

President Musharraf's woes go far beyond the Red Mosque Siege

By Harun ur Rashid, Barrister-at-law

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

The days are difficult for President Musharraf of Pakistan. Since 1999 he ruled Pakistan with an iron hand, brought economic stability and aligned with the US President Bush in the war on terror in 2001. Confidently he pays official visits across the world.

During his election campaign in 2000, Bush failed to mention the Pakistan President's name when asked by a journalist. Now President Bush not only knows the name of Pakistan's President, he invited President Musharraf twice to his Texas ranch. What difference a few years make in politics.

Pakistan's military Presidents have been lucky in a way. External factors often helped them to rule the country for a prolonged period.

When General Zia-ul Haq captured power in 1977 deposing Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the invasion of Soviet Union in 1979 in Afghanistan afforded him a long life-line to continue till 1988 because he fully used America to his advantage against the invasion of Afghanistan during the Cold War. Pakistan became a close ally of the US against the Soviet invasion,

War continued in Afghanistan between the Soviet Union and Islamic militants aided, abetted by CIA and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) until the Soviet Union had to withdraw its forces by February 1989. A superpower was then defeated.

Strategically, Pakistan always wanted Afghanistan within its influence and not under India. It is noted that during the time of Pakistan's admission to the UN in 1947, Afghanistan was the only country which opposed Pakistan's membership because of disputed land boundary drawn by Durand Line (1893) under the British period.

It is reported that ISI created Taleban from madrassah students, mostly Afghans, to occupy Afghanistan and Taleban swiftly brought the country to its rule in 1996. Taleban orthodox Islamic government was recognized by Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Uzbekistan (a neighbour of Afghanistan), and UAE. Pakistan seemed to be happy with Talebanised Afghanistan which was under the influence of Pakistan. Neither Iran nor India had any influence on the Taleban Mullahs.

Similar external situation occurred with President General Musharraf. In 1999 he captured power deposing the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and in 2001, Afghanistan became the "hot-bed" of war on terror after 9/11.

President changed Pakistan's policy of supporting Taleban and switched to US policy to defeat Taleban government. By the end of 2001, Taleban leaders had to flee Kandahar and Kabul.

The result is that since then, General Musharraf received reportedly more than US\$2 billion aid annually from the US and the General was given a “free hand” to rule Pakistan, by the Bush administration. He ruled under the veneer of elected Parliament. The General manipulated the country’s Constitution in a way that he retains the constitutional power to dismiss the Prime Minister and dissolve the Parliament in the name of “national security:”

Furthermore President has also been wearing the “hat” of the Chief of Army Staff. Many think it is unconstitutional that a public servant of the Republic holds the political position of the President. The two do not mix.

Although at one stage he wanted to relinquish the top army post, under pressure of the Commonwealth, he changed his mind again in the name of “national security”. The Bush administration kept silent at political developments in Pakistan, while ardently promoting democracy in the Middle East.

Why does President Musharraf put himself in hot water? There are many reasons and some of them deserve mention below:

First, it is widely believed that late President General Zia ul Haq during his 11 –year rule, had turned Pakistan into an orthodox Islamic country with Shariah courts, inconsistent with its founder M.A. Jinnah who proclaimed in 1947 that religion would cease the political identity of Pakistanis.

Second, President General Pervez Musharraf became too sure of himself in his position because of country’s economic stability. He brought an international Banker as the Prime Minister. Both of them ran the country well within their limits.

Often military President does not understand that economic stability does not equate with freedom and liberty. There is a saying that fish cannot survive in very clean water and they need algae. Economic stability is not an end itself for an individual who after a certain time craves for freedom and liberty that may not create a situation that the military President likes. Economic stability leads to greater desire of political freedom and some say there is a symbiotic relationship between the two.

Third, although the President is secular in his attitude, for political power, he is known to have compromised with some Islamic parties and allowed the province, North West Frontier Province, next to Afghanistan under Islamic clerics. Groups friendly to Taleban in the province are fighting with government forces for some time. The agreement with militants in Tribal area, South Waziristan, reportedly demonstrated that the government had some limits how far they could go in Tribal areas.

Fourth, the suspension of the Chief Justice of Pakistan by President Musharraf has been unwise and a great political blunder. It has manifested the President of being too sure of himself in the exercise of his power. It is reported that the wily lawyer Sharifuddin Pirzada (a former Attorney General and former foreign Minister during President Ayub’s

rule) advised both the President and the Prime Minister to take action against the independent-minded Chief Justice. Both the President and the Prime Minister appeared to have failed to gauge the current simmering dissatisfaction among the civil society including human rights activists of President Musharraf's iron-handed rule.

Fifth, if the military administration is too tight for a long time, it bursts just like heavy flow of water bursts dam if water flow is held for a long time. People forget the good things and remember negative things. Eight year rule is a long time for General Musharraf in Pakistan which is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic state. As a federal state Pakistan has yet to take firm roots with greater autonomy for its provinces.. For example Balochistan has become a political problem for the President as the province has yet to reconcile with Islamabad rule.

Sixth, the Red Mosque siege demonstrates how far the extremist Islamic armed militants have spread in Pakistan. Serious questions are already raised why the government has tolerated so long the extremist Islamic clerics right under the eye of the President in the capital. The two clerics Moulana Abdul Aziz of Red mosque, now arrested and another radical cleric Fazlullah of the Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law have been allowed to run madrassas where young extremists are breeding to support Talebans. The Red Mosque drama is a symptom of a deeper malaise.

Finally, President Musharraf's authority seems to be dwindling because of the rising popularity of two former Prime Ministers—Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif-- who live abroad in exile. The Bush administration reportedly supports their return and participation in the next election. The support of the US seems to be a political setback for the President. There is a report that Benazir Bhutto and the President are expected to conclude a political deal.

Conclusion:

President Musharraf should have seen for some time, especially since the uproar over the suspension of the Chief Justice, the cracks in his popularity among people. A great leader is one who retires voluntarily when he/she feels that time has come to hand over to next generation. Luckily the armed forces support the President and once their loyalty is gone, he will be gone from the political scene.