

PolicyWatch #1301

Pakistan and the War on Terror

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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On November 3, Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency, putting at risk, despite claims to the contrary, the upcoming January elections. Musharraf justified his move by citing an increase in "the activities of extremists and incidents of terrorist attacks." The action was taken despite recent pleas from U.S. secretary of state Condoleezza Rice, as well as Admiral William Fallon, head of U.S. Central Command, who visited Musharraf on November 2. Instead of political stability in Pakistan, U.S. policymakers are now confronted with a more difficult battle against al-Qaeda in neighboring Afghanistan, a perhaps less secure Pakistani nuclear weapons arsenal, and a postponed democratic revival of the world's second most populous Muslim state.

A Second Coup

Musharraf originally came to power in 1999 after he overthrew elected prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who had attempted to remove Musharraf from his position as chief of army staff. For the past several months, Musharraf has been struggling to preserve his power in the face of challenges from an activist Supreme Court and from Islamist forces opposed to his alliance with Washington. His latest move was apparently triggered by the Supreme Court's intention to declare his recent reelection illegal.

Pakistan is considered an indispensable ally in the U.S. war on terror, but the relationship has had its problems. During the Cold War, when Washington was attempting to undermine the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan, U.S. support for the mujahedin was channeled through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, which was known to be sympathetic to Osama bin Laden and later backed the Taliban. Following the September 11 attacks, Washington turned to Musharraf for support. The day after the attacks, Secretary of State Colin Powell told him, "You are either with us or against us," but it was not until September 19, after refusing blanket U.S. overflight rights and the use of Pakistani bases, that Musharraf went on national television to explain his new alliance.

Musharraf has risked his life because of his ties with Washington, escaping several assassination attempts. His methods of tackling the Islamist threat, however, have been unwise and untimely. For instance, Islamabad's Red Mosque, a haven for radicals seeking to implement Islamic law, has been tolerated for months. When Musharraf finally decided to move against it this August, more than a hundred people were killed, sparking suicide attacks across the country against police and military targets. Hundreds of security personnel have died as a result, including a handful killed last week at the Rawalpindi military area near Islamabad, outside the official home of one of the country's most senior generals.

Continuing Concern

Pakistan's failure to address certain issues over the years continues to cause worries for Washington:

Afghanistan. U.S. and allied efforts to stabilize the regime of President Hamid Karzai in Kabul have been hampered by the ability of Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters to take sanctuary across the border in Pakistan. The

mountainous border region, an area where Islamabad does not exert strong influence, is neither demarcated nor recognized by the local tribesmen, and Osama bin Laden is widely thought to be hiding there. The Pakistani army has suffered many casualties in these operations and its morale is reportedly weak. The military's ethos is to protect the state from Hindu India, and having to fight fellow Muslims is causing confusion within the ranks and officer corps.

Nuclear weapons. Prompted by an Indian test explosion, Pakistan successfully detonated two nuclear weapons in 1998. Its nuclear arsenal, begun in the mid-1980s, is thought to comprise well over a hundred warheads, deliverable by missile or aircraft. Pakistan insists these weapons are safe and secure, but it was revealed in 2004 that former nuclear chief Abdul Qadir Khan passed nuclear components to Libya, Iran, and North Korea. Although details of Khan's debriefings were passed to the United States, Britain, France, Japan, South Korea, and the International Atomic Energy Agency, doubts remain about the complicity of Pakistan's military and political leadership.

Democracy. Since independence in 1947, Pakistan has spent most of its years under some form of military rule. Even under civilian administrations, the military and bureaucratic elites have been very powerful. Most politicians have been either weak, corrupt, or both. Nawaz Sharif, twice prime minister during the 1990s, returned from enforced exile this September but was promptly sent back to Saudi Arabia after being threatened with corruption charges. Benazir Bhutto -- a twice-removed prime minister who inherited the leadership of the Pakistan Peoples' Party from her mother and, before that, her father (himself a former prime minister who was accused of political murder by a previous military regime and hanged) -- faced similar charges for years, but Musharraf recently withdrew them. Caught abroad by Musharraf's latest move, she was permitted back into the country and remains free for now. The United States had been pressing for a political rapprochement between her and Musharraf.

Limited Options for Washington

Secretary Rice has condemned Musharraf's actions and hinted that financial aid for Pakistan's military will be cut. She also warned darkly that the United States "has never put all its chips on Musharraf," although the opposite would appear to be the case. Whether or not Washington regards Bhutto as another potential powerbroker, her domestic political prospects depend on how much she has been tarnished by her recent negotiations with Musharraf. Her notion of her own popularity in Pakistan is almost certainly inflated, and her preference for large and poorly controlled political gatherings is at odds with the country's military style.

The declaration of the state of emergency reportedly was made after twenty out of twenty-five members of Musharraf's inner circle approved his plan. Having just promoted a new group of senior military commanders, he presumably has their immediate loyalty. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, a former Citibank executive who can claim credit for the country's recent prosperity, has also been supporting him in public. By his own autobiographical admission, however, Musharraf can be "reckless," as his 1999 border clash and 2002 near-nuclear confrontation with India attest. Although not democratic role models, China and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's closest allies apart from the United States, should urge Musharraf to be cautious and avoid any renewed tension with India, which he could seek to initiate as a means of restoring the army's morale and diverting adverse domestic opinion.

As for the United States, Secretary Rice, currently traveling in the Middle East, should avoid any temptation to make a detour visit, since that could legitimize Musharraf's actions. But cooperation on counterterrorism needs to continue, if not stepped up, through lower-level official visits. President Bush's call today for Musharraf to hold elections and relinquish his army post "as soon as possible" suggests that leaving him as president is acceptable to Washington -- an opening the Pakistani leader is likely to try using to his advantage.

Simon Henderson, a Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program](#) at The Washington Institute, has served as an Islamabad-based correspondent for the BBC and Financial Times.

