

ARTICLES
Musharraf's Mess Won't Go Away

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LAHORE — When Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf seized power in a military coup in 1999, he was besieged by American demands that his military stop supporting the Taliban regime in Kabul and that he help the U.S. apprehend Osama bin Laden.

Yesterday, as a beaten down Mr. Musharraf received his last military honour guard before departing the presidency in Islamabad, he left behind a government besieged by ever-escalating U.S. and NATO threats that the army either do more to stop the Taliban's double offensive in Afghanistan and Pakistan or face stepped up U.S. bombing inside Pakistan.

In other words, during the nine years Mr. Musharraf was in power, little seems to have changed or rather, things have gotten worse.

In his last speech to the nation, Mr. Musharraf tried to point out all the good he had done for Pakistan, but the majority of his countrymen - up to 80 per cent according to a local newspaper poll - think his years in power have worsened the perennial crisis Pakistan has been facing for several decades.

The country's divided civilian government has been emasculated by the military, the populace remains deeply polarized, Pakistan's economy is in crisis with inflation at 25 per cent, and the newly emerged "Pakistani Taliban" is now knocking on Islamabad's door.

Three of Pakistan's previous four military rulers were driven from power by popular movements, but the politicians who followed the military always failed to take advantage of the people's desire for democracy and economic development. Instead, they were turfed out by the military on charges of corruption and incompetence. The chances of that happening again are stronger than ever.

Much of the fault lies with Mr. Musharraf's aversion to democracy and his failure to capitalize on the opportunities offered by joining the Western alliance in the war on terror after Sept. 11, 2001, when he received massive financial aid - \$11.8-billion from Washington alone - and unstinting international political support.

The former general had come to power on a wave of popularity after the politicians had failed yet again, but despite promising to do so, he failed to stabilize the system by rebuilding state institutions and planning for a genuine and permanent transition to sustainable democracy.

In 2002, with ample U.S. and European support, he rigged a referendum that made him president for five years, and then held a rigged general election by keeping the major opposition figures in exile abroad and cobbling together a government made up of politicians loyal to the army. Last year, when millions of Pakistanis took to the streets demanding the rule of law and democracy, he dragged his feet. In November, he reimposed emergency rule in order to salvage his faltering popularity. The draconian measures he introduced - sacking the entire higher judiciary, censoring the press, throwing thousands of people into jail - infuriated the nation and galvanized the opposition politicians.

Under extreme pressure, he was forced to rescind his measures and hold free and fair elections in February, 2008. His political supporters were naturally trounced and his political opponents came to power. Since then they have tried - and failed - to work with Mr. Musharraf, who continued to believe political power should be concentrated in the presidency.

In the meantime, Mr. Musharraf and the military played a double game in the war on terror, chasing down al-Qaeda leaders hiding in Pakistan's tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, while clandestinely allowing the Afghan Taliban to regroup and reorganize on Pakistani soil. For Mr. Musharraf and the army, the Afghan Taliban were a hedge against a possible U.S. retreat from Afghanistan, against Afghan politicians whom the army disliked and against India's growing influence in Afghanistan.

But blowback was inevitable. The Pakistani Pashtun tribesmen who protected Osama bin Laden and the Afghan Taliban when they retreated to Pakistan in 2001 were themselves radicalized. They formed their own militias with their own agenda to turn Pakistan into an Islamic, Taliban-style state.

These militias, now dubbed the Pakistani Taliban, have taken over the tribal agencies that border Afghanistan and are terrorizing much of northwestern Pakistan. The army has been reluctant to take them on.

Joined by al-Qaeda, foreign militants from around the world, Arabs from the war in Iraq, as well as Pakistani militant leftovers from the 1980s insurrection in Indian Kashmir, the Pakistani Taliban are now a formidable force that have launched suicide attacks against the army itself. Last December, they assassinated the one person who could have pulled the country together: Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the opposition Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

Mr. Musharraf's departure is certainly a victory for democratic forces, but it will not necessarily pull the country together.

The PPP, now run by Ms. Bhutto's husband, Asif Zardari, governs with a complex coalition government that is in a constant state of internal conflict. The main protagonist is Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League, who spares no opportunity to try and pull down the PPP rather than working with it to consolidate the few democratic gains the country has made. Mr. Sharif believes his popularity and the parliamentary seats he controls in the majority province of Punjab will give him the prime ministership. Rather than wait for the next elections, he wants it now. The internal battles of the coalition are only magnified by the enormous mistrust between the army and these two political parties.

In the past six months, the army and the coalition have failed to work out a joint strategy to combat militancy. The army wants the government to lead and take the political responsibility for going after the militants, so that the army's present unpopularity does not get worse. The coalition parties have to come up with a joint strategy, but Mr. Sharif is refusing to oblige because he draws much of his political strength from the mullahs and anti-American right wing in Punjab.

Mr. Musharraf's departure is certainly a watershed moment that brings to an end a long period of personalized military rule. The mess he has left behind, however, is one that will haunt Pakistan, and the world, in the months ahead and will make the international community even more nervous about the country's future as the militants become stronger and more audacious.