

Musharraf was rambling and impervious to tormented cries from his people

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General Pervez Musharraf acted swiftly and ruthlessly when he seized power to become Pakistan's fourth military dictator in October 1999. He proclaimed himself Chief Executive of Pakistan. When he lost the confidence of two key board members – the United States and the Pakistan Army – majority shareholders of Pakistan plc, he realised his time had come. After a rambling, incoherent address to the nation, replete with the most puerile self-justifications, he resigned. He should have done so when his term expired, but afflicted with the power disease, his mind remained impenetrable to the tormented cries from below.

We can only speculate whether he would have lasted nine years had it not been for 9/11 and the “war on terror”. A previous dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88), had similarly become a vital cog in the imperial war machine during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The monsters spawned then were the perpetrators of the assault on the Pentagon in 2001. Musharraf and his generals had to unravel the only victory the Pakistan army had ever won: the conquest of Kabul via the Taliban. In a complete about turn, Pakistani military bases were made available to the US to occupy Afghanistan.

Ever since Zia's time, the soldiers had been inoculated with Islamist ideology. After 9/11, Musharraf was telling the same soldiers the target had been changed. They had to kill “terrorists”, i.e., other Muslims. It almost cost him his life (two assassination attempts came close), but he remained loyal to Washington and vice versa. His Western allies saw no contradiction in backing a general when “democracy and human rights” were the virtues preached to the rest of the world. Warring against the jihadis made him unpopular with the soldiery, who began to resign in droves.

It was his clash with a turbulent Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhury, who had begun to issue judgments favouring victims of state brutality and corruption and the disappearances of citizens in the name of the war on terror. The Chief Justice was sacked and angry lawyers began a campaign for his re-instatement. Musharraf backed down, only to impose a state of emergency and sack him and other judges again.

Had this happened in a country not favoured by Nato, all hell would have broken loose. Not in this case. In January, the Chief Justice wrote to Nicolas Sarkozy, Gordon Brown, Condoleezza Rice and the president of the European Parliament.

The letter, which remains unanswered, explained the real reasons for Musharraf's actions: “At the outset you may be wondering why I have used the words ‘claiming to be the head of state’. That is quite deliberate. General Musharraf's constitutional term ended on 15 November 2007. His claim to a further term thereafter is the subject of active controversy before the Supreme Court of Pakistan.” It was while this claim was under adjudication before ... the Supreme Court that the general arrested a majority of those judges in addition to me on 3 November 2007. He thus himself subverted the judicial process, which remains frozen at that point. Besides arresting the Chief Justice and judges (can there have been a greater outrage?) he also purported to suspend the constitution and to purge the entire judiciary of all independent judges.

“Now only his hand-picked and compliant judges remain willing to ‘validate’ whatever he demands. And all this is also contrary to an express and earlier order passed by the Supreme Court on 3 November 2007.”

With Musharraf’s fall, the demand to reinstate the Chief Justice will grow: lawyers are threatening a new street campaign.

A survey carried out last May for the New America Foundation revealed that 28 per cent of Pakistanis favour a military role in politic, as compared to 45 per cent in August 2007; that 52 per cent regard the US as responsible for the violence in Pakistan; that 74 per cent oppose the “war against terror” in Afghanistan.

A majority favours a negotiated settlement with the Taliban; 80 per cent hold the government and local businessmen responsible for food scarcity; only 11 per cent see India as the main enemy. None of this appeals to the country’s rulers who prefer to live in a bubble of their own.

Post-Musharraf Pakistan will stumble on, its people trapped between the hammer of a military dictatorship and the anvil of political corruption.

There is a way out, but the political and military rulers and their Western backers have always ignored it: serious land reforms, the creation of a proper social infrastructure and the establishment of at least a dozen teacher-training universities to lay the basis for a proper educational system. Malaysia has done so. Why not Pakistan?

P.S.

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