

Taliban The Big Winners

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By Ahmed Rashid

By imposing these draconian martial law-type measures, President Pervez Musharraf hopes to ensure his own political survival. But the move is more likely to lead to much greater political confrontation, protests and larger territorial gains by the extremist Pakistani Taliban.

General Musharraf's primary aim was to cleanse the Supreme Court bench. That he has achieved - all its judges have been forced to resign and several, including the Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, are under arrest. The Supreme Court had become a major irritant for military rule, and was due to rule on a petition whether Gen Musharraf could remain president for another five years.

Thus the emergency's first target is not the extremists terrorising northern Pakistan, but the democratic, secular elite. Dozens of judges, lawyers and human rights workers have been arrested while more have gone underground to avoid arrest. Journalists and the media are being targeted and harassed in an unprecedented manner.

Asma Jehangir, Pakistan's leading human rights activist, who is now under house arrest, appealed yesterday to the American and British governments "to stop all support of the unstable dictator".

In his actions and his speech to the nation on Saturday night, Gen Musharraf treated the Supreme Court with absolute contempt - a move that has devastating long-term implications for the ever widening gulf between an unaccountable army and a public that wants an independent judiciary, the rule of law and respect for the constitution.

Gen Musharraf and the army have once again decided they are above the law or international obligations, even though his political support collapsed months ago after four months of non-stop demonstrations by lawyers, professionals and opposition parties.

Diplomats from Britain and the United States fell into the trap of believing that Gen Musharraf wanted a deal with the former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, to restore his crumbling popularity. It now seems that both governments were taken for a ride by the wily general. An embarrassed Ms Bhutto has now been forced into a U-turn to condemn Gen Musharraf. She will now attempt to gather all the opposition around her.

The key winner in this will be the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, who is popular in Punjab and has refused to strike any deal with the army. His hard line towards Gen Musharraf has now been vindicated, while Ms Bhutto's soft line is being criticised.

A major loser will be the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML), with its politicians now reviled and virtually unelectable. PML leaders, including Shaukat Aziz and Chaudry Shujaat Hussain, had urged Gen Musharraf to impose an emergency, believing that it would allow them to rule for another year or so.

The real battleground for Gen Musharraf should be the north of his country, where a resurgent Pakistani Taliban, helped by al-Qa'eda, are conquering more territory and imposing their version of a so-called Sharia [Islamic law] state. The army has lost hundreds of men and at least 400 soldiers are being held hostage by the extremists.

But Gen Musharraf's first concern is his own survival rather than combating the extremists, while the army is deeply demoralised and unwilling to fight a never-ending war against its countrymen.

So we can now expect a flurry of truces and shaky peace deals with the Pakistani Taliban, which will leave them in place for the time being. As a sop to the US military, we can expect the "timely" arrest of a few high-level leaders of the Afghan Taliban who are living in Pakistan, and possibly even an al-Qa'eda leader or two. For the long term the extremists know that the Pakistani state has been irretrievably weakened and this is the moment to push home their offensive.

The future of stability of Afghanistan also hangs in the balance as does the safety of 40,000 British, US and Nato troops based there. The Afghan Taliban will now continue their offensive through the harsh winter months. They can only be encouraged by the mayhem in Pakistan from where they receive recruits, logistics and support.

The spread of anti-Westernism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has been fostered by a US policy that has sought only to keep Gen Musharraf in power. However, the dramatic lack of public support for Gen Musharraf will mean that his rule, and the emergency, is unsustainable for long, and could trigger

Even worse political chaos. The West has a vital stake in seeing stability in Pakistan, but so far its response has been too tepid to make a difference to the generals.