

Pakistan's Musharraf Is Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

by Ramtanu Maitra

At year's end, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf survived two assassination attempts—a harbinger of more to come, as he attempts to straddle the irreconcilable contradictions imposed upon him by U.S. demands in the “war on terrorism.” While the first attempt, on Dec. 15, did not cause any loss of life, the Christmas Day attack involved two suicide bombers and killed at least 15 people, including 11 Pakistani security personnel. The official Pakistani government statements suggest the involvement of al-Qaeda, including Afghan recruits of al-Qaeda, and domestic terrorists accused of committing terrorist acts inside the Indian-held part of Jammu and Kashmir.

Reacting to these incidents, White House press secretary Scott McClellan said, “It’s a reminder that the war on terrorism continues. President Musharraf has been a strong partner in our global war on terrorism. We will continue to work with him on our global efforts.”

Musharraf, a close ally in the U.S. war on terrorism, vowed to “cleanse the country of these extremists.” But in reality, very few believe that he would be able to do so, given the linkages between them and the Army.

After two years of playing both sides, analysts say, General Musharraf may now have to choose. The *Wall Street Journal*, whose views on Pakistan are similar to those of the neo-conservatives who rule the roost in Washington nowadays, pointed out this factor in its editorial on Dec. 28. The *Journal* said: “In the war on terror, the world’s weakest link is undoubtedly President Musharraf. The general’s close-call survival of two assassination attempts in two weeks suggests the Bush Administration needs a strategy that looks beyond the strongman’s rule.”

Like Saudi Arabia, the *Journal* adds, Pakistan was suffering for more than 20 years of striking “a devil’s bargain with Wahabi Islam.” If the extremists succeed in disposing of the Saudi Royal family, Washington could respond by taking over Saudi Arabia’s vast oil fields, the *Journal* suggested. But in case of Pakistan, the situation is more difficult; the terrorists would gain an access to the country’s nuclear arsenal.

Terrorists Galore

What the *Journal* is pointing out is that Pakistan’s security situation has become extremely unstable, and Washington

must take another look before continuing with its support to Musharraf. It cannot be denied that the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11, to oust the Taliban regime, has not only compromised Islamabad’s security situation, but has also made evident that there exists no group in Pakistan that can provide security to any institution, including the Presidency. Every group within the Pakistani establishment has been infiltrated by the anti-U.S. terrorist ideology, and that includes the military and intelligence establishment.

It is also evident that in the short term, Pakistan cannot restore law and order. The rot in Pakistan, so visible now, had set in at least two decades before 9/11. As a leading Pakistani analyst, Shahid Javed Burki, pointed out on Dec. 16 in the Pakistani news daily *The Dawn*, the spread of lethal weaponry in Pakistan in the 1980s resulted in what the media began to call the “Kalashnikov culture,” since that was the weapon of choice for the *mujahideen* fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. The small gun shops in Pakistan’s tribal belt proved exceptionally proficient in manufacturing the Kalashnikov rifle, and its easy availability fuelled, among other things, sectarian violence between the Sunni and Shia communities that had, for decades, lived in peace in Pakistan. This has taken a serious economic toll.

Unfortunately, Washington’s policy toward Pakistan following 9/11 did not recognize these complications and was driven by opportunism and an utter disregard for the realities of that country.

Failed Drug Policy

Former Pakistani Ambassador Afzal Mahmood pointed out recently that until 1980, there were hardly any drug addicts in Pakistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 made Pakistan a major transit route for heroin. With supply around, drug addiction started to spread in urban areas, particularly Karachi. These drug addicts now almost totally rely on Afghan opiates smuggled across the border. Afghan drugs move easily across Balochistan to the port of Gwadar.

Pakistan thus continues to be not only an important route for drug smuggling, but also a big market, with its 4 million drug addicts. According to United Nations Drug Control Program (UNDCP) Director Giovanni Quaglia, while a pound of heroin was worth \$1,360 in Karachi in 1997, it was worth

\$50,000 in the United States. If the present trend continues, the HIV/AIDS problem may explode in Pakistan soon.

The 1980s *mujahideen*, who were glorified in the United States as anti-totalitarian and freedom-loving Afghans, were the ones who, with the help of the international narcotics mafia and tacit support from Washington, made the Afghan lands bloom with poppies. Even today, when the Bush Administration is reiterating like a broken record that it wants to bring Afghanistan back to the mainstream, Washington is backing the same drug warlords to form a pro-U.S. coalition within Afghanistan. The results of a 2003 survey confirm that opium poppy cultivation and heroin production continue to increase in Afghanistan, and Pakistan, having a long porous border, cannot remain unaffected by this worrying development.

To begin with, the stated objective of the United States was to dislodge the Taliban from power and eliminate them physically. It was a policy in which Pakistan could not possibly have played a role. For Pakistan, Afghanistan was its “strategic depth” against any potential Indian attack. It is for this reason that the Pakistani Army, under the leadership of General Musharraf, among others, armed and trained the Pushtun-dominated Taliban since the mid-1990s—at the expense of Pakistan’s own economic development. The Pakistani Army made it a point to back the Taliban at every level, including helping them to decimate the Northern Alliance—a militia fortified by the warlords from ethnic minority Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and some Pushtuns, and inflicted with ethnic hostilities.

When the U.S. Special Forces came into Afghanistan in the Winter of 2001, charging down from northern Afghanistan along with the Northern Alliance warlords, Pakistan simply detested it, but could not do much. Many Pakistanis joined the fight on behalf of the Taliban.

What followed is what any strategist could have foreseen. The Taliban, dislodged from power, moved into the non-demarcated border areas where large tribes of Pakistani Pushtuns live. By identifying the al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and his groups of anti-American and anti-Saudi religious fanatics as “comrades-at-arms” with the Taliban, United States succeeded in bringing the Pakistani military umbrella over the al-Qaeda Arab fighters as well.

The Juggling Acts

At that point, Musharraf, under intense pressure from the United States to deliver the al-Qaeda fighters and demobilize the Taliban remnants, went along with the United States, while doing his best not to alienate the pro-fundamentalist Army personnel, “strategists” within the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and other anti-India and anti-U.S. forces. Some al-Qaeda fighters were arrested and handed over, while many were not. Terrorist groups’ bank accounts were closed, while allowing them to form a similar organization with a new name and a new bank account.

General Musharraf is strongly disliked by the militant

Islamic groups for two reasons. First, he has lent official support to the U.S. action against the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and has acted sporadically against domestic terrorist groups to please the United States. Although Musharraf had been careful not to dismantle the domestic terrorist groups, he has done enough to draw their wrath. On Sept. 11, 2003, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden’s top lieutenant, addressing “our brother Muslims in Pakistan,” called the general a “traitor who sold out the blood of the Muslims in Afghanistan.”

Second, President Musharraf has also become a target of some of the domestic terrorist groups, and their supporters within Pakistan’s establishment, because of the humiliation he has brought upon Pakistani nuclear scientists to please the Americans. Washington, worried about the terrorists getting control of Pakistani nuclear weapons, had forced Musharraf to interrogate a national hero, Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the “father of the Pakistani bomb,” who had worked with the ISI.

Musharraf is still trying to juggle these multi-level contradictions created by the U.S. policy toward Pakistan. According to a leading Pakistani journalist, Ahmed Rashid, Musharraf brought to power a grouping of politicians close to the Army, who reconstituted the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and chose Zafrullah Khan Jamali as Prime Minister. However, the military is now disappointed with Jamali and there were rumors, which were quashed by the President himself, that the Army would remove Jamali soon.

In addition to attending to the army’s political demands, Musharraf has also become more dependent on Islamic orthodox groups. Being always a part of the Army, which always had a close relationship with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, General Musharraf made it plain that he would align with the fundamentalists when necessary, as long the United States does not butt in. The arrest of Javed Hashmi, president of the secular Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) and the acting leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) faction that is headed by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, was a case in point. Hashmi was bundled into a car outside his residence in Islamabad by police and intelligence officers, after midnight on Oct. 30. He has been charged with high treason after he publicly criticized the Army for meddling in politics, and read out a letter at a press conference a day earlier, which he said was written by disgruntled Army officers.

On Dec. 29, Pakistani parliamentarians, led by the Islamic Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), passed the constitutional amendments that would allow President Musharraf to hold the slot of Army chief for one more year. The amendments were opposed by the mainstream political parties—the Pakistan People’s Party and Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League—which boycotted the votes.

Any way you look at it, Musharraf’s effort to juggle the demanding United States and an equally demanding group of fundamentalists, Army personnel, intelligence officers and downright murderous sectarian groups, is an impossible task—as the two assassination attempts showed.