

Luck Running Out?



No world leader faced a starker choice when United States President George Bush declared they were either ‘with us or against us’ in the wake of the 2001 attacks on America, than General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. Now, with his declaration of emergency rule, his score card is being remarked.

LIKE MANY WORLD LEADERS, GENERAL PERVEZ Musharraf of Pakistan has his favourite role models. Among them is Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Musharraf cites on his personal website as a source of an inspiration. ‘I call myself “Lucky”’, he declares. ‘Napoleon had said beside all qualities a leader has to be lucky to succeed. Therefore I must succeed’.

Wishful thinking or steely determination? Only time will tell. Meanwhile, many in the west fear that Musharraf’s hasty decision to impose emergency rule on November 3 could soon spell the end of his luck and with it, they believe, Pakistan’s too.

Such an assessment may not be entirely misjudged, for compared to his most immediate military predecessor, the bigoted – and luckless – General Zia ul Haq, Musharraf is a shining example of his own vision of ‘enlightened moderation’. It presupposes an easy co-existence between Islam and the west and has helped forge Musharraf’s reputation as a Muslim leader most western governments regard as their most dependable ally.

Musharraf’s image at home could not be more different. Long reviled by Islamic militants as ‘America’s stooge’ for his whole-hearted endorsement of its ‘war’ on terror, he now faces the wrath of an even wider array of forces. His declaration of emergency, which many equate with martial law, has outraged the legal fraternity and human rights activists, angered opposition parties, infuriated the media and, if recent opinion polls are anything to go by, disillusioned a majority of Pakistanis.

But it is the violent hostility of pro-Taliban Islamic militants with their uncompromisingly anti-western agenda that has caused greatest concern in democratic capitals. Here Musharraf is widely lauded for his courage in the face of repeated attempts to assassinate him and his steadfast opposition to the Islamic extremism that now threatens to engulf parts of Pakistan. The militants’ violent campaign of armed attacks and suicide bombings in Afghanistan and Kashmir, it is believed, not only risks the regional stability but also endangers the security of Europe and America through the recruitment of young Muslim radicals trained in the lawless border regions of Pakistan.

It is these concerns that account, above all, for the reluctance of most western governments openly to condemn Musharraf for his blatant disregard for democratic rule or to sanction him for his arbitrary suspension of civil liberties. To do so, it is claimed, would be seriously to jeopardise hard-won, if precarious, gains.

At stake is the west’s Afghanistan stabilisation programme; on-going peace talks between India and Pakistan and the benefits from Pakistan’s assured cooperation over terrorist intelligence-sharing. Together, they represent in the minds of many western leaders the most compelling reasons for defending Musharraf – even at the risk of alienating the fast-dwindling pro-western and pro-democratic

support in Pakistan – an error similar to the one many hold responsible for precipitating the 1979 Iranian revolution.

TALIBANISATION

However, Musharraf's record as an indispensable ally in the war on terror, on which these calculations are based, is chequered. Closer scrutiny of his performance on the three main areas of central concern to the west – the anti-Taliban campaign; dialogue with India and intelligence-sharing on the movements of Al Qaeda suspects – all point to a less than dependable performance.

Military operations against pro-Taliban groups in Pakistan's tribal areas – though extensive and involving some one hundred thousand troops – of whom one thousand have been killed in action – have been compromised by his readiness effectively to cede vast swathes of territory to tribal militants in exchange for questionable peace settlements. They have paved the way for the so-called 'Talibanisation' of much of the tribal districts of North and South Waziristan and emboldened militants to stamp their authority over key urban centres in the picturesque Swat valley in northwestern Pakistan.

It was no surprise that Musharraf's troops should suffer at the hands of local Pashtun tribesmen in these restive border zones with their long history of resistance to outsiders. It is also clear his reluctance to press ahead with political reform in the tribal areas – begun in 1997 with the introduction of votes for all – and lift the ban on political parties to empower elected representatives, worked against the development of institutional channels of dialogue that could have limited the influence of local militant groups.

Their ascendancy was assured by the patronage of the country's main religious alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA-United Council of Action) on which Musharraf also relied to shore up his legitimacy. In Balochistan province, for example, where the Taliban are said to have regrouped in large numbers, the pro-Musharraf party, the Pakistan Muslim League – Quaid (PML-Q) has worked comfortably alongside the MMA as part of the ruling coalition even as Musharraf continued to make a public show of casting the MMA as the main opposition to his regime and policies.

Ambiguities have also coloured Musharraf's otherwise bold initiatives since 2004 to end his country's dispute with India over Kashmir. They have included abandoning the demand for a referendum in the former princely state and an undertaking to curb 'cross-border terrorism' by banning Islamic militant groups, whose activities almost brought the two countries to war in 2002-2003.

The question here is whether these initiatives are designed to mask powerful countervailing pressures. For there is no sign yet that Musharraf intends to forfeit Pakistan's long established policy of 'bleeding' India through dangerous low-intensity conflicts such as the clashes in Kargil in 1999 – of which he was the chief architect – or abandon support for Kashmiri militants he still applauds as 'freedom fighters'.

On the vital matter of intelligence-sharing, many would agree that Musharraf's cooperation has been crucial, if not


indispensable. But while there have been notable successes in the capture of wanted Al Qaeda suspects, the hunt for senior Taliban leaders has proved less rewarding. It has fuelled suspicion that, despite his formal repudiation of Pakistan's support for the Taliban, Musharraf remains committed – as are his intelligence agencies – to the installation of a friendly government in Afghanistan that could eventually neutralise the threat of a 'pincer movement' against Pakistan, involving India and Afghanistan.

SUPPORT NEEDED

Many concluded that the west, and especially the United States, had unrealistic expectations of what Musharraf could reasonably deliver in the war on terror. However, the danger to Musharraf was less the risk of a militant backlash than the assumption that he could proceed with his controversial venture without the support of a genuinely negotiated political consensus.

It was this belated realisation that spurred the US and Britain to hastily craft a power-sharing agreement between Musharraf and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People's Party, the country's largest political party. Their solidly pro-western credentials, it was hoped, could yet salvage liberal opinion in Pakistan while effectively seeing off the threat of a fundamentalist take-over. This threat is a vital concern to the west, because of Pakistan's emergence as a nuclear weapons state with a disturbing record of nuclear proliferation.

Neither Musharraf nor Bhutto can expect to win the struggle against Islamic militancy without a clear mandate to do so. This entails urgently restoring civilian rule – however flawed – through free and fair elections, to help Pakistan embark on its long delayed transition from martial to constitutional law.

Pakistan is entitled to a better deal than it has so far had in the service of a war not of its making. The way ahead may well be rocky but there are no grounds yet to believe that stability and democratic government need be mutually exclusive in Pakistan as elsewhere. 



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