

Musharraf's Power Play

In his latest guest column for the BBC News website, journalist Ahmed Rashid finds President Pervez Musharraf increasingly isolated in Pakistan.

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

After five years in power is Gen Musharraf finally reaching out to the mainstream political parties, aiming to scuttle the army's present alliance with hardline Islamic parties?

Or is he once again just playing games to divide the growing opposition against him, as he finds himself politically isolated and tries to weather the storm unleashed by the "uniform issue"?

The speculation is rife, but there is no doubt that Pakistan is entering another period of intense political activity and possible turmoil.

President Musharraf's phone call to the family of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, whom he sent into exile in 2000, and the freeing of Benazir Bhutto's husband, Asif Ali Zardari, from jail, have unleashed a new round of political musical chairs.

"President Pervez Musharraf himself has decided to go for greater national reconciliation in the larger national interest," said Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed.

Even as Gen Musharraf continues to receive accolades from the US he is increasingly isolated at home

Mr Sharif and Ms Bhutto, who is in self-imposed exile in Abu Dhabi, were "very much in contact with the government", he added.

In fact, officers of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the president's civilian aides took the first step by meeting the two leaders, and other political figures such as Mr Zardari, to see under what terms and conditions both leaders would agree to have their parties take part in the political process and perhaps even return home themselves.

Isolated

Both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif have pledged to work together to restore full democracy and have refused to endorse Gen Musharraf's determination to continue being both president and army chief for the next five years.

Both the religious and mainstream political opposition are united in wanting Gen Musharraf to doff his uniform, and they have begun to hold protest rallies to make their point.

Even as Gen Musharraf continues to receive accolades from the US for his contribution to the war on terrorism, he is increasingly isolated at home.

The ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML), made up of politicians largely co-opted by the military and which came to power after controversial general elections in 2002, has failed to play its role as a junior but active partner to the army.

The general sacked the first PML prime minister, Zafarullah Khan Jamali, while the second, Shaukat Aziz, has been too insecure and politically inexperienced to make his presence felt.

Both prime ministers and the ruling PML have suffered from the overwhelming intrusion of Gen Musharraf and the army, who refuse to make room for a civilian government to function normally.

Islamists unhappy

Meanwhile the army and the PML's alliance with the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a grouping of hardline Islamic parties, is also fraying at the edges.

The MMA's main ideological component, the Jamiat-e-Islami, has turned against Gen Musharraf and is holding rallies demanding he give up his uniform.

The more populist component of the MMA, the Jamaat-e-Ulema Islam, is deeply divided as to what strategy to adopt.

American and European leaders have quietly suggested to the president that his alliance with the MMA, which still supports the Taliban and al-Qaeda, is an embarrassment and he should open a window to the ostracised mainstream parties - Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif's faction of the Pakistan Muslim League.

However, what still unites the MMA and the ruling PML is an aversion to the mainstream parties. Some of their leaders have been mortified by Gen Musharraf's overtures to the former prime ministers, knowing full well that it could signal their demise from the corridors of power.

What all opposition parties and many Pakistanis would like to see is national reconciliation between all political parties, a timetable for the army's exit from the political scene and institutional changes to bring about a fair and level playing field for all parties for the next general elections in 2007.

President Musharraf's aides hint that that is precisely what he is aiming at, but the problem here is the general himself.

Nobody, not even members of the ruling PML, believe that the army is willing to surrender power to a truly empowered civilian government, or that Gen Musharraf is willing to play second fiddle to an elected prime minister.

Power play

Despite his conciliatory statements, Gen Musharraf shows no signs of doing either.

The ISI is still intrusive as ever on the political stage, the army's corps commanders still call the shots in the provinces and all major decisions are taken and announced by the president rather than the prime minister.

Senior officials of both the Bhutto and Sharif parties are convinced that Gen Musharraf is just playing games, trying to break up the alliance between them, creating further rifts between the mainstream and the Islamic opposition groupings - all in order to get over the hurdle of keeping his uniform.

And although the ruling PML and the MMA are nervous about any scenario in which Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif may return home, they know that no matter how poorly they have performed, the army is not about to dump them and surrender its powers to the former premiers.

The recent political flurry has demonstrated yet again that military rule is unsustainable in the medium or long term.

None of the three previous generals who have ruled Pakistan were able to institutionalise permanent military rule in the country once they departed from the scene.

Nor have the civilian political facades they erected, as Pakistan has at present, survived their own demise.

In 1999 Musharraf seized power with the promise that he would institutionalise "real democracy".

So far he has failed to deliver on that, but could there be some hope that Musharraf becomes the first ruling general to realise that the military cannot rule for ever?