

Pakistan - Say Nothing

Opposition leader Javed Hashmi was a critic of the army's political role. Now he's under arrest.

Far Eastern Economic Review - 06/11/2003

By Ahmed Rashid/Lahore

The arrest in Pakistan of a leading opposition politician on treason charges has heightened year-long tensions between the army and opposition politicians who are campaigning against President Pervez Musharraf and the army's dominance over the political process. Javed Hashmi, president of the opposition Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and the acting leader of exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's faction of the Pakistan Muslim League, was bundled into a car outside his residence in Islamabad by police and intelligence officers after midnight on October 30. Hashmi was charged with high treason after a press conference at which he read a letter criticizing the army for its role in politics. The unsigned letter, Hashmi said, was written by disgruntled army officers on official letterhead.

Musharraf is also army chief of staff; he took power from Sharif in a coup in 1999, named himself president in 2001 and renewed his term for five years in a controversial referendum in April, 2002. The letter was critical of Musharraf's close relations with the United States and his support for the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, and praised parliament for opposing a U.S. request to send Pakistani troops to Iraq. Government officials said Hashmi forged the letter and accused him of defaming the military and attempting to incite officers to mutiny. Several opposition leaders said they had also received the letter, but only Hashmi spoke to the press. Hashmi has in the past publicly criticized the army for dominating the political process. Following the arrest, Prime Minister Zafrullah Khan Jamali warned politicians not to criticize the army. "All citizens should be careful in their comments and uphold the supremacy of the constitution," he told reporters.

The leading secular opposition party in the National Assembly, the Pakistan People's Party, warned that the arrest sowed the seeds of confrontation between the army and the people. Opposition parties have vowed to launch street protests. As the Review went to press, Hashmi was still being held at an undisclosed location and had not yet appeared in court. The arrest surprised and stunned leaders of Prime Minister Jamali's faction of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League, who have been trying to convince a sceptical public that they, rather than the army, are running the country. Significantly, only two other Muslim League leaders voiced support for the arrest. Ironically, Hashmi's arrest came as Jamali and Musharraf tried to convince a delegation from the European Parliament that democracy had been fully restored in Pakistan. Last year the European Parliament concluded that general elections held by Musharraf in October were neither free nor fair. This September the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group refused to reverse Pakistan's suspension from the Commonwealth because it did not consider that democracy had been restored in the country. But Musharraf continues to be strongly supported by the U.S., which was silent on the arrest. Despite the induction of a civilian government in October 2002, the two major opposition groupings-Hashmi's secular ARD and the Islamic fundamentalist Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)-have refused to accept Musharraf's dual positions as president and army chief of staff. As a result, parliament has been paralyzed for one year, with little legislation or parliamentary business being carried out. Musharraf told the European delegation that he would continue to retain both posts until he feels "the political and economic situation in the country is stable," a government news agency reported.

Friends of the military seem to get a break Hashmi's arrest has highlighted how the military treats secular politicians differently from the MMA's leaders. MMA leaders, who are close to the army, have often called on the army to topple Musharraf because they consider him to be working for the U.S. But they have never faced arrest. The issue has also brought to the surface the growing public

resentment against the continued dominance of the military. In September, a police constable in Lahore became a public hero when he stopped a car belonging to a major-general because its windows were covered with tinted glass, which is banned. The policeman was subsequently arrested for allegedly abusing the general's family. Since then there has been a torrent of articles in the press praising the policeman, which has irked the army. Musharraf appeared unperturbed by Hashmi's arrest-he refused to comment and went on a state visit to China.