

Pakistan running out of options

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KARACHI - It is a debate that keeps Washington and Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf in a quandary: What system can be introduced to control the Pakistani armed forces, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, while at the same time nurturing democracy but without compromising Musharraf's dominance? And all this while the country is in the midst of a judicial crisis that is fast spiraling out of control?

Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry was suspended by Musharraf on March 9 on charges of abuse of power and nepotism. Increasingly large protests have followed, the most recent in Lahore last weekend, with one scheduled for Karachi this weekend.

Widespread anger over the move has not been defused by the Supreme Court's suspension on Monday of the Judicial Council's inquiry into the charges of misconduct against Chaudhry. Not only did the apex court rule that a full court bench look into the charges filed by the government against Chaudhry, it also began hearing a petition filed by the top jurist challenging his suspension.

Legal observers believe that the ruling allows for much face-saving, both for the government and for Chaudhry, and gives them time to cool the situation.

But it appears Musharraf is sticking to his guns, and Chaudhry will go ahead with his address to the Bar Council in the southern port city of Karachi on Saturday despite the provincial Home Department's warnings of the likelihood of a terror attack, if not riots and bloodshed. All opposition parties and the ruling coalition led by the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) have announced plans for rallies.

Analysts believe that unless the country really plunges into crisis in the coming weeks, the present government setup will have to go, as already planned in the recent past in Washington and Islamabad. However, the feeling is that after instituting a face-saving setup, Musharraf will try to return as the all-powerful leader and introduce long-term constitutional guarantees for himself.

An alternative narrative

The popular, democratic and secular Pakistan People's Party Parliamentary (PPPP) of currently exiled Benazir Bhutto is the only party Washington will anoint to run Pakistan. But the million-dollar question, raised by Bhutto in Washington when she insisted that she run the country without Musharraf, is whether she would be able to confront the Taliban and al-Qaeda, as well as control the military.

The country's political map speaks volumes. North West Frontier Province and the southwestern province of Balochistan are totally out of Benazir's orbit, as either nationalists or religious parties dominate there. Punjab province clearly favors the right, with such parties as the Pakistan Muslim League led by former premier Nawaz Sharif. The province of Sindh is a traditional seat of power for the PPPP, but urban Sindh is completely in the hands of the MQM.

Tellingly, Bhutto does not have the ability to keep the military in control. Therefore, the only option

for her, as suggested by Washington, is to join as Musharraf's partner. Musharraf, after all, is still a precious asset for Washington in controlling the military establishment, the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

"You have to appreciate the fact that March 9 changed the political realities of the country. It will not be easy for anybody to jump on the government's bandwagon," commented Ehsan Iqbal, former federal minister and secretary of information of Nawaz's Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). The Nawaz Group is now a reluctant partner of the PPPP in the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy after reports began to emerge of a political deal between the PPPP and the government.

The popular discontent against the Musharraf government has created difficulties for the PPPP. Observers believe that it is now a matter of "sure" political death versus "probable" political death for Bhutto. If the PPPP refuses to shake hands with Musharraf, the government will pursue corruption charges against her in the Swiss courts and any decision against her would surely end her career. Joining with Musharraf would be against popular sentiment, but it would give Bhutto the chance to survive, for a little longer at least.

The problem is, while the feudal base of Bhutto's party will support her, the top leadership dominated by left-leaning "social democrats" will never sit in the lap of a uniformed dictator.

Bhutto received a taste of this when a top PPPP member, Chaudhry Aitzaz Ahsan, who is a member of the National Assembly and a lawyer for Iftikhar Chaudhry, refused Bhutto's instructions not to become involved in the suspended chief justice's rallies. Other party leaders have already protested her supporting "a collapsing setup", in reference to Musharraf's administration.

What is clear is that Islamabad and Washington do not have much room in which to maneuver. And adding even more spice, one of the leaders of the influential Lal Masjid (Mosque) in Islamabad, Maulana Abdul Aziz, has reiterated the necessity for a jihad against the government.

P.S.

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