



Will General Musharraf Survive Current Political Discontent?

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The recent decision by President Pervez Musharraf to remove chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry had sparked major protests and plunged Pakistan into one of the most bitter political rows since he came to power in 1999. The opposition led by Pakistani Islamists has utilized the row to further their own agenda of attempting to over-throwing the military regime. The question is now whether Musharraf will survive this current episode and how this will impact upon Pakistani politics. While it is not likely that this current episode will result in the immediate departure of Musharraf from Pakistani politics, his position has been significantly weakened and it may lead to his eventual removal from power. Three major issues are currently acting against Musharraf: Pakistani domestic politics; the failure of Musharraf's "enlightened moderation" with regard to Islam in Pakistan; and waning support of the US.

The Pakistani Domestic Scene

After seven years in power, the honeymoon is over for Musharraf. Since assuming power, General Musharraf has often highlighted the differences between the political circumstances from previous coups in Pakistani history and the condition in 1999 when he staged the coup. As was the case with his military predecessor, Musharraf also continued to rewrite the rules of political conduct by disqualifying seasoned politicians based on academic qualifications. The rationale for such a move was often cited as the need for democracy to be compromised for the larger good of the nation. However, this attitude is wearing thin with the Pakistani public. While the Pakistani economy is doing well, the impact of this economic growth has not trickled down to the Pakistani masses. This had led to growing frustration and unhappiness amongst its masses. Corruption also remains an endemic problem in Pakistan despite Musharraf's promise to stem it out. In addition, Musharraf is also now facing a more united opposition. Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, former Prime Ministers of Pakistan have agreed to cooperate during a meeting in London to force General Musharraf out of office.

Failure of "Enlightened Moderation"

For many in Pakistan, Musharraf's handling of Islam is also drawing intense unhappiness among the Pakistani masses. In recent years, Musharraf was hard on extremist Muslim groups in the country. He threw some of its leaders into jail and shut down fundamentalist madrasahs. This has angered the radical elements in the country who pounced upon the current issue to launch a massive campaign against Musharraf. The continued Islamisation of the Pakistani army led some lower ranking generals and officers to support and shield extremists. Many of these army officers are also anti-Musharraf. This could be seen from the arrest of several army officers for the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Shaukhat Aziz and General Musharraf himself.

At the same time, the more moderate elements among the Pakistani masses feel that Musharraf is not doing enough in trying to contain Islamists groups and their activities. The regime's failure to curb the activities of these groups and their continuing acts of violence irritate many in Pakistan. Despite setting up a Women's Affairs ministry, allocating 33 per cent of seats in Parliament to women and passing the Women Protection Bill to protect women, many among the more liberal Pakistani populace feel that the government should totally repeal the hudud laws. This is a move Musharraf is not willing to undertake for fear that it will lead to a backlash from the Islamic elements in the country.

American Support

In the midst of the crisis, the United States has also stated its support for General Musharraf describing Musharraf as a 'good' and 'solid friend' in fighting terror. President George W. Bush's administration has also ruled out any immediate threat of Musharraf being toppled. However, officials in the White House are reportedly indicating privately that Musharraf should begin opening up the country and that the US could 'offer guidance, counsel and encouragement to continue along the pathway to democracy'.

The Democrat controlled Congress has also asked Musharraf to democratize the country. In fact, several senior senate Democrats have written to Musharraf asking him to ensure that the coming elections due late this year will be open and free for the participation of key political parties of exiled ex-prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. Among the signatories was Senator Joseph Biden, head of the powerful senate foreign relations committee. At the same time, Musharraf's ability to assist the US in its War on Terror is questioned, citing his inability to arrest key terrorist figures such as Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri and also the failed attempts to flush out extremist Taliban militia from their Pakistan sanctuaries. It is possible the US will begin to distance itself from Musharraf.

The Future of Pakistani Politics?

While few would argue that the current crisis will lead to his imminent ouster, popular discontent is both deep and wide, and could lead to future problems for Musharraf. In the coming months, Musharraf's actions and policies – especially his handling of elections due this year – will be under heavy scrutiny. This is likely to determine the survival of his regime. The biggest winner out of this episode is Benazir Bhutto. The prospect of her becoming Prime Minister again does not seem that remote any more. She has played her cards carefully by distancing herself from Islamist elements and terrorism. Her party, the Pakistan's People Party (PPP) is also the only secular party seen to be credible and strong enough to hold the mantle of power in Pakistan. Hence, the long-term survival of Musharraf today may be dependent on his ability to co-opt Bhutto and this may lead to some interesting compromises on his side.

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