

Pakistan under Musharraf: Democracy Endangered

By Bushra Asif | June 16, 2004

Pakistan's position as a key U.S. ally in the campaign against al-Qaeda has been particularly beneficial to the military-led government of General Pervez Musharraf, whose support is seen by the Bush administration as indispensable to U.S. "anti-terrorism" efforts in the region. Despite the country's anti-democratic credentials and the army's continued dominance of the political scene, U.S. economic and diplomatic support has provided Musharraf much needed international legitimacy—and funds.

In June 2003, President Bush announced a \$3 billion, five-year aid package to Pakistan that includes \$1.5 billion in foreign military financing.

Washington is also set to approve the sale of a new range of military equipment to Pakistan with the aim of bolstering the Pakistan military's efforts to fight al-Qaeda remnants along the Pakistan-Afghan border.

Recently, the administration decided to designate Pakistan as a Major Non-NATO Ally (MNNA). Other members of this "exclusive club", granted preferential treatment by the US in areas of defence cooperation, include Israel, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Egypt, New Zealand, Kuwait and the Philippines. Although the designation is still in process, it serves as a symbolic affirmation of the importance the Bush administration attaches to its "special" relationship with President Musharraf.

U.S. support for Musharraf has emboldened him to institutionalize the military's authoritarian control, demonstrated by the creation of a military-dominated, supra-parliamentary National Security Council (NSC) to "serve as a forum for consultation on matters of national security and crisis management." The 13-member council, which came into being on April 19 after a hurried parliamentary vote boycotted by the main opposition parties, marks the formalization of the military's political power. By giving the military a direct role in governance, the council severely undermines parliamentary democracy. Its formation is part of the army's systematic encroachment on civilian institutions that has become rampant under

General Musharraf's authoritarian rule disguised as "real" democracy.

Electoral Manipulation and the Rise of the Religious Parties

Since overthrowing the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in October 1999, General Musharraf has not tired of claiming to restore this "real democracy" in Pakistan. But, his claims have been more rhetorical than real. The military manipulated the entire electoral process, leading up to the national elections of October 2002, in favour of the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam, or the PML-Q, a faction of the PML-Nawaz. The two mainstream political parties the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the PML-N were systematically sidelined. In the run up to the elections, Musharraf issued a series of executive decrees to bar their leaders from contesting the polls. Arbitrary educational qualifications for holding public office were used to disqualify members of these moderate parties while degrees from madrassahs, religious schools, were accepted as equivalent so that Islamist party leaders stood unaffected. The result of all these electoral machinations was a narrow majority for the pro-military PML-Q and a historically unprecedented number of national and provincial seats, mainly in the North-western Frontier Province (NWFP) and Balochistan, for the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six religious parties.

In an overall environment of rising anti-American sentiments against U.S. military operations in neighboring Afghanistan, the military's deliberate targeting



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of the moderate parties handed the religious parties a golden chance to gain electoral victories. While the religious MMA got only 11 percent of the national vote finishing fourth after the PPP, PML-Q and the PML-N, its popularity has remained restricted to the traditionally conservative Frontier province and the Pushtun-speaking areas of Balochistan where the Islamists had previously fared well in the elections of the 1970s. However, Musharraf's determination to keep the PPP and the PML-N—perceived by the military as its main civilian rivals—out of office, has helped forge a mutually favorable alliance between the military and the MMA, allowing the Islamists to expand their political clout.

Musharraf's attempts to legalise a series of constitutional amendments introduced under his Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 2002—that empower the president to dismiss the Prime Minister, dissolve the National Assembly and appoint military service chiefs—stalemated parliament for over a year. In December 2003, however, the MMA's consent made it possible for the Musharraf government to muster the two-thirds majority required to get parliamentary approval for these amendments. In return, Musharraf agreed to the MMA's demand that he relinquish the post of chief of army staff (a post he holds in addition to that of the president) by December 2004. Given that the post of the army chief is regarded as the main seat of power in Pakistan, Musharraf's recent ambivalence on the issue has belied further his oft-stated desire to restore civilian rule.

As the military under Musharraf has expanded its political role, civilian political institutions have been weakened. With Musharraf exercising virtual monopoly over national decision-making, the elected government is little more than a front for a military-led political order erected for assuaging internal and external concerns about democratic legitimacy. Only the Islamist political parties of the MMA continue to thrive under Musharraf as recently evidenced in the military-influenced appointment of Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Secretary General of the MMA, as leader of

the opposition in the national assembly. But the military continues to crush the moderate opposition parties with a heavy hand. In April, Javed Hashmi, the acting president of the PML-N and a staunch critic of the military regime, was sentenced to 23 years in prison on charges of inciting mutiny in the army. The forceful deportation of Shahbaz Sharif, the exiled former chief minister of Punjab and brother of Nawaz Sharif, by Pakistani authorities last month is yet another indication of this policy.

Pakistan's support in the war on terror is vital to the U.S. Islamabad has provided key logistical and intelligence support to the U.S. and has helped arrest more than 500 al-Qaeda members. But Musharraf's politically expedient alliances with Islamic extremist groups within Pakistan and his failure to crackdown on resurgent Taliban and other 'home grown' terrorists makes Washington's heavy policy reliance on Pakistan's military ruler short-sighted and dangerous.

A democratic Pakistan is likely to be a more effective force against terrorism in the region rather than an authoritarian one that blocks political participation and fans Islamic extremism. Surely, democratization in Pakistan will have to be internally supported. But the country's external donors, including the U.S., can play a facilitative role. Key steps could include making aid conditional on democratic freedoms and free elections as well as higher allocations of aid towards human development goals.

A sustained international commitment to the reform and strengthening of political and other civilian institutions is, therefore, necessary to address Pakistan's internal challenges and ensure long term domestic and regional stability.

Bushra Asif is an independent political analyst based in Washington, D.C. and a regular contributor to Foreign Policy In Focus (www.fpif.org).

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