

PolicyWatch #1398

Pakistan after Musharraf: Growing U.S. Challenges

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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Today's resignation of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf creates a power vacuum in the most crucial country in the fight against al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism. For the foreseeable future, political power in Pakistan will not be in the hands of lackluster prime minister Yousef Raza Gilani, but in those of the ruling coalition rivals -- Benazir Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif. Future political contests will likely emphasize Musharraf's perceived closeness to Washington, an issue that united domestic opinion against him. This growing political reality, in addition to Islamabad's unwillingness to confront Islamic militants, further complicates U.S. policy toward Pakistan.

War on Terror

After the September 11 terror attacks, then Secretary of State Colin Powell told Musharraf, "You are either with us or against us." Although the Pakistani dictator sided with the United States rhetorically nearly seven years ago, it is still unclear whether he or his government followed suit. Pakistan's powerful spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), created and backed the Taliban in Afghanistan, and continues to be a growing concern for Washington. When Gilani visited the White House last month, U.S. officials reported that the ISI was behind the recent car bomb attack against the Indian embassy in Kabul, the worst such incident in years.

Last week, Ted Gistaro, the U.S. national intelligence officer for transnational threats, [told a Washington Institute Policy Forum](#) that al-Qaeda had strengthened its safe haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) by deepening its alliances with local militants and pushing government authority from the area. Gistaro compared al-Qaeda's operational and organizational advantages in the FATA to those it enjoyed in Afghanistan before September 11. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, however, took issue with this judgment on *ABC News* on August 17, calling al-Qaeda's communications and mobility in the FATA primitive. Other Western officials remain concerned that most al-Qaeda attacks in Europe in recent years are connected to Pakistan, with terrorists traveling to and from the country, and receiving training with weapons and explosives in the FATA.

Nuclear Tensions

In this uncertainty, there is concern about the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons arsenal, thought to number up to 150 warheads, and capable of being deployed by U.S.-supplied F-16 fighter-bombers and locally produced versions of Chinese and North Korean missiles. Musharraf blames the past proliferation of nuclear technology on the rogue activities of disgraced nuclear scientist A. Q. Khan, who although no longer under house arrest, remains closely guarded and restricted. The alternative explanation -- that successive Pakistani military and political administrations traded Khan's uranium enrichment, bomb making, and missile skills for diplomatic favors with China, Iran, Libya, and North Korea -- suggests that Islamabad, which is currently prepared to defy Washington, could again engage in similar dangerous behavior. In brief telephone conversations with the media, Khan has recently claimed to be innocent of wrongdoing, and a full explanation could be imminent. Since his detention reportedly was one of the reasons for Musharraf's impeachment proceedings, Khan's complete freedom is a growing possibility. He could even emerge as the country's new

president if a respected domestic figurehead is preferred over a political personality.

Challenges for the United States

Musharraf's resignation represents yet another failure for the Bush administration's Pakistan policy. Musharraf's help in arresting top al-Qaeda militants was equaled by the freedom he gave al-Qaeda sympathizers in the FATA. The more than \$10 billion of U.S. military aid has been largely spent on enhancing Pakistan's capabilities against its historic rival India, rather than on the terrorist counterinsurgency. And while Musharraf took steps to stop nuclear proliferation, Pakistan greatly expanded its atomic weapons arsenal, boosted in part by the new acquisition of Chinese M-18 missiles.

Although Musharraf's departure could be seen as a sign of Pakistan's growing democratic strength, the country's political and judicial systems are widely considered defunct. Zardari and Sharif both aspire to be the country's top political leader, but neither seems likely to accept second place quietly. Zardari's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) currently has the most seats in the parliament, but not a majority. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League could be bolstered by defectors from Musharraf's party, and may overwhelm the PPP in any fresh elections, since its power base is the country's most populous province of Punjab.

Pakistan's greatest challenge perhaps is the rule of law. The 1973 constitution has been amended frequently, and the current judiciary is stacked with men who owe their position to Musharraf. The judges sacked last year for refusing to endorse Musharraf's manipulation of the constitution are seeking reinstatement. How this will be resolved is unclear, although the activism of Pakistani lawyers ensures that the issue will not go away.

On the sidelines is the Pakistani army, which is disturbed at its designated role of dealing with radical Islamic elements in the west rather than its traditional Hindu foe to the east. The army is also concerned that it may be recalled to enforce another period of martial law. The disputed territory of Kashmir provides the focus of Pakistani-Indian hostility, and tensions have escalated recently in response to a religious dispute and the tough measures adopted by Indian police against Muslim demonstrators.

Traditionally, U.S. policymakers see Pakistani political administrations as weak, with the real power in the country's military-bureaucratic elite. This could, however, now be changing. Pakistani politicians seem more determined than ever to make sure the military -- an institution that has ruled for about half of the country's existence -- will never take over again. The immediate focus will be on chief of army staff General Ashfaq Kayani, a taciturn officer who trained at Fort Leavenworth and commanded the ISI from 2004 to 2007.

Many U.S. policymakers make the error of assuming that the link between the United States and Pakistan is key, and ignore or downplay the times Washington has let down Islamabad over the years. In reality, Pakistan has developed strong links with China, a more reliable weapons supplier, and Saudi Arabia, a strong political ally that has been involved in brokering the current exit for Musharraf. The United States must remain engaged with Pakistan during this political uncertainty so the fight against al-Qaeda does not falter, but progress could prove elusive in the final months of the Bush administration. As a result, Pakistan is certain to be a top agenda item for the next president.

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