilian appendage to the military but faces an election and knows that going to bat for the unpopular Musharraf will turn off voters. Party leaders and cabinet ministers are already distancing themselves from him.

The second element is the country's three intelligence agencies, which are at loggerheads over control of Musharraf, Pakistan's foreign policy, its political process and the media. Military Intelligence and the Inter-Services Intelligence are military agencies, while the largest civilian agency, the Intelligence Bureau, is now run by a military officer. Ironically, Inter-Services Intelligence, the most powerful agency in the country, has been the moderate element urging Musharraf to open up the political system to the opposition parties. The other two agencies are the hard-liners and are urging Musharraf to adopt even tougher measures.

The third loss for Musharraf has been the unqualified international support he has received since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Anger in the U.S. Congress and media, and particularly among members of the Republican Party, toward Musharraf's dual-track policy in Afghanistan -- helping to catch al-Qaeda members but backing the Taliban -- is making it difficult for President Bush to continue offering Musharraf his blanket support.

That was the tough-love message that Vice President Cheney delivered to Musharraf in Islamabad last month: Unless Musharraf goes after the Taliban, the Bush administration can no longer protect him.

Any loss of Western support will be critical to the army, which is on an arms-buying spree and depends on annual U.S. military aid of about \$300 million. Musharraf has balanced the pro- and anti-American factions in the army's officer corps, but if both sides see him as a lame duck, unable to deliver the goods or stabilize the country, their support will dwindle.

Musharraf is now too weak to pursue policies that could keep his back-stabbers in check, restore his credibility at home and abroad, and pursue his agenda of remaining in power for the next five years.

It is far better that he revert to the promise he made when he seized power in 1999: to return the country to democracy. His best course of action would be to say he is not a candidate for president, hold free and fair elections, allow the return of exiled politicians, restore full political rights and gracefully depart with his legacy, which is considerable, intact.

It is in the interest of the United States to support such an exit strategy. The military can no longer counter the phenomenal growth of Islamic extremism in Pakistan through offensives alone. What the country needs is greater political consensus and a popularly elected government, and to replace the extortions of the mullahs with the return of day-to-day parliamentary politics. The army created a political vacuum in which extremism has thrived. Pakistan needs a return to civil society and government.