

In Pakistan Power Ebbs Away From Musharraf

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

Power is ebbing away from President Pervez Musharraf hour by hour as though he were a snowman melting in the spring sun.

Every day he and his small coterie of generals thrash around trying to find a way out of the deep political impasse they find themselves in, but there seems to be none.

After eight years in power Gen Musharraf, who is also army chief, is battling for his political survival, refusing to yield power to civilians and yet unable to exert the authority to rule what is fast becoming an anarchic nation armed with nuclear weapons.

Yesterday Gen Musharraf and his inner coterie considered taking the hard line by imposing a state of emergency which would have suspended fundamental rights, placed restrictions on the Supreme Court and delayed elections.

The week before they pursued the appeasement line, trying to strike a deal with Gen Musharraf's once hated enemy Benazir Bhutto.

The week before that it was all about coaxing support from President George W Bush. But nothing is working.

There is still no done deal with Ms Bhutto and yesterday after the army's civilian allies threatened to desert Gen Musharraf if an emergency were declared, the generals called off the idea - for the time being.

Mr. Bush's words of support have been drowned out in a litany of accusations by US presidential candidates from the Democrat party that Gen Musharraf is double dealing the US on Al-Qaeda.

The tragedy is that Gen Musharraf is hell bent on preserving power come what may and the army is so far backing him.

There is a full-blown al-Qaeda-backed tribal insurgency in the North West Frontier Province bordering Afghanistan. In Balochistan a separatist insurgency by secular rebels has gained momentum.

After 100 militants were killed in the Red Mosque siege in Islamabad in July, where Islamic militants had held out for months, the Islamists promised revenge. Intelligence agencies report that more than 600 students who escaped the siege are potential suicide bombers.

The mainstream Islamic parties have threatened a mass movement to topple Gen Musharraf and bring Islamic government.

However the real wild card is the Supreme Court which has pledged to follow the rule of law after being treated with contempt by Gen Musharraf. A single one of several cases awaiting adjudication could bring down the general.

For too long the US and Britain have pandered to military rule in Pakistan and any further attempts to do so will ensure that millions of liberal Pakistanis come to hate the West.

David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, correctly asserted recently that the real war against Islamic extremism needs to be fought in Afghanistan and Pakistan rather than Iraq. Britain needs to take charge in helping Washington see the light.

Pakistan needs all the help it can muster from its foreign friends, but they must now realise that the days of equating Gen Musharraf with Pakistan are over.