Amid mounting political crisis

Pakistan's military dictator survives assassination attempt

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Pakistan's military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, narrowly escaped assassination December 14 when a bridge was almost levelled by multiple bombs just seconds after his motorcade passed over it. In a show of bravado, Musharraf has downplayed the seriousness of the assassination attempt, but its sophistication strongly suggests the involvement of elements within Pakistan's military-intelligence establishment.

No group has claimed responsibility for the assassination attempt, which took place in a highly-policed section of Rawalpindi, the twin-city of Pakistan's capital. Five separate bombs, containing hundreds of pounds of plastic explosive, were reportedly detonated by remote control. Pakistani officials concede had his motorcade not been equipped with a device that blocks out all radio signals for a 200-meter radius Musharraf, who doubles as Pakistan's president and the chief of its armed services, would have in all likelihood been killed. Because of the blocking device, the bombs could only be detonated after Musharraf's motorcade had passed over them.

Musharraf was quick to pin blame for the assassination attempt on Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. Declared Musharraf, "I have been saying that the greatest danger to our nation is not external; it is internal and comes from religious and sectarian extremists, and this is a typical example of that."

That Islamic fundamentalist terrorists were party to the plot to kill Musharraf is certainly possible. Under pressure from Washington, Musharraf recently ordered a crackdown against Al Qaeda elements said to be hiding in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. He has also banned a number of Islamic fundamentalist groups with reputed terrorist ties and has agreed to a border cease-fire with India, which cuts across the Islamic fundamentalist-backed insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir.

Pakistan's military security establishment has long had close ties to Islamic fundamentalist insurgents. During the Afghan civil war, Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence Agency (ISI) served as the conduit for US funds to the Islamic fundamentalist guerrilla forces. Pakistan supported the efforts of Islamic fundamentalists to wrest the leadership of the insurgency in Indian-held Kashmir from more secular nationalists and in the late 1990s Islamabad was the principal foreign patron of Afghanistan's Taliban regime.

However, an article in *Asia Times* argues that Musharraf staged the assassination attempt himself. It says that an unnamed source in a high-level position in Pakistan's security establishment was "adamant" Musaharraf and his staff staged-managed the bombing to alleviate pressure from Washington—the message being that there are limits to the extent to which Musharraf can accommodate himself to US demands.

Whatever the truth, the failed assassination points to the fragility of the Pakistani regime—a key ally of the Bush administration in its "war against terrorism."

Musharraf, who came to power in an October 1999 coup, has long been involved in a precarious balancing act, trying to appease Washington while simultaneously seeking to uphold Pakistan's traditional geopolitical and strategic interests in South and Central Asia and to promote the domestic Islamic fundamentalist right as a counterweight to his opponents in Pakistan's traditional political elite and the threat of popular opposition from below.

Under threat of being declared a hostile power by Washington, the Musharraf regime effected a major shift in policy in the days immediately following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, withdrawing its support for the Taliban regime and providing crucial logistical support to the US in its conquest of Afghanistan.

In a blatant quid pro quo, the US abandoned any pretence of opposition to Musharraf's repressive regime, with Bush himself repeatedly lauding the Pakistani dictator for his leadership and the US and US-led agencies like the World Bank extending several billions dollars in credits, loans and new weaponry to Pakistan. (Musharraf's critics nonetheless note that the US aid has fallen substantially short of the $10 billion hit that the Pakistani economy took as a result of the Afghan war.) The World Bank and IMF have also had high praise for Musharraf for pressing ahead with privatization and other "structural reforms."

In recent months, however—and it is to this that the *Asia Times* article made reference—Musharraf has come under

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renewed pressure from Washington and US allies like Britain's Tony Blair to do more to curb Islamic fundamentalist extremism and reduce tensions with India. The US fears that Al Qaeda has succeeded in transforming Pakistan into a major base of operations. It also believes that the insurgency which Pakistan has long supported in Indian-held Kashmir is providing sustenance to Islamic terrorism internationally. From a longer-term perspective, the US has increasingly come to see the decades-old Indo-Pakistani conflict as dangerously destabilizing a region in which it has suddenly taken great interest, because of the possibility of tapping into South Asia's virtually inexhaustible supply of cheap labor and of using India to "contain" China in Asia.

For the Pakistani ruling class and especially the military-intelligence establishment the policy changes demanded by the US pose major difficulties. Dating back at least to the dictatorship of General Zia, Islamabad has cultivated the Islamic fundamentalist right. As for the conflict with India over Kashmir, whose origins lie in the 1947 communal partition of the subcontinent, the Pakistani elite has long cast it as pivotal to Pakistan's national existence. The army in particular has justified its dominant role in Pakistani political life on the grounds that Pakistan is locked in a life-and-death struggle against a hostile and much larger India and that the military can alone safeguard Pakistan's national existence.

Musharraf is himself closely identified with the most hard-line anti-Indian elements. His 1999 coup arose at least in part out of conflicts between himself and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif over the latter's decision to bow to US pressure and end the Pakistani incursion in the Kargil region of Kashmir. Musharraf further bolstered his hard-line reputation by refusing to bow before Indian pressure when New Delhi mobilized for war in 2001-2002, answering Indian threats to cross into Pakistan to "end terrorism" by brandishing the threat of a nuclear response.

In recent weeks, even while taking steps against Islamic fundamentalist "extremists," Musharraf has been seeking to secure the support of a six-member coalition of Islamic fundamentalist parties—the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA)—for a package of constitutional changes. Musharraf has already imposed these changes—they include the president's right to dissolve the National Assembly, creation of an army-dominated National Security Council, and Musharraf's right to be simultaneously both president and armed forces chief—by fiat under the so-called Legal Framework Order. But he wants the MMA's support, so as to get them approved by the National Assembly and to win a vote endorsing his presidency.

The MMA, for its part, is more than willing to assist Musharraf in gaining this fig leaf of constitutional legitimacy, although it has apparently resisted appeals to join the phony parliamentary government Musharraf has fashioned for himself through ballot-rigging, threats and bribery. The governing party in Pakistan's two smaller province, the MMA has benefited handsomely from the restrictions Musharraf has placed on the traditional political parties, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and Sharif's Muslim League (N). But it above all owes its new found prominence to its criticism of growing US influence in Pakistan.

Adding urgency to Musharraf's attempt to gain greater legitimacy is not only the possibility of being pressured by the US into substantive negotiations with India, but also the worsening economic situation. While the World Bank and investment firms like Moodys applaud Musharraf's handling of the economy, poverty and unemployment have in fact both risen sharply. According to a recent report authored by the state bank, the percentage of the population living in poverty has risen to 33 percent. Others say the real figure is closer to 40 percent.

Growing popular anger over unemployment and price hikes, as well as anger over Musharraf's refusal to cede them even a modicum of power, have caused the PPP and Sharif's Muslim League, who are allied in the so-called Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy, to threaten to mount a "Go Musharraf" campaign. Not surprisingly, the ARD leaders have jumped on Musharraf's suggestion he might be willing to be "flexible" in negotiations with India over Kashmir to charge him with betraying the country's national interest.

In a recent editorial *Dawn*, Pakistan's largest English-language daily and a critic of the Musharraf regime, expressed fear that the power struggle within the Pakistani elite could open the door to a venting of popular anger. Commenting on the threat that the MMA or the ARD might mount a popular agitation against the Musharraf regime, it warned: "It will be short-sighted to let the crisis simmer.... New perils might arise, as popular discontent over economic and social problems mingles with the MMA's protest drive. Once an agitation takes hold, there is no knowing what turn events might take, particularly in view of the fact that political parties have largely lost touch with the masses and their problems."

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