

Karachi bomb blast highlights Pakistani regime's political crisis

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The car bomb attack near the US consulate in Karachi last week underlines the precarious political situation confronting Pakistan's military strongman General Pervez Musharraf. Under pressure from the US he broke ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and now he must block armed Islamic militants from entering Indian held Jammu and Kashmir. He faces growing opposition from the Islamic fundamentalist groups that have had close ties to the Pakistani military.

The explosion in Karachi, which killed 11 people and injured at least 50 others, took place a day after US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld left Islamabad. Rumsfeld insisted that Musharraf crack down on Islamic groups opposed to Indian rule in Kashmir. A million Indian and Pakistani soldiers along the border have been on a state of high alert since last December when a group of suspected Kashmiri separatists carried out an attack on the Indian parliament building in New Delhi.

Last month, following an attack on an Indian army base in Jammu and Kashmir, the Indian government of prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee ratcheted up tensions another notch, threatening to launch military strikes against so-called training camps in Pakistani territory. India accuses the Pakistani military of directly sponsoring and organising the attacks inside India—a claim that Islamabad denies. Both Rumsfeld and US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage met with Musharraf to demand that the Pakistani army block Islamic militants from entering Indian held Kashmir.

Last week, New Delhi acknowledged a decline in what it terms the infiltration of “cross-border terrorists”. But Musharraf's actions have provoked widespread anger in Pakistan. Various Islamic fundamentalist organisations, some with direct connections to the armed groups active against Indian

rule in Jammu and Kashmir, are exploiting the situation.

A previously unknown organisation, Al Qanoon, claimed responsibility for the bomb attack in Karachi. In a handwritten statement issued to the press, it warned: “America and its allies and its lackey Pakistani rulers should prepare for more attacks.... [This] bomb attack is just beginning of Al Qanoon's jihadi (holy war) operation in Pakistan.”

Both the US and Pakistani administrations have immediately seized on the terrorist attack to intensify police operations in Pakistan. US President Bush warned that the US would “continue to hunt down” those responsible. On Tuesday, the US reopened its embassy in Pakistan and deployed a huge squad of 80 FBI agents—including counter-terrorist operatives and SWAT team members—to “assist” in the police investigation.

Since January there have been four attacks in Pakistan directed against foreign nationals. *Wall Street Journal* correspondent Daniel Pearl was kidnapped in January and later killed. On March 17, five people, including two Americans, died in an attack on a Protestant church in Islamabad. On May 8, 15 people, including 11 French technicians, working at a submarine construction facility, died in a bomb blast in Karachi.

On each occasion Washington has exploited the attack to add to its substantial police and military presence inside Pakistan. Significant numbers of US police, CIA agents and special forces soldiers are now operating inside the country using the pretext of Bush's “global war against terrorism”. While the Bush administration insists that it is hunting down Al Qaeda members who have fled from Afghanistan along with those responsible for the terrorist attacks inside

Pakistan, these operations increasingly appear to be aimed at opponents of Musharraf and the US-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Musharraf seized power in a military coup in 1999 from former prime minister Nawaz Sharif after he bowed to US pressure and stopped support for armed Islamic militants entrenched in the strategic Kargil area of Jammu and Kashmir. Now he finds himself under the same sort of fire from the Islamic fundamentalist organisations to which he appealed just three years ago. The military has been encouraging these elements over the preceding two decades.

Musharraf has attempted on several occasions to find support among other political parties, including the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistani Muslim League (PML) of Nawaz Sharif. But he has been consistently rebuffed. Bhutto recently published an open call in the British based *Guardian* newspaper for Musharraf to be replaced.

Musharraf's "anti-terrorist" measures are aimed not only against armed Islamic groups but his political opponents. Last weekend police arrested three PML leaders—Raja Zafarul Haq, Syed Zafa Ali Shah and Siddiqui Farooq—and are hunting for a number of other party members. The three were initially charged following a clash with police during a banned demonstration in Rawalpindi last Friday. A court released them on bail. The police then added a further charge under the country's anti-terrorism act and detained them again.

Among Islamic fundamentalist groups, Musharraf is perceived as a traitor for abandoning armed Kashmiri groups that successive Pakistani governments have declared to be "freedom fighters". At a meeting in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, attended by about 10,000 people, the leader of the extremist Jamiat-e-Islami, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, warned his fighters would continue to cross the Line of Control separating the Indian and Pakistani areas of Kashmir.

The Pakistan based *News* reported that another Islamic organisation, Muttahida Majlis Amal (MMA), recently held a conference in Kashmir and issued a statement declaring: "The Kashmir jihad should continue.... The military government which had already sold out Afghanistan must not do the same with Kashmir."

Last weekend conservative political and religious groups held a meeting in Lahore attended by an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 supporters. Prominent Islamic leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman told the crowd that Musharraf and the Pakistani army "has sold out Islam, jihad, Afghanistan and Kashmir."

At the same gathering, Qazi Hussain Ahmed declared: "The army should not follow the American agenda. We, the people of Pakistan, want peace but not at the cost of our sovereignty. If the situation requires us to fight along with our armed forces [against India], we are prepared to do so. But we will not allow the FBI and other US intelligence agencies to dictate terms to us. They should pack up and leave."

Even among his closest supporters, there are signs that Musharraf is losing support. Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar resigned last Friday, despite the Pakistani president's efforts to convince him to stay on at least until national elections, due to be held in October. A report in the Pakistan-based *Herald* last week, about an unsuccessful attempt on Musharraf's life in December, cited retired army general Talat Masood. He told the newspaper: "There are so many forces that have been unleashed in the past months.... We are under pressure from all sides and within."

Under siege and without any significant political base of his own, Musharraf is heavily reliant on sections of the army and state bureaucracy as well as on political and economic backing from Washington. But the support from the Bush administration, whose own intervention has exacerbated the Pakistani strongman's isolation, is conditional. If Musharraf fails to meet Washington's growing string of demands, he could rapidly find himself without any support at all.

The very fragility of Musharraf's grip on power is a potent destabilising factor not only in Pakistan, but throughout the region, under conditions in which any incident may become the pretext for war between Pakistan and India.



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