



IDSA POLICY BRIEF

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MUSHARRAF IN A MESS OF HIS OWN MAKING : AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH?

A commentator of Pakistani origin in the US, writing in *The Wall Street Journal* in September 2006, coined a new name for Pakistan, i.e., Musharrafistan. He fell short of saying 'Musharraf is Pakistan and Pakistan is Musharraf'. At one level, Musharraf had until now established his reputation as the best bet for the US and the West, as a liberal dictator and better-than-the-rest leader within Pakistan, who pulled Pakistan successfully away from the brink. He chose to side with the liberal forces at the international level at a critical juncture in the history of Pakistan, and flaunted his liberal credentials by emphasising on his policy of enlightened moderation. He was also known to have been the first military ruler in Pakistan who had given the media in Pakistan considerable amount of freedom in expressing their views.

The developments in last few months, especially since March 9, 2007, when Musharraf sacked the Chief Justice(CJ) of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, have, however, subjected Musharraf to all kinds of criticisms at home and abroad. As "go Musharraf go" slogans rend the air in Pakistan, the media and analysts at home and abroad have predicted that the days of Musharraf were numbered.

The Judicial Crisis: The Political Fallout

The threat to entrenched dictatorships always comes from unexpected quarters. Musharraf could have hardly imagined that removal of the Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Choudhury would snowball into a crisis of legitimacy for him in a matter of months. But the issue has gathered

momentum and the CJ has almost become a public figure. Various political parties in the opposition including the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League- Nawaz (PML-N) and Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) have supported his demands for a fair trial and the larger issue of judicial independence.

The judicial crisis has led to strong criticism from all quarters. There is a critical consensus among most of the analysts in Pakistan and outside that Musharraf is facing the worst ever challenge to his authority in Pakistan. An otherwise media-savvy Musharraf is also showing signs of strain and has betrayed his sense of nervousness in his appeals to the public to trust him and his regime. He is clearly in a state of panic and appears to be losing his sense of balance, which was a marked feature of his style of functioning until now.

Shaky Musharraf: Survival is the first Option

Musharraf has, of late, taken steps, which, rather than ameliorating the situation, have aggravated the political crisis. First, he asked the ruling party to convene a public meeting on the very same day (May 12, 2007) when the CJ was supposed to address the Sindh High Court Bar Association, in Karachi. Simultaneously, Muttahida Quami Mahaz (MQM), an ally of the ruling dispensation in Islamabad, and known for its strong presence in Karachi, was quietly encouraged to counter the spontaneous rally in support of the CJ.

As Karachi burnt and casualty figure rose to

about forty persons, Musharraf climbed the podium dressed in *salwaar kurta*, with his arms outstretched, in Islamabad and declared that he was certain the people of Pakistan were with him. The CJ followed it up with a high-pitched criticism of army rule in Pakistan in a seminar in Islamabad on May 26, 2007, which was telecast by some of the private TV channels. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz was seen to be warning the media and the lawyers to face the consequences if they persisted with their criticism of the military.

Musharraf then went on to reassure himself by convening a corps commanders' meet on June 01, 2007, where he could easily muster a 'yes' from his colleagues in uniform. The ISPR press release after this important meet said that some people had launched a "malicious campaign" against state institutions, and the meeting observed that it was aimed at maligning the institutions by "vested interests and opportunists who were acting as obstructionist forces to serve their personal interests and agenda even at the cost of flouting rule of the law". The information minister Mr. Muhammad Ali Durrani, even went one step further on June 3, and said that criticism of the army was intolerable and that nobody would be permitted to ridicule national security institutions.

Subsequently, on June 4, 2007 the government brought about draconian amendments in the rules governing the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) which empowered PEMRA to close down any TV channel without reference to any review mechanism. This provoked criticism from all quarters. It was interesting to observe Musharraf backing down on the PEMRA ordinance exactly like in the earlier case of attack on the GEO TV, days after the removal of the CJ. As the journalists took to the streets in Lahore, Islamabad and other places in the country, Musharraf withdrew the ordinance on June 8, four days after it was proclaimed.

Emergency?

There have been speculations in many quarters that Musharraf would clamp down national emergency if there were to be widespread demonstrations throughout Pakistan leading to

situations like in Karachi on May 12, 2007, despite the fact that Musharraf has himself categorically rejected that option. These observations have been based on the analysis of Musharraf's behaviour in the recent days. As a military leader, not too well-versed with the politics of the street, he has over-reacted to the CJ issue and invented troubles for himself. His move to hold a parallel rally in Islamabad on May 12, stage-managing his own endorsement at a hurriedly convened corps commanders' conference, the decision to amend press laws to gag the media and the emergency meetings with the leaders of the ruling party exhibit a sense of panic and nervousness. Drawing conclusions from his reactions, analysts have predicted that Musharraf might end up imposing an emergency to keep himself in power.

The dooms day scenario of people of Pakistan taking to the streets in large numbers over the issue of independence of judiciary compelling Musharraf to impose emergency or take some such drastic step may not materialise so fast. The fact that political parties have not openly come out on this issue shows that there may not be enough political steam in this issue, even if it may be acting as an outlet for public anger in a certain sense.

Moreover, the chances of these spontaneous street protests morphing into an active and organised political protest against Musharraf do not look that bright now. Again, this will depend on other imponderables like future behaviour of Musharraf, the willingness of the political parties to back the issue openly with determination. If Musharraf chooses to deal with such protests with equanimity the CJ issue is likely to taper off. On the other hand, if he allows the dictator in him the upper hand, then he is likely to add more fuel to the fire. His retreat over the PEMRA ordinance shows, he may still be able to pull through the crisis with aplomb.

Politicians: Disunited and Divided

The past behaviour of mainstream politicians indicates that, they have been supremely amenable to coercion from the the military establishment. There have been sensitive political issues like incarceration of PML-N leader Javed Hashmi, the

cases of disappearance of people apprehended by the security forces, the arbitrary arrest of Balochi leaders and the return of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, which the political parties have not been able to exploit to their advantage and it is highly unlikely that they would like to provoke the the wrath of the army which appears determined to hold on to power under the leadership of Musharraf.

The failure of different political groups to come together in their fight against military rule suggests that the anti-Musharraf political elite are a divided lot. Benazir Bhutto does not want her party to ally either with the conservative Ulama-led MMA or with the liberal and moderate MQM. She is also not willing to join hands with PML-N because of its softness towards the conservatives over the issue of Islamisation of Pakistan. Some of them like Benazir on the one hand and MMA on the other, would want to strike a deal with the military, yet simultaneously seek to weaken the military regime by placing difficult demands on it. All these political forces have their separate calculations to come to power, even if it means piggy-backing on the military. Their collective weakness has been Musharraf's greatest strength.

Issue of Uniform

Smarting under pressure from the International community on the issue of democracy, Musharraf is more worried now about how to handle the domestic hue and cry about his holding two offices. It is expected that he would prefer his uniform to the office of president if it ever came to taking a call over the issue. His predecessor in uniform, Ayub Khan, is credited with the statement on the eve of his ouster from power that if the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) were to organise a coup even God could not stop it. It is true that after the present JCSC Gen Ehsanul Haq and Vice Chief of Staff, General Ahsan Saleem Hayat retire in October this year, the people succeeding them will be rank junior to Musharraf and the possibility of resistance from within is remote. But Musharraf is not expected to leave his COAS post, for he knows too well, he owes his strength and power to this position. He has already made a mention of the uniform being his second skin to this effect in his interview with the BBC urdu

service earlier in May 2007.

Some analysts would argue that Musharraf may shed his uniform and get himself elected as the president for another five years by a lame duck parliament on the eve of the elections. Some of his cronies in the political establishment have already started arguing openly that there would be no harm in getting Musharraf elected by the existing parliament. But it is unlikely that Musharraf will leave the uniform in the bargain.

There are others who predict that he may elevate one of his loyal followers in the army to the post of COAS and control him from without, as an elected President. However, as has been argued already this is not likely to happen; rather he may get a loyal civilian politician elected as President, while he continues to call the shots from the GHQ. In that case, the necessary political arrangement may be made through a constitutional amendment or through force of an ordinance making the army chief as an important additional power centre with the right to veto or override the decisions taken by other institutions. This possibility is again remote.

Elections and Democracy

On June 8, 2007, the media in Pakistan reported that Musharraf, in his separate meetings with parliamentarians and federal ministers at his Parliament House chamber, said that the people would soon hear good news regarding the judicial and political crises and asked the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q) to concentrate on the forthcoming general elections.

This came exactly two days after he admonished the PML-Q parliamentarians at the PM House on June 6, that out of 1,000 provincial/federal ministers, parliamentary secretaries and chairmen standing committees, he could not see even 10 of them speaking in his defence. His disappointment with the political coalition he had enabled was quite clear when he said: "You have lost the war of nerves. You all are silent upon what the media is doing. If I have to do everything, then what is your purpose?.....I bluntly say that you always leave me alone in the time of trial and tribulation. Whether it was a change in the Afghan policy, Dr A Q Khan and Bugti issues,

the judicial crisis or the May 12 incident, you never came to my support... I see the party nowhere. You people are not mobilised..."

After months of back-channel negotiations with Benazir Bhutto, Musharraf is perhaps preparing himself to walk it alone with his hand-picked and tailor-made political coalition. In fact, till the first week of June, there were strong rumours that Musharraf was feeling the popular pulse in Punjab about such a political risk. There were reports in the media that his most trusted aide, Tariq Aziz, was on a tour to Multan to talk to several influential political personalities and prepare for alternatives to the Choudhuries of Punjab, in case they rebel over the issue of accommodating Benazir. Musharraf's chidings have been interpreted by some analysts as his excuse to settle the deal with Benazir.

But the chances of alliance with Benazir are running out fast. Only the politically naïve can overlook the role of the PPP party-men cavorting around CJ. She would like to keep the pressure alive on Musharraf through such issues to maximise her chances of gain from any prospective deal with Musharraf. She is also insisting on Musharraf leaving the uniform to save her face both in Pakistan outside as a democrat who refused to shake hands with a military ruler. At the same time, she is also anticipating a better political future in Pakistan minus a deal with Musharraf.

Another factor complicating the issue of alliance with Benazir is Musharraf's sympathy for the MQM, not because he is a *muhajir*, but because, it is the only political party which has stood solidly behind him through sunshine and shade all these years since the elections in 2002. MQM was the first party to bring out a demonstration against the Lal Masjid maulanas and was the only party to support Musharraf over the CJ issue as well in Karachi.

As far as their common liberal orientations are concerned, MQM, PPP and Musharraf ought to swim together; but politics of Karachi and Sindh has a dynamic of its own. Even if PPP had coalition with MQM in the past, these two parties have always been bitter political opponents in Karachi, and after the May 12 incident, Benazir would not like to ally

with Musharraf on the issue of any alliance with MQM to protect her popularity in Sindh, which has been her traditional bastion. Thus the prospect of a deal on this front looks dim at the moment.

Threat of Talibanisation

In his meeting with PML-Q parliamentarians on June 6, Musharraf outlined his apprehensions about the future of Pakistan: "You do not know the problems for Pakistan if I am left out... You would see it (Taliban) in Lahore and Karachi as well. And if the present state of affairs is continued, it would be a big disaster.... I am not worried about myself. I am fighting your war".

To add to Musharraf's woes, the news of Pakistani Taliban asserting itself in areas outside the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) have started pouring in. Settled areas like Tank, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Swat, Charsadda, Mardan, Peshawar, Swabi and Nowshera are now coming under the sway of the local Taliban who have imposed Islamic system on the people, shut down video shops, banned music and cutting of beards, declared night curfews and forced the security forces to retreat. The hold of the state in these areas is clearly getting weaker day by day and Musharraf's efforts to extend the writ of the state to all corners of the state have clearly failed. The Maulana siblings of the Red Mosque right at the heart of Islamabad have troubled Musharraf no end. They have indeed forced the Pakistani State to allow them a free run.

Musharraf's enlightened moderation has been the first casualty in the bargain. Musharraf has shown uncharacteristic patience in dealing with the clergy and the Islamists. He was unusually soft with the MMA over the issue of women rights and with the so called 'Pakistani Taliban' in the tribal belt. In the process, he has allowed the Islamists of all hues to build their constituency in Pakistan. His predecessor in uniform, Zia ul Haq, had enabled the conservatives through his overindulgence. Ironically, Musharraf has empowered them by adopting a soft approach towards the growing phenomenon of radicalisation.

There is a view that the silent majority in Pakistan

is in favour of a liberal democracy and would vote out the Islamists and push them to the fringe. But the facts on the ground show that the Islamists have gathered unprecedented strength during the last few years and in spite of the ideological divisions among them, they have projected themselves as a political alternative in Pakistan. They have spread their wings in the political arena and have also demonstrated their enormous street power through their cross cutting linkages with militant Islamists of all shades.

Musharraf has tried his best not to antagonise the clergy as much as he would provoke the Balochi nationalists or the opposition forces in the political realm. Rather than driving a hard message to the Maulana brothers in the Lal Masjid case, the authorities were seen to be cowering under pressure and releasing the arrested people in return for the security officials. It was a clear case of retreat of the security establishment and victory for the Islamists. Musharraf rationalised his policy by stating that armed action would not have been difficult, but he was bothered about loss of lives— as if the army actions in Balochistan or against the local militants in the tribal belt did not involve loss of lives! The Maulanas have now shown their resolve to Talibanise Pakistan. Pakistani Taliban is already out of the tribal belt and threatening to devour Pakistan.

Can he pull out of the crisis?

Musharraf may be up against the wall at the moment. But if one analyses his career as the head of Pakistan state ever since he came to power, Musharraf has shown remarkable resilience and has been quite flexible in his approach. And as a supreme leader, convinced about his superior wisdom, he has taken decisions which have ensured his survival and continuance. One has seen him through 9/11, the A Q Khan case, the issue of women protection bill, the Balochi assertion, and the issue of Lal Masjid.

He has done exactly what he needed to do to survive in power. He has taken the right decisions at the right time. His unconditional apology to Hamid Mir over attack by the police on the GEO TV and his decision to rescind the PEMRA ordinance which

sought to gag the media can be taken as pointers that he has the ability to weather political crises.

He has already had people guessing about what good news he would offer to his countrymen “very soon”. He may go on to reinstate the CJ if the judicial council comes out with a favourable verdict, and in so doing, convince the people about his best intentions. He may also announce the schedule for the elections soon. He may also get himself elected as the President by the existing Parliament and refuse to shed his uniform. He knows that people will not be too uncomfortable with the two offices he is holding, if he resolves the political crisis fast. After all, the people of Pakistan do not have too many choices among the existing genre of leadership and interpret Musharraf’s actions positively. As the Gallup polls conducted by some Western organisations during the last two-three years have shown, Musharraf still commands substantial popularity among the people of Pakistan.

Both Musharraf and Benazir have expressed their concern over the issue of Talibanisation. There is hardly any doubt that there has been a progressive overtaking of the Pakistani state and society by radicals and Musharraf has to demonstrate his resolve to fight these forces. There is external pressure on him to fight the local Taliban, however, there is no serious pressure on him from within Pakistan. The trends suggest that Musharraf would go by his familiar strategy of using these elements against his liberal opponents in the coming days. However, it is in the interest of Musharraf to strike a workable deal with liberal forces like Benazir Bhutto and try to bring all liberal forces together on the eve of the elections. He may find it difficult but it is not impossible, if he gives it a good try.

Implications for Indo-Pak Relations

So far, a dispassionate analysis would reveal that during the post-1999 coup period, Musharraf, even if he has been the architect of Kargil war, has rather committed himself to a continued dialogue with India on issues dividing the two countries. There has been an over-emphasis on the external pressures on him to stay put on the peace track, but there are internal constraints driving his policies too.

By and large, there is a popular approval of the peace process in Pakistan and the people-to-people contact have gone down very well among the people of both the countries. The opening up of the line of control in Jammu and Kashmir, willingness to look for solutions that would take care of the interests of the Kashmiri people and the idea of joint mechanism to fight terrorism provide good examples of the thaw that has set into the bilateral relations.

Pakistani army is also tied up in the north and west, fighting the Taliban as well as the Balochis. A confrontationist stand with India will force him to waste his resources on the eastern front and give him a bad name at the international level.

As things stand today, Musharraf may not like to risk his reputation in this regard and one would expect him as a general, who has learnt his lessons from Kargil, and as an ally of the West on the global war on terror, not to push for greater militancy in Kashmir, even if it would be naïve to expect him to turn off the tap of militancy entirely.

But as the the General's woes take a turn for the worse, there is a view that Musharraf may not invest as much energy and attention on India-Pakistan peace process and the bilateral relations may either be disemphasised or fall into disrepair.

There is yet another possibility, like it has been seen in some cases in the past, that as the crisis mounts, beleaguered leaders quietly play the India card and divert popular attention towards India. Thus, India may have to stay prepared for the possibility of Kashmir or India-Pakistan issue being used as a diversionary tactic by the establishment in Pakistan.

It has to be clearly understood that unlike a democratic system, a military regime is extremely sensitive to issues challenging its authority and it is primarily concerned with the issue of regime survival at all costs. In that sense, the military seems to be strongly backing up Musharraf because he has been the well-proven bet for them so far, who has secured the military a prime of place in the country's power structure. Musharraf has also maintained a consultative approach by taking most issues to the

top brass in the army almost once every month. He has also picked up his corps commanders very carefully and worked closely with them to avoid any misunderstanding or mis-communications.

That is why, the possibility of Musharraf's sticking to power for long remains strong as ever. Unless something dramatic (like in the case of Zia-ul-Haq) happens, it is improbable that military will evolve an exit policy which will run contrary to its interests, at this juncture.

Imperatives for India

A politically disturbed Pakistan is not a healthy proposition for India. There is a consensus among analysts in India that Pakistan had stabilised economically during Musharraf's rule and this had won him wide popular acclaim. But the recent political miscalculations have backfired on Musharraf and there is a sense of concern that increasing instability may provide the right context for fundamentalists to gather further strength in Pakistan.

In view of the above the following policy imperatives can be considered by India in dealing with the developments in Pakistan.

* There is a need to monitor the developments in Pakistan in an objective manner unencumbered by exaggerated predictions in the media about Musharraf's imminent exit.

* As a means of bolstering India-Pakistan relationship and with a view to broad-basing the ongoing political dialogue, India should think of establishing relationship at the unofficial level with the leaders of all the political parties and influential groups in Pakistan.

* It is also absolutely essential to lay continued emphasis on the people-to-people contact and on diversifying and strengthening the tracks of interaction between the two countries.

* It is imperative for India to take the threat of radicalisation of Pakistani society seriously, as it may

have a trickle down effect on militancy in India on the one hand and affect the situation in Kashmir, on the other. Islamist radicals in Pakistan have a pronounced bias against India and may play havoc with the existing state of bonhomie at the popular level between India and Pakistan.

*On the Kashmir front, there is a greater need to engage different groups from the valley and work

towards a working consensus on the system of governance and the type of federal relations that will take care of the issue at the internal level.

* India may consider working with the US and other powers in the West to put indirect pressures on Musharraf to fight out the Islamist radicals and show more flexibility and pragmatism in dealing with political issues in the coming days. ■

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