



COMMENTARY

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington, D.C.

Musharraf's Options Shrinking

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July 20, 2007

The Pakistan Supreme Court's 10–3 decision to reinstate Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry is a major blow to Pakistan's beleaguered president, Pervez Musharraf. Coming on top of the violence that has occurred since the raid on Islamabad's Red Mosque, it leaves Musharraf and the army with shrinking political options as they struggle to reassert control and maintain internal security. Musharraf faces an unpleasant choice: either to undertake a period of authoritarian rule (he has said he won't) or to take his chances on an electoral process that has become much more uncertain for him. Neither path is a sure winner for him. The second, paradoxically, may improve the odds of Pakistan finding its feet, but only if it can be combined with a vigorous campaign to eliminate, or at least marginalize, the extremist threat. The United States needs to handle the situation with care but to push consistently for respect for Pakistan's legal system and constitution.

The Supreme Court ruling was a heavy political blow. The court rejected a high-profile petition to which he had attached his prestige, after months of controversy in which the chief justice's crowd-drawing power and the government's heavy-handed response daily reinforced the judgment that the government and the army were weak, inept, and unpopular.

Worse, from Musharraf's perspective, the court's decision seriously complicates his election strategy. He wants to be elected to a second presidential term while remaining army chief. The current legal provision that makes this dual job description possible expires at the end of 2007. To keep his uniform and the presidential palace, he therefore needs the National Assembly to renew this legislative authorization and the Supreme Court to uphold it against an inevitable constitutional challenge. The odds against his crossing both these hurdles are high.

And time is short. According to current Pakistani law, the National and Provincial Assemblies must conduct the presidential election between mid-September and mid-October. This timetable is considered inherently undemocratic by Musharraf's opponents, because it would have the current assemblies, which elected him in 2002 and are set to go out of office a month later, conduct this election as well. They may well challenge it in the courts as unconstitutional. The legislative elections, assuming the current assemblies complete their full scheduled term, must take place by mid-February.

Musharraf's political options are further constrained by the violence that has erupted in Pakistan. In May, riots in Karachi left 41 dead, stunning the nation. The toll in July dwarfs that: an estimated 280 dead in the assault on the Red Mosque and a rash of suicide bombings that is still going on. Most of the bombings were in the Northwest Frontier Province, already badly hit by violence from militants sympathetic to the Taliban. But one of the most severe attacks was near Karachi, at the other end of the country, and targeted Chinese workers, a sensitive point for Pakistan's authorities.

Some of Musharraf's quasi-allies in the religious parties broke with him over the violence of the army's final assault on the mosque (although they had not necessarily supported what the mosque leadership had been doing). Musharraf's more consistent opponents in the country's two major nonreligious parties are pulled in different directions. They want to capitalize on his weakness, now manifest once again in the Supreme Court ruling. But the Westernized elite, and many in Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), are horrified at the sight of violent extremists mounting a sharp assault on basic law and order and on the moderate approach to Islam, which they consider Pakistan's birthright, and which

Musharraf says he shares. Talk of a deal between Musharraf and Bhutto continues, but each new event will make it harder to conclude. The army's prestige has taken a beating.

Musharraf's policy toward the extremists thus far has been ambivalent, aimed at control rather than at putting them out of business. This is no longer sustainable. They are enemies of a modern, prosperous Pakistan. Pakistan's government needs to mount a savvy but relentless campaign designed to eliminate, as much as possible, their operating ability and their political appeal in Pakistan.

But it does not follow that Musharraf should cast aside the rule of law in favor of authoritarian rule. The army, Musharraf's home base and the instrument he would use if he were to turn toward authoritarianism, will not move to eliminate the extremist threat if left to its own devices. The army has always ensured that previous crackdowns preserved its ability to reenergize violent militant groups when it wished. Paradoxically, the only chance to deal with the threat extremists now pose to basic law and order as well as to Pakistani society is to mount a long-term, skillful, relentless campaign that rests on political legitimacy and integrates both civilian political leadership and the army's operational abilities.

This is a tall order, perhaps an impossible one. But it is the only path to "enlightened moderation," and it is the only path to a Pakistan that can work in harmony with the United States over the medium to long term. The first step is to have elections that will be recognized, in Pakistan and elsewhere, as free and fair, with Musharraf taking off his uniform when the current legal waiver runs out. But there is not much time to get the most dramatic forms of violence under control and move into a credible election campaign.

U.S. policy and public diplomacy will obviously be shaped in the context of Musharraf as Pakistan's leader. But we should shift our emphasis. Rather than simply sticking to Musharraf like Velcro, we should emphasize the larger dimension—Pakistan itself. U.S. policy and public diplomacy should focus on the need to respect Pakistan's law and constitution, and carry out genuinely free elections, to achieve legitimacy and long-term stability. The United States will need to work with the army, a critical partner on Afghanistan, but should put its weight behind an effort to move the army away from the political center stage. This is a course correction rather than a reversal, and it needs to be carried out with skill and subtlety.

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