

ARTICLES
Musharraf's Double Game Unravels

International Herald Tribune - 10/08/2005

By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Since the July 7 bombings in London, Pakistan's military ruler, President Pervez Musharraf, has again come under severe international pressure to clamp down on local extremist groups linked to Al Qaeda, bring extremist religious schools under control and stop the Taliban from using Pakistan as a base for attacks in Afghanistan. As a result, serious cracks are developing in the 35-year alliance between Pakistan's army, its intelligence services and Islamic fundamentalist parties.

Musharraf has parried international criticism of Pakistan by accusing Prime Minister Tony Blair of allowing Islamic extremism to flourish in Britain, but since July 7 he has arrested 800 militants and is expelling 1,400 foreign students studying in the religious schools, or madrasas.

For decades, Islamic fundamentalist parties in Pakistan have provided manpower and ideological support for the military intelligence services' forays in Afghanistan and Indian Kashmir. Under outside pressure, however, the inherent contradictions in this relationship are coming to the fore.

In an unprecedented broadside on Sunday, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the head of an alliance of six Islamic fundamentalist parties and leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, accused the army of helping militants to attack Afghanistan, supporting "jihadi" training camps in Pakistan and deceiving the West in its commitment to combat terrorism. "We will have to openly tell the world whether we want to support jihadis or crack down on them - we cannot afford to be hypocritical any more," he said.

For nearly two decades, Maulana Rehman has been one of the strongest Islamic leaders in the country. He heads Jamiat-e-Ullema Islam, or JUI, the most powerful fundamentalist party in the Pashtun tribal belt bordering Afghanistan. Since the 2002 elections, the JUI has dominated the provincial governments of North West Frontier Province and Baluchistan.

Working closely with the intelligence services the JUI has spawned numerous virulently anti-Western, violence-prone extremist groups who now work for Al Qaeda. In the 1990s, the JUI helped the army provide arms and manpower to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, JUI mullahs have allowed Taliban leaders to recruit Afghan and Pakistani students from JUI-run madrasas.

Now there are severe tensions between the army and the JUI. Under considerable American pressure to explain the Taliban resurgence, Lieutenant General Safdar Hussain, the Corps Commander in Peshawar, said on July 25 that the Taliban "are getting public support in Pakistan, especially from some Pakistani religious parties." He was clearly pointing the finger at the JUI and Maulana Rehman was furious.

On Aug. 1, Maulana was detained in Dubai International Airport while on his way home from Libya and promptly deported, with officials in the United Arab Emirates hinting that he was on a terrorist list. Maulana Rehman accused the Pakistan government of not doing enough to save him from humiliation.

Musharraf's declaration that he would send home foreign students was seen as another attack on the JUI, who control the largest number of madrasas. Rehman and other leaders from his six-party alliance mounted a tirade against Musharraf and have threatened to start a campaign to unseat the government.

The fundamentalist leaders don't like Musharraf's liberal stance and are determined to protect their parties and institutions. But they are also furious with the army for trying to make them a scapegoat for all of Pakistan's ills, when they have only been a junior partner to the army's own past policies that have encouraged Islamic extremism to flourish.

Rehman is now defying the army by declaring that it bears responsibility for the fruits of its past policies, and that it should not seek to parry American pressure by blaming Pakistan's Islamic parties.

At one level, such statements are part of the kind of political wheeling and dealing that can be expected before local council elections later this month and general elections scheduled for 2007, when Musharraf wants to get himself elected as president. The fundamentalist parties feel threatened because they know that Musharraf may be trying to reduce their influence. But the danger is that Rehman and others could divulge more details of the intelligence services' links, which might diminish the military's credibility at home and abroad.

Musharraf is in a difficult position. Since Sept. 11 he has successfully ridden two horses, placating the West with promises of reform and crackdowns on extremists while pandering to the Islamic parties in order to retain their support. But now that Pakistan's political system is in danger of slowly unraveling as he loses support across the political spectrum, Musharraf could fall off altogether.