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Pakistan's Political Instability: Musharraf Still the Solution?

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While the world fussed over the imposition of emergency rule in Pakistan, no concrete actions have been taken on Musharraf besides veiled threats of sanctions. What are the possible consequences that might arise if the problem in Pakistan is not solved any sooner?

THE IMPOSITION OF emergency rule in Pakistan on 3rd November by the Army Chief and President Pervez Musharraf reversed the small steps towards democracy in that nuclear-power state. The ensuing arrests and media restrictions have resulted in world-wide condemnation, but little or no substantive actions. Veiled threats of sanctions against dictators, who are ironically supported by nations purportedly trying to spread democracy and rule of law in the region, will not be taken seriously.

Western Democratisation values

The United States and its Western allies have been the key supporters of Musharraf's regime in their efforts to promote democracy and security interests. They have pumped in billions of dollars through USAID, World Bank, and others to develop programmes aimed at democratising Pakistan; none have yet met with success. Blatant suppression of human rights and the absence of democratic norms remain today. Nonetheless, the Western supporters remain partial to Musharraf – who seized power in the 1999 coup – just because he remained committed to the war on terror.

The declaration of the state of emergency was the clearest indication of a backsliding on the democratisation of Pakistan. The US response to Musharraf's heavy-handed measures, thus far, has been a verbal threat to review aid to Pakistan, which could hurt the US more. The aid is in the form of military assistance to fight terrorism, and cutting that assistance would reduce the capacity of the military to fight Al Qaeda. Only a little trickle to moderate Pakistanis whose economic and educational support is supposed to "win hearts and minds". Sanctioning Pakistan is out of the question but not sanctioning it is hypocritical, for the Western world preaches democracy but only when it suits its interests. Supportive dictatorships are viewed more favourably than unreliable democracies.

Pakistan and the world

The problems in Pakistan are also the world's. The setbacks and lack of concern for Musharraf's hold on power are a global issue. Many will be affected by instability in this nuclear state. Its geographical position, Islamic links, intelligence networks and support are key to a strategic resolution of five critical issues that both Pakistan and the world share: Talibanism; Al Qaeda; criminal and terrorist

impact of the drug trade; nuclear proliferation; and the war on terror.

The lack of stability will see the rise of Talibanism both in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The porous borders and reassignment of army personnel to emergency duties (and dodgy agreements with tribal chiefs) have already seen an immediate increase in deaths in Afghanistan including a recent attack on NATO troops. Experts fear the consequences of an unstable Pakistan and a military even less interested in policing the border. NATO and the US cannot afford additional troop deployments to Afghanistan especially given the Iraq situation, and with US presidential elections in a year. They are thus dependant on Pakistan's support no matter how limited.

Al Qaeda and its senior members are still holed up in Pakistan and have sympathizers. The instability and the loss of control of Waziristan and parts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) is likely to re-create the situation in pre-9/11 Afghanistan. This will have far reaching impact on the international community. The loss of training camps has resulted in some difficulties. Resurrection of camp infrastructure will certainly strengthen both organised groups, increase the lethality of the home grown jihadis and create a safe-haven to develop and rehearse a range of plots.

The Afghan drug flow has been strongly linked to Al Qaeda's funding. The transit routes through Pakistan will reinvigorate. The drug trade is a critical component in the continuing threat posed by both the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Whilst production of the poppies is under the control of Afghan tribal chiefs, the main transportation routes, as well as the money and weapons protecting the fields, trace directly to Pakistan. Experts have long argued that only a strong government presence in the area, either military or other security services, will significantly disrupt this situation. A weakening state, including a demoralised military, will not stem the flow of drugs and weapons to and from the tribal areas. A relatively strong central government has had little impact on the current situation in the tribal areas; a weak or non-existent government will only further empower the Al Qaeda linked tribal chiefs, further deteriorating security.

Nuclear proliferation

Nuclear proliferation will return as a profound problem. Pakistan's record on nuclear oversight is at best dubious. The networks of Abdul Qadeer Khan have stretched from Libya to Iran to North Korea, and were only disrupted after enormous pressure on the Pakistani government. The concerns are two-fold. First is the physical control and security of the nuclear arms within the Pakistan army. Any instability or loss of morale in the military may expose latent extremist sympathisers resulting in a threat to the weapons arsenal. Second, is knowledge security. The proliferation of knowledge to the highest bidders was checked in the past with the disruption of AQ Khan's network, whose founder remains under house arrest. Any instability may reopen the door for the network to reactivate.

Lastly, the above is inextricably linked to failure on the war on terror, through the strengthening of Talibanism and Al Qaeda. This is being fed in part by the tribal perception of a failed or failing state, tied to a failed secular, unIslamic ideology. For the tribal areas the Taliban interpretation of Islam is attractive, or seen as winning, creating a large area of sympathetic individuals helping to physically manifest that sympathy. Recent reports have pointed to the resurgence of training camps in the tribal areas, which if proven, will further enhance the skills of terrorists and help to deepen the resurgence of Al Qaeda. The expanding drug trade, with its smuggling routes, money, and arms will be exploited. Of course, the ultimate cause for concern is the dreaded possibility of terrorist networks getting their hands on radioactive materials or worse, nuclear weapons and/or technology resulting in apocalyptic consequences.

Musharraf the solution?

The current problem in Pakistan is one that has plagued the world for six decades. Does the international community trade democracy for undemocratic stability? The unstable regime and the

gamble Musharraf had played indicate he is betting the answer is yes. If it is, the results will make a bad situation worse. Nonetheless, the loss of Western-style democracy and blatant disregard for constitutional protections may be overlooked by the world. The instability in Pakistan has far-reaching consequences beyond supporting one more military dictator. Musharraf has played a bad poker hand well by remaining in the game, but for the long term, the verdict is still out. For how much longer can Musharraf claim he is the solution?

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