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In a show of bravado, Pakistan's military-dictator president quipped he had nine lives after two sophisticated attempts on his life in December 2003. Yet 12 months later, Pervez Musharraf reneged on his pledge to step down as head of Pakistan's armed forces by the end of 2004 and announced he shall remain chief of Pakistan's Armed Services, as well as the country's president, till at least 2007. Clearly the general—a man the Bush administration has repeatedly touted as a key ally in the “war on terrorism”—doubts he has many lives left.

There are credible media reports of growing dissension within the officer corps over Musharraf's readiness to cooperate with Washington in preparing a military strike against neighbouring Iran, as well as his peace overtures toward India, which have included ratcheting down the military's support for the anti-Indian insurgency in Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir.

According to a recent report on *Asia Times On-Line*, “For the first time since he seized power on October 12, 1999, there are indications that [Musharraf] and some of his lieutenant-generals, who constitute the real source of his power, ... are not on the same wavelength.”

Meanwhile, Musharraf's attempts to shore up his regime by gaining the support of elements of the bourgeois opposition have, thus far, come to naught and a tribal insurgency in Baluchistan has become a major government headache.

For months there have been reports of attacks on Pakistani government installations and military personnel in Baluchistan, but on January 11, Baluchi nationalists mounted their most spectacular attack to date, storming the country's principal gas field in Sui. During a battle that lasted several hours, a number of buildings belonging to the state-owned Pakistan Petroleum Limited were occupied and eight security personnel killed. The damage that the fighting did to a natural gas compressor meant that there was no gas from the Sui field for more than a week for thousands of businesses and millions of homes in Punjab and Sind. Government officials estimate the economic losses at between 150 and 200 million rupees per day, approximately \$US2.5 to \$US3.3 million.

Last week, the state-owned railway company was forced to call an indefinite halt to all night service in Baluchistan after repeated attacks on train lines.

Musharraf's immediate response to the escalating anti-government agitation in Baluchistan was to threaten massive military retaliation. “Don't push us,” he exclaimed. “It's not the 70s when you can hit and run and hide in the mountains.” (A reference to an insurgency in the early 1970s that the army brutally suppressed on the orders of then Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto.) “This time, you won't even know what hit you.”

Some 20,000 security troops, including 5,000 armed forces personnel, have reportedly been redeployed to Baluchistan. But thus far the military and the pro-military government, headed by former Citibank official Shaukat Aziz have energetically denied they are planning a major military operation. Islamabad has appealed for negotiations, saying it is ready to heed calls for Baluchistan to receive a greater share of gas royalties and federal government development funds.

The parliamentary opposition, the MQM (one of the parties participating in the pro-military government), and much of the press have spoken out

against using violence to resolve the crisis in Baluchistan. From within Pakistan's political establishment there have been numerous warnings that the Musharraf regime, by further centralizing power in the hands of a Punjabi-dominated military and bureaucracy, has exacerbated national-ethnic tensions, with potentially grave consequences for the unity and integrity of the Pakistani state.

Baluchistan is the largest of Pakistan's four provinces, but the least populated. Although rich in natural resources, including natural gas, oil, copper and gold, it is the poorest part of Pakistan.

The anti-government movement in Baluchistan is being led by tribal chiefs who resent the decline in their power and privileges that has accompanied economic development and the migration of Afghan refugees and other Pakistanis into the province over the past quarter century. But the insurgency has tapped into genuine and deep-rooted popular resentments concerning the lack of economic opportunities and democracy.

While the Baluchi agitation has dominated newspaper headlines in Pakistan for much of the past month, it is just one of a myriad of problems and stresses facing the Musharraf regime and Pakistan's ruling elite.

Under a series of geo-political and economic compulsions, Musharraf is being forced to pursue foreign and domestic policies that are highly unpopular with the broad mass of Pakistan's toilers, but that also cut across the interests and aspirations of important sections of the elite and their traditional supports, from the Muslim religious leadership to the military-intelligence establishment.

It went almost unmentioned in the American press, but the national intelligence legislation that the US Congress adopted last month in response to the government-appointed 9/11 commission gave legal backing to the commission's recommendation that “If Musharraf stands for enlightened moderation ... the US should be willing to make hard choices too and make the long-term commitment to the future of Pakistan.” The legislation stipulates that President Bush must transmit to Congress within 180-days of its adoption “a detailed proposed strategy for the future long-term engagement of the United States with Pakistan,” and lists eight aims of US support for Pakistan, including “combating extremists,” halting “the spread of weapons of mass destruction” and pressing for neo-liberal economic reforms.

Washington's pledge of a long-term relationship with Pakistan is at least partly a response to criticisms from the Pakistani elite that during the Cold War Washington repeatedly promoted Pakistan as a frontline state, only to give it short-shrift when US geo-political strategy shifted.

Islamabad has obtained several billion dollars in US aid, the rescheduling of much of its debt, and approval for purchases of advanced military equipment from US arms-makers, since Musharraf ceded to Washington's September 2001 demands, broke relations with the Taliban regime, and allowed the US to use Pakistan as a staging point for the conquest of Afghanistan.

But if the Bush administration is, next only to the Pakistani military, the strongest bulwark of Musharraf, its aggressive, neo-colonial thrust into the Middle East and Central Asia is also enormously destabilizing to his regime.

In Pakistan there is great popular hostility to the Bush administration,

especially for its illegal conquest of Iraq. The revelation that Pakistan has been providing assistance to the US in planning military action against Iran can only further fuel the perception that Islamabad is an accomplice in the crimes of US imperialism. It could also open Pakistan to retaliation from Teheran and further complicate relations with India, which in pursuit of energy sources and out of concern over the US invasion of Afghanistan, is actively pursuing closer relations with Iran.

Some Pakistani officials have suggested a “third party” has been involved in the recent events in Baluchistan. Given that Iran borders Baluchistan and itself has a sizeable Baluchi population, this could well be a reference to Iran.

But the Pakistani government has been desperately trying to reassure Iran of its friendly intentions. It has vehemently denied the report that it has been helping the US identify Iranian nuclear sites and allowing US Special Forces to train in Pakistan for possible action in Iran, and to enter Iran from Baluchistan. Islamabad may thus have chosen not to level a direct accusation against Iran for fear of further heightening tensions.

According to press reports, Pakistan’s vassal like relations with the US are beginning to grate on the nationalist and religious sensibilities of sections of the military. Pashtun officers are said to have been unhappy about the massive military operation carried out over much of last year in Pashtun tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. (The government has defended the operation, saying that had Pakistani troops not conducted a search for Al Qaeda and Taliban supporters in South Waziristan, US forces might have crossed over from Afghanistan and carried out the search themselves.) And there is press speculation that Shia officers, in particular, may take exception to Pakistan conspiring with the US against Iran.

Under pressure from the US, which had come to see the Kashmir insurgency as a breeding ground for Islamic terrorism and the Indo-Pakistani conflict as dangerously destabilizing, Musharraf—who had hitherto been identified as an anti-India hawk— switched gears in late 2003, declaring a ceasefire across the Line of Control in Kashmir and then seeking a composite peace dialogue with India.

Behind this shift also lay Musharraf’s calculation that now is the best time to seek a settlement with India, since India’s economic and military advantages will only grow larger in years to come and since the US is at present interested both in facilitating a settlement of the Indo-Pakistani conflict and having a strong Pakistan.

More than a year later, the peace process is stalled. According to *Dawn*, the Pakistani daily, both India and Pakistan “appear close to resurrecting the idiom of the bad, old days.”

While eager to develop trade and other ties with Pakistan, India is adamant that any settlement does not involve a change to the current border in Kashmir.

Meanwhile, a serious conflict has developed between India and Pakistan over their interpretation of the Indus Water Treaty of 1960, with Islamabad claiming that the Baglihar Dam, now under construction in India, is illegal. It has appealed to the World Bank to mediate, but the bank is wary of getting involved in what one official described as a “Pandora’s Box”.

While the Indo-Pakistan peace parlays have proven extremely popular in Pakistan, as in India, the Pakistani elite has for decades presented the unification of Kashmir under Pakistani-rule as a holy cause, whipping up anti-Indian sentiment in the name of Kashmir as a means to divert social tensions and promote national unity.

Moreover, the Indo-Pakistani conflict and the claim of an imminent threat to Pakistan’s national existence have been central to the military’s assertion that it must play a major role in government.

Musharraf has repeatedly boasted that under his rule Pakistan’s economy has revived. The more astute among Pakistan’s observers have noted that parallels between Musharraf’s claims and those of the BJP-led

government in India, which was routed in last May’s general election after trumpeting that “India is shining.”

The truth is Pakistan saw its growth rate improve to 6 percent last year, but it is receiving only a small fraction of the world’s foreign investment (\$328 million in 2004). Inflation rose sharply in the second half of 2004 to reach an annual rate of 9 percent.

Most importantly, recent years have seen a sharp increase in poverty and social polarization, with somewhere between 35 and 39 percent of the population now living under the poverty line.

In a bid to attract greater foreign investment, the Musharraf regime has announced plans to step up neo-liberal reforms. “We have a big privatization agenda,” boasted Prime Minister Aziz in a January 3 address to the American Business Council. At the top of the list for privatization are Pakistan Petroleum and Pakistan Steel.

The government is also pouring money into large infrastructure projects, while totally ignoring social needs. (Half of Pakistan’s population is illiterate; not surprising given that Pakistan is one of only a handful of countries in the world that spend less than 2 percent of GDP on education.)

The mega-projects, which include power dams and irrigation projects, have themselves become a major source of friction for two reasons. Some of them will result in large numbers of peasants losing their lands. They have also become a flashpoint for grievances and resentments among different provincially based elites over the allocation of resources.

Musharraf well recognizes that he needs to shore up support for his regime from within the political elite, whom he shunted aside on seizing power, if he is to withstand the opposition to his embrace of Washington, be in a position to effect a strategic shift in Pakistan’s relations with arch-rival India, and press forward with his socially destructive neo-liberal, export-led growth strategy.

The last months of 2004 saw the general and his aides speak about the need for “national reconciliation” and hold backroom talks with various opposition parties, most importantly Benazir Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP). It was rumoured that the PPP would be willing to accept Musharraf remaining president, if Bhutto was allowed to return to Pakistan to lead her party in contesting fresh elections to the National Assembly in the first half of 2005.

In the end, the talks seem to have fizzled out. While Bhutto is widely discredited after two terms in office during which she implemented IMF dictates and presided over rampant corruption, Musharraf apparently fears that her popular appeal far surpasses his own.

But Musharraf’s maneuvering did manage to antagonize the pro-military Pakistan Muslim League (Q). Under pressure from the PML (Q), the dominant partner in the current “elected” government, Musharraf made a public pledge that there would be no new elections till 2007.

Musharraf’s fears of the political and social conflict that might erupt if there is any loosening up of the restrictions on political activity were well-illustrated in two recent comments. According to PML President Chaudhry Shujaat Husain, the president has told him that he wants “the ruling party and the opposition to have identical views on Kashmir, Iraq, Afghanistan and other important issues.” In a December 31 speech to a government-organized Punjab Students Convention, Musharraf further expounded his doctrine of “enlightened moderation” declaring, “No political party should be allowed to promote its politics in any university in the country.”



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