

ARTICLES
Pakistan's Growing Problems

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By Ahmed Rashid in Lahore

In his latest guest column for BBC News Online, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid sees problems growing for President Pervez Musharraf.

Extremist strikes and sectarian attacks across the country together with mini-insurgencies in two of Pakistan's four provinces have increased public insecurity and criticism of President Pervez Musharraf. All this at a time when he is seeking ways to retain both the presidency and control of the army before a 31 December deadline to give up one of these responsibilities.

The growing violence in Pakistan compounded by political instability - we have just seen the widely anticipated resignation of the prime minister - is causing immense concern to the US and Pakistan's other Western allies.

It is also creating a major credibility problem for General Musharraf's government.

Army chief ambushed

The killing of more than 70 people in Karachi in a series of sectarian massacres earlier in June has created a wave of instability in the port city.

The real answer to Pakistan's continuing political crisis is for the army to take a back seat and allow the ebb and flow of democracy

After Sunni extremists massacred dozens of Shias in attacks on their mosques and unknown assailants assassinated a leading Sunni cleric, riots and protests shut down the city - Pakistan's business and commercial centre - for several days. The attacks culminated in the 10 June ambush on the convoy of Karachi Corps Commander, Lt. General Saleem Hayat in which 10 soldiers and 3 policemen were killed.

It was a clear signal that al-Qaeda and its allies in Pakistan - Sunni extremist groups and jihadi parties - were implementing an Osama bin Laden edict earlier this year to target General Musharraf's government and try and topple it.

The direct attacks on the army's top brass - General Musharraf warded off two assassination attempts in December - indicates that the government faces an unprecedented threat from extremists which it has so far failed to adequately address.

Determined to resist

Meanwhile an ongoing military offensive in Wana in South Waziristan against al-Qaeda and local Pashtun tribesmen has claimed more than 60 lives in June.

More and more Wazir tribesmen appear determined to resist the government's attempt to capture or kill their al-Qaeda guests.

Pashtun politicians and experts have voiced fears of an anti-army insurgency spreading across the semi-autonomous Pashtun tribal belt that lies on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In Gilgit, in northern Pakistan, tensions between Sunnis and Shias (who are largely Ismailis or followers of the Agha Khan) in mid-June resulted in riots and protests leading to a 24 hour curfew in the city.

The curfew lasted for nearly two weeks.

It crippled normal life for ordinary people and led to huge price rises as the bazaars and traffic came to a halt.

Mounting anger

Meanwhile Balochistan province has been gripped by a wave of rocket and mortar attacks on several large towns by groups of unknown Baloch nationalists.

They are also believed to have been behind the killing of three Chinese engineers in the port town of Gwadar on 3 May.

There has also been mounting anger among Baloch politicians and tribal chiefs on the widely-circulating reports that General Musharraf was preparing to dismiss Prime Minister Jamali, a Baloch tribal chief.

The rumours also raised the hackles of politicians from the opposition and the ruling Pakistan Muslim League in all three minority provinces.

Reports that Mr Jamali would be replaced by a Punjabi, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, added to the strong anti-Punjab feeling in the provinces of Sind, Balochistan and the North West Frontier Province.

Pushed out

The government has been desperately searching for corrective measures.

There is no guarantee that a new prime minister will be able to do a better job at running the country

On 7 June, Sind Chief Minister Sardar Ali Mohammed Khan resigned, although there is little doubt that he was pushed out by the army. On 13 June the government said it had arrested 10 members of an al-Qaeda group in Karachi, whom it blamed for all the recent attacks in the city.

The group included two relatives of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the al-Qaeda number 3 who helped plan the 11 September attacks on the United States and was arrested in Pakistan in March 2003.

All this came as tensions in Islamabad between General Musharraf and Prime Minister Jamali mounted.

Mr Jamali was President Musharraf's choice for PM after the general elections nearly two years ago, because of his unassuming and non-confrontational manner.

While in office he hardly contradicted General Musharraf, frequently referring to the president as "my boss".

Differences eventually cropped up, especially over President Musharraf's reluctance to give up his uniform as army chief by December 31, 2004 which he pledged to do in a public commitment in December 2003.

He now appears to be back tracking on that commitment which Mr Jamali had resisted.

Elections discredited

Now Mr Jamali is gone.

But there is no guarantee that a new prime minister will be able to do a better job at running the country, when General Musharraf and the army retain total control over all policy decisions.

The pressure on Mr Jamali to step down has also discredited the very controversial elections and controlled parliamentary democracy, which the army introduced in 2002.

The real answer to Pakistan's continuing political crisis is for the army to take a back seat and allow the ebb and flow of democracy and civilian rule to function more effectively.

Politicians are unable to concentrate on the job of governance, when they are constantly having to look at over their shoulder at the military.