

Musharraf's Morass

Facing an unexpected challenge to his power from Islamic fundamentalists in the provinces and defiance from the parliamentary opposition, President Musharraf may counter-attack

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By Ahmed Rashid/Islamabad

The Pakistan military has long given strategic and covert support to the country's Islamic fundamentalists, but that policy appears to be backfiring as the religious radicals mount a challenge to central power. This, coupled with President Pervez Musharraf's failure to win parliamentary support for the military's continuing political dominance, has led to fears that he may be on the verge of dissolving democratic legislatures and reimposing military rule nearly four years after overthrowing an elected government in a bloodless coup. "The present army leadership has developed utter contempt for civilians and democracy," says a retired general who used to be close to Musharraf. "It's a very dangerous situation for Pakistan and the region."

The current crisis has given added importance to the president's visits in the second half of June to the United States and Britain, say Western diplomats. They believe he will ask U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to back his position in return for his continuing key cooperation in the U.S.-led war against terrorism, holding talks with India on the disputed territory of Kashmir and sending troops to help establish stability in Iraq.

The Bush administration has formed a strong bond with Musharraf since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States and still sees him as the only glue capable of holding Pakistan together. "You've got a government who is simultaneously trying to move democratically, fight a battle against terror and right an economic picture which was terribly skewed," notes U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, while acknowledging that Musharraf did not come to power democratically.

But clearly U.S. politicians are worried about Pakistan's domestic political situation and would like to see the Islamic fundamentalists reined in, particularly in rugged areas bordering Afghanistan. "Our question always is the degree of control that President Musharraf has on all the elements in his country and we hope that it's substantial. But we are worried from time to time because of activities in Pakistan near the Afghanistan border," Democrat Senator Richard Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations committee, told the Review in an interview on June 2.

It's in the border area that Musharraf is facing his latest crisis, which threatens to reverse decades of modernization and secular rule. On June 2, the Muttahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties, pushed through a bill imposing sharia, or Islamic law, throughout the mountainous North West Frontier Province.

The MMA had won control of the provincial assembly during the general election of October with the help of the military's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, according to army officers. The ISI is also accused of helping deliver national power to an alliance of pro-military politicians led by the weak but pliant Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali.

Even before the sharia bill was approved, an MMA-declared anti-obscenity drive had prompted Islamic militants to charge round the provincial capital Peshawar tearing down advertising hoardings showing women, destroying cable TV dishes and attacking the offices of foreign multinationals.

Sharia promises to turn the North West Frontier Province into a carbon copy of neighbouring Afghanistan under the Taliban's harsh 1995-2001 Islamic rule, which was admired by the anti-American MMA. It will bring the province's educational, legal and financial systems in line with fundamentalist Islamic laws. Under sharia all offices, shops and schools must close five times a day at prayer times; schoolgirls have to wear head scarves, boys must sport traditional dress and men are required to grow beards.

Other features include compulsory prayers for the entire male population, media censorship, veiled women and

religious police answering to a newly formed Department of Vice and Virtue and wielding large sticks to enforce the laws. Next, the MMA hopes to impose sharia in the southwestern province of Baluchistan, where it shares power. Ultimately, it wants strict Islamic law imposed throughout the country.

The MMA's plans are causing tremors in both Kabul and Islamabad. "The MMA's agenda is a disaster for both Pakistan and Afghanistan because the Taliban and Al Qaeda will be immeasurably strengthened," says a senior aide to Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Pakistan's lame-duck prime minister, Jamali, reacted by belatedly replacing some senior bureaucrats and police officials in the North West Frontier Province in a bid to demonstrate central government control. But Musharraf was silent until June 9, when he told a meeting of lawyers in the northern city of Lahore that "the people of Pakistan do not want a theocratic state and are strongly opposed to Talibanization . . . personal liberties and freedoms should be respected." MMA Secretary-General Maulana Fazlur Rehman claimed a day later that the party was "doing everything according to the constitution."

Yet the crisis is almost entirely of the military's making, as it refuses to share real power with civilians, insists on being the only decision-maker and covertly arms the fundamentalists to fight its proxy wars in Kashmir and, allegedly, Afghanistan. "The army has wilfully distorted the political system and denied space to secular parties and civil society while favouring the fundamentalists," says Samina Ahmed, regional director of the International Crisis Group (ICG), a Brussels-based think-tank.

For decades Pakistani generals and politicians raised the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism to elicit Western support for their regimes. That, allegedly, is why the military helped the MMA win power in North West Frontier Province. In fact, the country's rulers cultivated the militants as a vital foreign-policy tool, especially in dealings with India-the Islamic warriors waged the war to reunify Kashmir that Pakistan's army could not do itself.

But now the tables have been turned as the fundamentalists-no doubt alarmed at Pakistan's betrayal of the Taliban and growing friendship with the U.S.-see their moment to turn the country into a theocratic state. And the MMA is banking on its support base within the military to help move the country towards Islamization. Thus even as the MMA reviles Musharraf as an American stooge, it praises the army's commitment to Islam.

Some opposition politicians and journalists are convinced that the crisis has been set up by elements in the ISI. "Far from criticizing the MMA or reining in its militants, the military's intelligence agencies have worked overtime to pave the way for their forceful entry into the corridors of power," claimed the Friday Times, a leading liberal political weekly, on May 30.

The MMA's sharia initiative, however, is something Musharraf seems not to have predicted. And he was also wrong-footed by the refusal of both Islamic and secular opposition parties in parliament to endorse him as concurrent president and army chief for the next five years. They also rejected his package of constitutional amendments, the so-called Legal Framework Order (LFO), to institutionalize the military's role in government and reduce the powers of the premier.

In opposing the LFO, the combined opposition has disrupted every session of the National Assembly, paralyzing parliament and the Jamali government. Not even the recovering economy can sway the opposition, which on June 7 tried to drown out Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz as he presented the budget for the next fiscal year starting on July 1 (see story below).

The ISI held negotiations with the Islamic opposition to try to work out a compromise, but Musharraf is adamant on being both president and army chief.

"I hold the two offices not by choice but by compulsion of events," he said on June 9. And Prime Minister Jamali's attempts to justify the LFO have been mocked by the opposition, further weakening the image of the government.

Musharraf seems to be genuinely concerned about what he has described as "Talibanization" in the border areas and angered at the lack of support for his continuing role as president and army chief. It seems that he miscalculated in his belief that he could control the Islamic parties and the democratic process, and it's likely that, facing a challenge

to his power in the provinces and a refusal to recognize his power in parliament, he will take steps to rectify that.

There is now a widespread perception that the president is planning a second coup that would be backed by Washington. This would most likely see him suspend or even dismiss the national and provincial assemblies. The transition in power would not be difficult-despite the return to civilian rule, more than 600 military officers occupy key jobs in government ministries and state-owned corporations, while the military controls foreign policy.

But going it alone again, even with the likely support of Washington, carries big risks. "When you grossly distort and manipulate a political system to stay in power, the foundations are so fragile that they crumble," says the ICG's Ahmed.