

Musharraf Faces Big Decision

Ahmed Rashid, Guest Journalist And Writer On Pakistan, Afghanistan And Central Asia, Says Pakistan's Leader Faces A Stark Choice.

BBC News. 17/07/2007

By Ahmed Rashid

The storming of the Islamabad's Red Mosque last week and the deaths of scores of Islamic militants has placed Pakistan and its leadership on the edge of a deadly precipice.

One wrong move and the already deeply polarized country could plunge into a permanent state of anarchic violence, bordering on civil war.

Al-Qaeda and underground Pakistani extremist groups have pledged to target President Pervez Musharraf, government ministers and the army in revenge for the commando action that brought down the Red Mosque, which had defied the state for six months.

Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao barely survived just such a suicide attack in late April. Gen Musharraf himself has been the target of several assassination plots.

And since the Red Mosque siege some 50 soldiers have been killed by suicide bombers and in ambushes by the militants in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Now Gen Musharraf - himself a former commando - has promised to wage war against all extremist groups and to never allow a madrassa (religious school) to defy the state again.

He has sent thousands of troops to Swat, a tribal territory of NWFP and to the town of Tank where Pakistani Taleban and al Qaeda are attempting to impose their version of a Sharia state.

At the same time Gen Musharraf is faced with a middle-class movement of lawyers and professionals who are fed up with military rule and a burgeoning political opposition movement that held its biggest get together ever in London recently.

He is under intense pressure to spell out soon a time table for free and fair elections and his own future political role.

Although he has pledged to curb Islamic extremism repeatedly since 2001, he has failed to do so. But this time even he acknowledges that the crisis is far more serious.

Open war between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the so called 'Sharia state' of the Taleban has to be avoided.

A close adviser to the president says that when he finds himself in a crisis or a political trap, he carries out "a tactical retreat" which he then manoeuvres into "a strategic advance" in another direction altogether - leaving the past issues unresolved behind him.

"It's a typical commando's way of looking at politics and the world," says the adviser.

Now there appears to be no space left for tactical retreats.

He is faced with a stark choice - either go for the extremists in a consistent manner as he has promised to do in the past or once again try to appease them. The latter course, many fears, would put the future of Pakistan at risk.

Since 9/11 he has been accused of double-dealing with the West, sometimes bending to pressure to curb Islamic extremism and at other times allying himself with extremists to brow beat or blackmails the governments of Kabul,

Delhi or Washington.

Thus far, he has never attempted to break the three decades old nexus between the army and Islamic extremists.

As a result al-Qaeda has found the space and support to regroup in Pakistan's tribal areas, the Afghan Taleban have found a safe refuge in Balochistan province and Pakistani Taleban have spread their propaganda across the Pashtun belt of north-west Pakistan.

If Gen Musharraf takes the first choice he will need to first garner political support and a new political mandate by allowing secular national parties such as Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party and smaller regional parties back into the political arena.

These are parties that have accused him of treating them with contempt since he seized power in a coup in 1999.

But striking a deal with Ms Bhutto and others would mean that the army would have to hold a genuinely free and fair election by the end of the year, allow the independence of the judiciary and media and share power with the politicians - something President Musharraf has been loathe doing.

Isolation risk

Now it seems to many that the army needs to understand that it cannot take on the extremists unless it is prepared to have a credible parliament and civilian government to work with.

If he takes the second path it would mean striking more controversial and fragile peace deals with the Pakistani Taleban, the extremists and militant madrassas. This would involve allowing a weakening of the state's authority and credibility.

Taking the second path could also ultimately mean an abandonment of any pretence of democracy, the imposition of martial law, a further distancing from the West and enormous isolation from the majority of the people of Pakistan.

Whatever choice he makes, Gen Musharraf knows he will still be targeted by the extremists.