

Machiavellian Musharraf

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Editor's Note

This article was written before Benazir Bhutto's assassination

The 42-day drama in Pakistan is far from over; the declaration of emergency and the lifting of emergency are part of a charade, behind which exists a complex power play between Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, various camps within the military elite, and the US government. The Pakistani people are the least relevant to these calculations, although every player never fails to justify unwarranted actions in their name.

General Musharraf's motives for declaring emergency on November 3 are far from enigmatic. To guarantee his political future, Musharraf acted in the decisive, uncompromising fashion of a military man: first he brought the country to a state of suspended animation, then he restructured the government, judiciary, parliament and constitution to align them with his interests. Once these changes were enacted, he revoked the 42-day state of emergency, and even further promised 'absolutely' free and transparent legislative elections on January 8 next year.

The Bush administration's placatory response to Musharraf's actions (not going further than carefully-worded, benign condemnations) is not the only thing that makes it hard to substantiate the claim that Musharraf acted independently of the US or at the behest of some elements in the Pakistani military alone. Following September 11, 2001, and the invasion of Afghanistan soon after, Musharraf has become one of America's most faithful allies in the region. US aid to Pakistan multiplied and spent with little accountability. According to Jeffrey D Sachs, a Professor of Economics at Columbia University, "75 per cent of the \$10 billion in US aid has gone to the Pakistani military, ostensibly to reimburse Pakistan for its contribution to the 'war on terror', and to help it buy F-16s and other weapons systems. Another 16 per cent went straight to the Pakistani budget, no questions asked. That left less than 10 per cent for development and humanitarian assistance."

The Pakistani president is Machiavellian part and parcel. Contrary to appearances, he knows his limits and plays by the unwritten rules of power. When he declared emergency, he cited two objectives with underlying messages.

The first was aimed at his detractors who he claimed had mounted a 'conspiracy' to destabilise the country and his rule; as this conspiracy allegedly involved the judiciary, it justified his purge campaign.

The second message cleverly transcended all of that to reel in the US and its 'war on terror'. Indeed, according to this logic, Musharraf needed a state of emergency to combat a

Taleban-inspired insurgency stemming from the tribal areas in the North West Frontier Province. With the US and NATO fighting their own Taleban and Taleban-inspired insurgency in Afghanistan, Musharraf's actions in Islamabad were meant to supplement the incessant efforts at curbing the terrorist resurgence in the entire region.

It is hardly news that countries which to utilise 'war on terror' reasoning to justify violating human rights and democracy in their own countries are often — if not always — American allies or clients.

Musharraf must have understood that his failure to cooperate with US military plans would invite US wrath and hasten his exit (violent or otherwise). While his 'cooperation' was hardly optional, it also had its rewards. One of these was a free hand to alter internal political structures, so long as they didn't in any way interfere with US interests. Musharraf tested this unspoken understanding, and the Bush administration kept true to its word — until the US Congress decided to interfere.

At the same time that Musharraf began decrying the Taleban-inspired insurgency in the tribal areas, US officials began highlighting — if not manipulating — intelligence that exaggerated the same threat.

For example, US Defence Secretary Robert M Gates said in a media briefing on December 21 that Al Qaeda insurgents are shifting focus to Pakistan, threatening the country and its 'people'. Gates dismissed the Taleban's violent return to Afghanistan, even mocking the over-publicised spring offensive. "The spring offensive we expected from the Taleban became NATO's spring offensive," he told journalists in Washington. Why this sudden change of priorities, and why did they coincide so well with Musharraf's own changes?

The shift — which has made Pakistan the primary battleground, as opposed to its previous position as a less important frontier than Afghanistan — could mean a major strategic change in US military policy toward Pakistan in the future. It also emphasises the importance of the role played by Musharraf and his regime.

Musharraf's validation is urgently needed by the Bush administration now that Congress has passed the spending bill, putting limits on \$300 million of US military aid to Pakistan. A sum of \$250 million is to be used strictly for counter-terrorism operation, and the delivery of the rest hinges on Pakistan's success — or failure — in living up to the Congress' strict conditions. This deviation, if not contained quickly, might cause a rift and future difficulties for the US in Pakistan, especially among disgruntled military figures competing for power, privilege and contracts. For now, the White House has gone on crisis management mode, touting the January 8 elections and paying lip service to democracy, free media access and so forth.

One of those involved in defending Musharraf's record is US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, who, on December 20, said that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice should be able to report that Pakistan is on its way toward full restoration of democracy. "We're trying to keep moving toward elections that are as fair and as free as possible. We do think there are (additional) steps that can be taken and will be taken," Boucher said.

The US administration and Congress are likely to clash over the best ways to control Pakistan, or — to put it mildly — to ensure Pakistan's continuous cooperation in the US 'war on terror'. However the clash manifests, the resulting US foreign policy posture is likely to

affect changes – substantial or otherwise – in US policy toward Pakistan, resulting in further interference in the country’s internal affairs, deepening the discord and fuelling more violence. Indeed, it may endanger the future of genuine democracy in Pakistan for years to come.

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