

Tariq Ali: Musharraf will not go gentle into that golf course

Tuesday 19 August 2008, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 17 August 2008).

Pakistan's military dictators never go quietly. Field Marshal Ayub Khan was removed by a three-month long popular insurrection in March 1969. General Yahya Khan destroyed Pakistan before he departed in 1971. General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (the worst of the lot) was blown up in his military plane together with the US Ambassador in 1988.

And now President Pervez Musharraf is digging his heels in. There is a temporary stalemate. The army is in favour of him going quietly, but is against impeachment. Washington is prepared for him to go, but quietly. And last Friday it was reported that the chief of Saudi intelligence, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz, had secretly arrived in Pakistan and held talks with coalition leaders and President Musharraf.

He wants a "safe exit" for the president. Sanctuaries in Manhattan, Texas and the Turkish island of Büyükada are being considered. The President would prefer a large estate in Pakistan, preferably near a golf course, but security considerations would make that unfeasible.

One way or another he will go soon. Power has been draining away from him for more than a year now. Had he departed peacefully when his constitutional term expired in November 2007 he would have won some respect. Instead he imposed a state of emergency and sacked the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Now he will go in disgrace, threatened with impeachment and abandoned by most of his cronies.

The country has moved on from a moth-eaten dictatorship to a moth-eaten democracy. Six months after the old, morally obtuse, political gangs returned to power, the climate has further deteriorated. Asif Ali Zardari – the widower of Benazir Bhutto – and his men are extremely unpopular. Removing President Musharraf, who is even more unpopular, might win the politicians some time, but not for long.

There was one hugely diverting moment last week that reminded one of pots and kettles. Mr Zardari, the caretaker leader of the Pakistan People's Party who runs the government and is the second-richest man in the country (funds that accrued when his late wife was prime minister), accused President Musharraf of siphoning official US funds to private bank accounts. For once the noise of laughter drowned the thunder of money.

President Musharraf's departure will highlight the problems that confront the country, which is in the grip of a food and power crisis that is creating severe problems. Inflation is out of control and was approaching the 15 per cent mark in May. The price of gas (used for cooking in many homes) has risen by 30 per cent.

Wheat, the staple diet of most, has seen a 20 per cent price hike since November 2007. Too much wheat is being smuggled into Afghanistan to serve the needs of the Nato armies. The poor are the worst hit, but middle-class families are also affected and, according to a June 2008 survey, 86 per cent of Pakistanis find it increasingly difficult to afford flour on a daily basis, for which they blame

their government.

Other problems persist. The politicians are weak and remain divided on the restoration of the judges sacked by President Musharraf. The Chief Justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, is the most respected person in the country. Mr Zardari is reluctant to see him back at the head of the Supreme Court. A possible compromise might be to offer him the presidency. It would certainly unite the country for a time.

Over the past 50 years the US has worked mainly with the Pakistan army. This has been its preferred instrument. Nothing has changed. How long before the military is back at the helm?

P.S.

* From The Independent:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinio...>

* Tariq Ali's latest book, 'The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power' will be published on 15 September.