

The High Stakes in Pakistan

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Despite the growing pressure from mass protests and the US government for President Pervez Musharraf to rescind the State of Emergency, doff his uniform as army chief and hold free and fair elections, it will ultimately be the army deciding whether he stays in power or is forced to quit.

In declaring a State of Emergency on November 3, the besieged president opted for a widespread crackdown on Pakistan's secular civil society rather than the Islamic extremists operating with relative impunity in Pakistan's frontier provinces. The Emergency has resulted in the arrest of over 6,000 people, but most of them from the secular elite, people who vehemently oppose the terrorist campaigns launched by the Pakistani Taliban.

Indeed, it is safe to say that the Emergency is likely to embolden both the domestic Islamic extremists as well as the Taliban of Afghanistan. While the army's attention will be focused on containing the growing political discontent at home, the Taliban is very likely to continue its offensive through the winter, putting the stability of Afghanistan also at risk.

Internal tension rising

The public protests are picking up momentum. Thousands of lawyers offered themselves for arrest, followed by women, human rights activists, members of professional organizations and opposition party political workers. For

the first time since 1968 a student movement has erupted on university campuses. Musharraf has continued to defend his crackdown, saying that the elections promised before January 9 will be held under an Emergency. But this has led to opposition calls for a total boycott.

At the same time, international pressure has mounted. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice is making increasingly tough calls for him to back down. A visit to Islamabad on November 16 by Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte, adds to the pressure, as does the threat by the Commonwealth Group of Countries to oust Pakistan from their midst by November 23 if Musharraf does relent.

The international community has, however, stopped short of calling on Musharraf to step down. Former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, leader of the largest opposition party the Pakistan Peoples Party, is now calling for

just that. "I would like the US to facilitate an exit strategy for General Musharraf," she told a US TV channel yesterday, on the eve of Negroponte's arrival.

It is up to the army

Her wish will not be possible though, until or unless the army decides that Musharraf has become a liability and the US gives a nod to the army's high command. Newly appointed Vice Chief General Ashfaq Kayani, formerly head of

the Interservices Intelligence (ISI) and trusted by the Americans, has his hands tied. Until Musharraf fulfills his promise to step down as army chief, Kayani as vice-chief cannot order troops to move.

At the same time, Musharraf has ensured that the top slots are manned by loyalists. The new head of the ISI, General Nadeem Taj, has led the crackdown on civil society. However the army remains hierarchical and disciplined. If Kayani is appointed army chief, all the top generals will swing their institutional loyalty around to him -- something that Musharraf is certainly aware of, making him hesitant to relinquish command.

Public wrath at the crackdown is, however, increasingly being directed at the army and the ISI and not just at Musharraf. Senior professional officers had hoped that elections and a return to civilian rule would remove them from the political firing line. Instead, they are back in the trenches being abused by an angry public.

Over the past eight years of his rule, Musharraf has guaranteed the army a major stake in the country's economy, political and social structure. He has ensured that the army has access to top civilian jobs, perks and privileges from both the military and civilian sector, and a lifestyle that is now far higher than even generals could have previously imagined. Thus the senior officer corps is loyal to him personally, and know as well this system would be immediately rescinded by any civilian prime minister.

The untamed frontier

While the excuse Musharraf gave for the Emergency to Western ambassadors in Islamabad was that it was needed to tackle home grown terrorism, the PCO offers no plan or even suggestions for tackling the extremist insurgency.

In fact, no Islamic political leaders, rogue mullahs, heads of terrorist organizations or even of the madrassas, some of which teach suicide bombing as a course subject, have been arrested. In fact, the day the emergency was imposed, the army freed 28 jailed Pakistani Taliban who had planned suicide bombings in the country, in return for the Taliban freeing 211 soldiers they were holding hostage in the mountains of Waziristan.

Rather than go after extremists, the army is now expected to launch another round of peace deals and ceasefires with extremists who will be allowed to continue holding the large chunks of territory in northern Pakistan, while helping the Afghan Taliban with recruits and logistics.

The Pakistani Taliban now control territory in the North West Frontier

Province and the tribal agencies bordering Afghanistan, which they are using as "liberated" base areas offering far greater security to al' Qaeda and its affiliates than at any time since 2001. Bolstered by the chaos in Pakistan and the weakness of the Afghan government, al' Qaeda has installed new camps in these regions. They are training a multitude of European Muslim militants from Germany, Denmark, France, Holland and Scandinavia, according to officials from several European intelligence agencies.

Afghanistan at risk

The future stability of Afghanistan is at stake. The Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda have said for the first time they will continue their offensive through the harsh Afghan winter since they consider the Kabul government on

the verge of collapse. In recent weeks, they have made concerted attempts to widen the scope of the war, seizing control of Farah province in the west for a week before being ousted by Afghan and NATO troops. They also launched a bid to infiltrate Kandahar, and carried out devastating suicide bombings in the north. Almost all the leaders of the Afghan Taliban and major allies like Gulbuddin Hikmetyar and Jalaluddin Haqqani have safe havens in Pakistan to send men and materials into Afghanistan.

The US and the world cannot ignore Pakistan. The country lies at the fault line of the international global crisis. In the past it has harbored terrorists, sold nuclear weapons technology to rogue states, allowed Islamic radicals to gain political space, and become a major export route for Afghan heroin. The future stability of Afghanistan rests largely in Pakistan's hands. Greater instability in Pakistan will fuel Islamic radicalism in the Middle East, Caucasus and Central Asia.

Picking up the pieces in Pakistan will be extremely difficult, and it is impossible to see how Musharraf can do it. The army and the Americans alike are realizing that few in Pakistan would trust elections held under Musharraf. The US media has portrayed the dilemma for US as choosing between democracy versus Musharraf's continued support for the US-led war on terrorism. But it's a false premise.

The reality is that if Pakistan is internally unstable and polarized, it will be impossible for the army to battle Islamic extremism anyway.

Establishing political stability should be the first premise for any US government, not the second. The US cannot now save Musharraf. If it continues to try it will lose what little support the Pakistani people have for Western policies. Ultimately, Washington's only tool in bringing about a change which does not lead to major unrest will be through the army.