

How long Pervez Musharraf rules over Pakistan depends on his actions today

# At ease or attention?

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**G**ENERAL PERVEZ Musharraf has been able to take one step after another to consolidate his power base due to the backing of top officers, including the corp commanders and principal staff officers. Despite being a Mohajir, he commands the respect of the Punjabi-dominated top structure of the army. He has appointed non-Punjabi officers in top slots for tactical reasons. The appointment of a Baloch corp commander at Quetta, a tribal corp commander at Peshawar and a Pathan DG ISI to deal with the Taliban has facilitated controlling dissent not only by military means, but also by other means such as the barter of social obligations.

Unlike Nawaz Sharif, who rarely sought advice and input from his cabinet, Musharraf always consults the top commanders and officers at the general headquarters. He has ensured the unity of command in the army. While there may be different views and personal ambitions, there are no indications of an organisational break-up of the army leadership structure. Musharraf's efforts to maintain the unity of the top structures are at the cost of his own idealism, profusely expressed in his various speeches soon after assuming power in October 1999. These included:

- Vision of a modern Islamic State like Turkey,
- Documentation of the economy to prevent tax evasion,
- General sales tax on retail trade,
- Curbs on smuggling on the Afghan route,
- State control of the *madrasas* through various measures,
- Meeting with Mullah Omar of Afghanistan to moderate the Taliban behaviour before the incidents of September 11, 2001 and
- Signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Musharraf reneged on all these promises. Thus, he has remained in power by conforming to the decisions of the top echelons of the army hierarchy at the minimum common denominator level. Whenever he was not able to mobilise a consensus to stay in power, he has had to give up his plans. Musharraf, therefore, is as good as anyone else in the top orbit at the general headquarters. It will make no fundamental difference if he is replaced, so long as the successor allows the common will of the corps commanders to supersede his own commitments to the nation.



SITTING PRETTY COULD BE HANGING AROUND: Pervez Musharraf

The continuation of Musharraf depends on two factors: one, organisational unity, which he manages well through consensus and compromise; and two, fundamentals in terms of socio-economic factors, and public support for the army in case the situation is deteriorating. According to present indicators, if it were not for the Afghan war, it would have taken just 4-5 years for the economy to hit rock bottom and generate massive public protests against the army. Thus, Musharraf can now hope to stay in power for three to five years more. During the period, he can strengthen the office of the president and hold elections for a civilian government, which will work under the tutelage of the president and the general headquarters. If economic conditions deteriorate, he can go on replacing one civilian government after another, while perpetuating his own role.

Pakistanis are not purely guided by economic considerations. They are strongly suspicious of the US's objectives in attacking Afghanistan. Many Pakistanis believe that the US is going to set up its base in Afghanistan for at least 20 to 30 years more for geo-economic reasons, especially for access to oil. As an extension of the US policy in Afghanistan, many Pakistanis fear that their country will also be converted into a long-term American base. This suspicion has created widespread resentment towards the US among the Pakistani masses. Though these feelings are not reflected in Pakistan's liberal English press, the Urdu press has been widely voicing these thoughts.

The Pakistani masses have also lost faith in Musharraf and have branded him as the man who compromised their nation. Neverthe-

less, they may suppress their emotions if they make concrete economic gains. By late 2002 or early 2003, if the US war in Afghanistan persists, and the economic returns become marginal, there will be mass demand to replace Musharraf. An ominous sign for Musharraf is the emergence of a new group called National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty in February 2002. Some of the former heads of ISI are associated with this group, including General Mahmood Ahmed, who was sacked in October 2001. The group holds strongly anti-American views.

One vehicle for translating latent public anger towards Musharraf could be within the army itself. While there is unity of command at the highest level of corps commanders and principal staff officers, there are different views and tendencies in the lower ranks — at the level of major general and brigadier. It is at this level that Musharraf faces a threat. There are 15 corps commanders and principal staff officers. But the layer below them is strong as well. There are altogether 25 lieutenant generals and around 100 major generals. Quite a few of these lieutenant generals and major generals are not in command positions and may appear to be in a position to threaten the top layer. Yet this is too big a group to be predictable in times of crisis.

Many Pakistanis lost their lives in Kunduz and other places in Afghanistan. Worse, in order to avoid international embarrassment, the government could not accept their bodies with honour. The dead soldiers are bound to have sympathisers in the army, including some of those with access to the

chief. If any of them decides that Musharraf has become a liability, and senses this perception being shared by the masses, it is quite likely that he will be ousted in late 2002 or early 2003.

If his replacement has sought the approval of the CIA for the coup, it is possible that Musharraf may be given the opportunity to retire quietly and either migrate abroad or live a dignified life on the seminar circuit. *Nawa-i-Waqt*, a newspaper known to be close to the establishment, has warned in an editorial (January 29, 2002) that Musharraf would be ousted the moment the US found him ineffectual.

The US will try its best to save Musharraf as American leaders fear dealing with an uncertain situation in the post-Musharraf era. In reality, unless the general has to leave under circumstances in which extreme religious forces are dictating terms, his replacement will be no different from him in terms of Pakistani policy towards the West. Yet, the mere fear of uncertainty will motivate the US to protect him.

In order to receive such a high level of commitment from the US, Musharraf will have to barter Pakistan's territorial control and sovereignty. He will have to allow US defence forces, advisors and intelligence agents to operate from Pakistani territory against Afghanistan or any other States in Central or West Asia. In other words, he will have to turn Pakistan into a dependent of the US. If he does not offer Pakistan's sovereignty fully and unconditionally, the support he will receive will also be limited and conditional on a *pro rata* basis.

On the other hand, if he offers Pakistan on a platter, without asking for aid for improving the economic and social conditions of the population, he will be portrayed as a traitor by the extreme religious forces. They will then try to oust him with the support of those in the army, who are not only opposed to Musharraf in personality or power politics, but who oppose him ideologically. In this case, not only Musharraf but the entire set of officers leaning towards the West will be marginalised and a new regime with a fundamentally different character will take over at the general headquarters in Rawalpindi.

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