

Pakistan's 'Leaders' Will Be Tested in Coming Months

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Western media, and some in Pakistan's English-language media, divided between the White House's wishful thinking and some others' aspiration for ushering in democracy in Pakistan, are busy debating whether a non-uniformed Pervez Musharraf, or the scandal-ridden democrat Benazir Bhutto, will be the appropriate choice for President at this juncture, to meet Washington's needs. Considering what Pakistan is going through, and what it could experience in the coming months and years, this is an utterly surreal debate.

The crisis in Pakistan today is not centered on who gets power in Islamabad, but how to put a stop to the process of "Talibanization" in Pakistan's western provinces, including the troubled Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), bordering the battlefields in Afghanistan, where foreign troops are on a search-and-destroy mission. No doubt, much of the anti-U.S. "Talibanization" occurred in Pakistan's west because of the insensitive U.S.-led military actions in Afghanistan, and Washington's riding roughshod over Pakistan. According to a U.S.-based Pakistani analyst, Taliban forces and their sympathizers are becoming entrenched in the region and are aggressively expanding their operations.

Considering Washington's *modus operandi* in the region, it is inconceivable that whosoever assumes power in Islamabad can do much to change this course of events, which has the potential to break up the country. But, long before that happens, Pakistan's military, the only stable institution as of now, will be torn apart.

What is equally disturbing is British involvement in the area, and their promotion of Benazir Bhutto to return to Pakistan's power structure. Britain knows the area well and thrives on splitting Islamic nations to maintain access not only to oil and gas, but also to the cash of the oil-exporting

countries, which is heavily invested in the City of London. According to British Ministry of Defence figures, there are now more than 6,000 British troops in Afghanistan. That will rise to 7,700 by the end of this year, and it could go even higher next year.

A Civil War-Like Situation

Some analysts claim the process of a civil war between the Pakistani Army and locals in the Pushtun-dominated North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and FATA; and in the Baloch-dominated Balochistan against the Army, have already begun. While a sort of civil war may not have begun, preparations for it are under way.

On Oct. 9, according to the Pakistani Army, in North Waziristan, one of the three most alienated districts in the FATA, at least 45 Pakistani soldiers, and as many as 150 pro-Taliban militants, were killed in three days of fierce fighting. The military said that the militants were unusually well trained and were getting support from Afghanistan. Dozens of civilian casualties are also reported.

The *Daily Times* of Lahore reported on Aug. 15: Many people in the tribal areas marked Aug. 14 (Pakistan's independence day) as a "black day," in protest against the stepped-up military presence in the region near the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Reports of clashes are pouring out of the area, between the so-called tribals, who consider the Pakistani military as intruders, and the Army. During the last three months, at least 250 Pakistani soldiers were killed, and another 250 remain in the insurgents' custody.

There are also indications that Pakistani soldiers are giving up their weapons and their identities to the insurgents,



almost voluntarily. In one case in mid-September, an entire Pakistani Army company was “kidnapped” by the insurgents and released later—*sans* arms and identity cards. The identity cards would enable some of the militants to travel abroad. One leading Pakistani news daily in its editorial said on Oct. 10 that “the most serious development is that some of the security personnel seem to be succumbing to propaganda, or perhaps just criticism, that they are killing fellow Pakistanis.”

The Tarbela Ghazi Incident

But the most troubling event for the Pakistan Army’s security occurred on Sept. 13, when an ethnic Pushtun Army officer belonging to the elite Special Services Group (SSG) blew himself up at the headquarters mess hall of the SSG at Tarbela Ghazi, 100 kilometers south of Islamabad. Reportedly, the officer’s younger sister was among the 300 girls killed during the Army’s commando raid on the Lal Masjid in Islamabad between July 10 and 13, 2007.

The incident is of grave importance, because the U.S. Special Forces trained the SSG, to which Gen. Pervez Musharraf once belonged. The SSG was trained for covert operations, and also for counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency. There were rumors that CIA personnel were present in the mess hall, and that the U.S. National Security Agency’s monitoring station was badly damaged by the explosion.

This is a serious breach in the security of Pakistan’s most elite troops, and the officers’ mess is secured more tightly than even the Presidential Palace, some point out. If all the details of these reports turn out to be accurate, it is evident that following the raid on the Lal Masjid, the Pakistani Army has inherited another ferocious enemy—mostly tribal, but also strong backers of the Islamist zealots who are anti-U.S., anti-NATO, anti-Musharraf, and anti-Army.

Two other recent events could contribute significantly

to further instabilities. On Oct. 5, the new imam of Lal Masjid issued an implied warning to deploy suicide bombers. In his traditional Friday Jumma sermon, according to a report filed from the capital, Imam Abdul Ghaffar said, “There can be no compromise. If our demands are not fulfilled, we cannot guarantee that there will be law and order. There will be protests, unrest, and we may have to use our last option.”

The second event involves Osama bin Laden, who was the beneficiary of the Pakistani establishment at one point, and had never verbally attacked the Pakistani Army. But on Sept. 20, As-Sahab, the propaganda and psywar unit of al-Qaeda, disseminated an audio message from bin Laden, the third since Sept. 7, 2007. It is a sort of *fatwa* against Musharraf and his Army. It is titled: “Come to Jihad: A Speech to the People of Pakistan.”

The *fatwa* says: “It is obligatory on the Muslims in Pakistan to carry out *Jihad* and fighting to remove Pervez, his government, his Army and those who help him. . . . We in the al-Qaeda organization call on Allah to witness that we will retaliate for the blood of Maulana Abd al-Rashid Ghazi of the Lal Masjid [the imam who was killed during the Pakistani Army’s raid in July] and those with him against Musharraf and those who help him, and for all the pure and innocent blood, foremost of which is the blood of the champions of Islam in Waziristan—both North and South—among them the two noble leaders, Nek Muhammad and Abdullah Mahsud.”

Such incendiary speeches have already begun to find their mark. Violence is increasing not only in the western part of Pakistan, but also in Afghanistan, particularly in the areas adjacent to Pakistan.

Origin of the Crisis

The process of Pakistan’s destabilization began following the erstwhile Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. The Reagan Administration, seeing an opportunity to bring the Red Army to its knees, presented the invasion as an attack against Islam. Organizing Islamic zealots, and assembling criminals from various Islamic countries, the Reagan Administration handed them over to the Pakistani Army to train them with modern arms and equipment. The operation was a success, at least in the short term. A defeated Red Army hightailed it back to the U.S.S.R. in 1989, and soon after, the Soviet Union vanished from the world map. What was left behind, however, were well-trained and indoctrinated militants who had secured a victory against the Red Army. A number of well-heeled warlords in Afghanistan fought each other, and looted and pillaged the citizenry, for years, seeking control of Kabul. It became evident that Afghanistan would remain a state in chaos for years, if not decades.

At this point, the Pakistani Army, partly with the intent to gain strategic control over Afghanistan, and partly to prevent the ongoing bloodshed, committed a tactical blunder by mobilizing Islamic zealots, most of whom were from Afghani-

stan, but quite a few from Pakistan as well. At the time, Benazir Bhutto was the premier and she had presided over this externally initiated development. These zealots—known as the Taliban—were used by the Pakistani Army in 1995 to capture Kabul.

The Army's mistake was its inability to realize that the Taliban would not get the support of the United States—a major benefactor of Pakistan. The Taliban's orthodox/fundamentalist Islamic tenets, very close to the Sunni-Wahhabi variety, were acceptable to Saudi Arabia, and, in fact, Saudi Arabia was providing financial help to the Taliban. But Washington remained suspicious of the Taliban, and of Pakistan's real intent behind developing this radical Islamic force.

After 9/11, the United States told Pakistan not only to stop providing support to the Taliban, but also to hunt them down and eliminate them. What soon became evident to Washington and others, was that the Taliban had developed a large support base within Pakistan, thanks to the Pakistani Army and the powerful Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. The United States invaded Afghanistan in November 2001 with the help of the Tajik-Uzbek-Hazara ethnic groups, to oust the Pushtun-dominated Taliban. Although the U.S.-led invading forces captured Kabul at breakneck speed, what followed was the failed attempt by the United States to establish a democratic system in Kabul, with a Pushtun, Hamid Karzai, as President. As a result, Washington leaned heavily on its military to bring about a "solution." The process continues to date, with the defeated Taliban getting stronger by the day; it is likely that they will come back to power in the not-too-distant future.

It is unlikely that the Taliban will return to power of Kabul, as long as the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and NATO remain stationed in Afghanistan. At the same time, it is likely that the insurgents, no longer Taliban militants only, will continue to challenge the foreign forces whom the enemy has identified as an occupation force.

Pakistan is fully involved in this complex state of affairs; most of the insurgency operations against the foreign forces, and the U.S.-backed puppet government of President Karzai, were launched from Pakistan's FATA. Although President Musharraf ordered his Army to move in to the FATA in 2001, it did not come into real conflict with the tribal areas before 2004.

Musharraf came under extreme pressure from U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney, who had been demanding that Pakistan clear the FATA of jihadis, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban—since unless Pakistan eliminates the "Islamic extremists," a victory in the "war on terror" in Afghanistan would be well-nigh impossible. The proposal translates into asking Musharraf to declare war against Pakistani citizens, on behalf of U.S. and NATO forces.

Once the conflict began between the tribal areas and the Army, it became apparent just how much Islamabad is risk-

ing in order to satisfy the United States. The tribals, who were sheltering the anti-U.S. and anti-Kabul militants in their territory, have now grown opposed to Musharraf and the Pakistani Army. The recent armed conflicts, and the emergence of suicide bombers in Pakistan, including in the capital city of Islamabad, are indicative of the level of animosity that exists between the militants and the Pakistani establishment.

An Existential Crisis

President Musharraf enjoys the support of many senior army officers and a large number of Pakistanis, who identify him as the true representative of the Army, the only institution of substance in Pakistan. He has agreed to shed his military uniform and remain only as President. He has taken the necessary moves to get "friendly" army officers to assume positions from which they can protect him. He has also agreed to the U.S. demand for "free and fair" general elections by the end of this year. He issued hurriedly on Oct. 5, a day before his election, a National Reconciliation Ordinance to grant immunity to former two-time Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Backed by the United States and Britain, Bhutto announced that she would return to Pakistan, after almost eight years, on Oct. 18.

On Oct. 6, Musharraf got himself re-elected as President, drawing his support from the existing National Assembly members, and ignoring the lawyers' debate over whether General Musharraf in uniform could participate in a Presidential election. A number of petitions have been placed before Pakistan's Supreme Court to invalidate the election. The court told Pakistan's Election Commission not to formally validate the results until it has finally decided the case, which it will start hearing on Oct 17. Musharraf has stated that he will remain the Chief of Army Staff until his re-election is validated.

It is evident that those Pakistanis who are looking for a strong government at this critical juncture are going to be deeply disappointed. Benazir Bhutto, for instance, has already been identified as a democratic face that Washington would like Pakistan to put on. But Bhutto as Prime Minister failed miserably twice, and she was out of country for almost eight years, afraid to face the corruption charges against her. This may further diminish her credibility as an effective leader. In addition, the very idea that Benazir Bhutto is an American choice would work against her. America is one of the least-liked nations in Pakistan today.

On the other hand, Musharraf has also lost much of his shine over the years. One reason is that his attempt to subdue the Supreme Court last March, when he sacked the Chief Justice, did not succeed. Another is that the much-vaunted economic development in Pakistan over the last eight years has bypassed the ordinary people, who are being hit hard by higher prices for food and other essential items. This has weakened President Musharraf as well.