

Musharraf Is Losing His Grip

International Herald Tribune - 02/06/2005

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

When Pakistan announced the arrest of a senior Al Qaeda operative last month, it was another feather in the cap of President Pervez Musharraf, with President George W. Bush describing the capture as "a critical victory in the war on terror." Musharraf's peace overtures toward India and criticism of Islamic extremism have also won high praise abroad, especially in Washington, which in March awarded him with a supply of F-16 fighter jets. But Musharraf's growing international standing is at odds with his faltering position at home.

His government is unraveling under the twin pressures of Islamic fundamentalists whom he refuses to resist and political opponents whom he harasses and jails. In April, thousands of members of the Pakistan People's Party were arrested to prevent big rallies for one of the party's leaders, Asif Ali Zardari. The Pakistan People's Party has been effectively sidelined since Musharraf took over in a military coup in 1999. Zardari - here for a visit from Dubai, where he lives in exile with his wife, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto - says he wants to test Musharraf's promises to restore genuine democracy.

The crackdown on the party is in sharp contrast to the extent to which the government has bowed to the demands of a coalition of six Islamic fundamentalist parties, even though many of these same fundamentalists consider Musharraf too secular and demand his resignation. The government has recently accepted the fundamentalists' demands that it stop men and women from running marathons together, and that it delay reform of the Islamic schools called madrassas, as well as efforts to amend laws on blasphemy and to curb honor killings.

Meanwhile, the civilian government brought to power by the military in 2002 after what many international monitors considered to be a rigged election has failed to deliver what Musharraf desired - a coherent and effective civilian facade for the military, which actually runs the country. Instead, the ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League, is riven by factionalism, and Parliament is often forced to suspend business because it lacks a quorum.

Shaukat Aziz, the third prime minister since 2002, is a former finance minister who has no political experience and is too beholden to the army to be an effective political leader. Challenged by its own ineptitude and by those parties demanding democracy, the Muslim League finds it convenient to pander to the fundamentalists, who are strong enough to keep the democrats at bay.

Musharraf's problems are compounded by insurgencies in the provinces. In Baluchistan, separatists are demanding greater autonomy and control over their natural resources. For the past three months the country's largest gas fields have been besieged by the separatists.

In North-West Frontier Province, a neo-Taliban resistance against the army continues with the return of Afghan and Pakistani Taliban who have been recently trained in Iraq. In the southern province of Sind there is growing alienation because of interethnic strife, increased criminality and corruption and tensions between the majority Sindhis and the central government.

The only answer to the domestic problems now tearing the country apart is more democracy - in particular a free and fair election in which the political elements that have been disenfranchised since 1999 get a political stake in determining the country's future. The next few months will be crunch time for the army, the Americans, the mullahs and the political parties. All the major players know that the present political situation under Musharraf is unsustainable.

It is time that the world sat up and took notice of events in Pakistan, because with 160 million people, nuclear weapons and a myriad of Islamic extremist groups still operating openly, Pakistan remains critical to regional and global stability.