

The General in his Labyrinth

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If there is a single consistent theme in Pervez Musharraf's memoir, it is the familiar military dogma that Pakistan has fared better under its generals than under its politicians. The first batch of generals were the offspring of the departing colonial power. They had been taught to obey orders, respect the command structure of the army whatever the cost and uphold the traditions of the British Indian Army. The bureaucrats who ran Pakistan in its early days were the product of imperial selection procedures designed to turn out incorruptible civil servants wearing a mask of objectivity. The military chain of command is still respected, but the civil service now consists largely of ruthlessly corrupt time-servers. Once its members were loyal to the imperial state: today they cater to the needs of the army.

Pakistan's first uniformed ruler, General Ayub Khan, a Sandhurst-trained colonial officer, seized power in October 1958 with strong encouragement from both Washington and London. They were fearful that the projected first general election might produce a coalition that would take Pakistan out of security pacts like Seato and towards a non-aligned foreign policy. Ayub banned all political parties, took over opposition newspapers and told the first meeting of his cabinet: 'As far as you are concerned there is only one embassy that matters in this country: the American Embassy.' In a radio broadcast to the nation he informed his bewildered 'fellow countrymen' that 'we must understand that democracy cannot work in a hot climate. To have democracy we must have a cold climate like Britain.'

Perhaps remarks of this sort account for Ayub's popularity in the West. He became a great favourite of the press in Britain and the US. His bluff exterior certainly charmed Christine Keeler (they splashed together in the pool at Cliveden during a Commonwealth Prime Ministers'

Conference) and the saintly Kingsley Martin of the New Statesman published a grovelling interview. Meanwhile opposition voices were silenced and political prisoners tortured; Hasan Nasir, a Communist, died as a result. In 1962 - by now he had promoted himself to field-marshal - Ayub decided that the time had come to widen his appeal. He took off his uniform, put on native gear and addressed a public meeting (a forced gathering of peasants assembled by their landlords) at which he announced that there would soon be presidential elections and he hoped people would support him. The bureaucracy organised a political party - the Convention Muslim League - and careerists flocked to join it. The election took place in 1965 and the polls had to be rigged to ensure the field-marshal's victory. His opponent, Fatima Jinnah (the sister of the country's founder), fought a spirited campaign but to no avail. The handful of bureaucrats who had refused to help fix the election were offered early retirement.

Now that he had been formally elected, it was thought that Ayub would be further legitimised by the publication of his memoirs. *Friends Not Masters: A Political Autobiography* appeared from Oxford in 1967 to great acclaim in the Western press and was greeted with sycophantic hysteria in the government-controlled media at home. But Ayub's information secretary, Altaf Gauhar, a crafty, cynical courtier, had ghosted a truly awful book: stodgy, crude, verbose and full of half-truths. It backfired badly in Pakistan and was soon being viciously satirised in clandestine pamphlets on university campuses. Ayub had suggested that Pakistanis 'should study this book, understand and act upon it . . . it contains material which is for the good of the people.' More than 70 per cent of the population was illiterate and of the rest only a tiny elite could read English. In October 1968, during lavish celebrations to commemorate the ten years of dictatorship as a 'decade of development', students in Rawalpindi demanded the restoration of democracy; soon Student Action Committees had spread across the country. The state responded with its usual brutality. There were mass arrests and orders to 'kill rioters'. Several students died during the first few weeks. In the two months that followed workers, lawyers, small

shopkeepers, prostitutes and government clerks joined the protests. Stray dogs with 'Ayub' painted on their backs became a special target for armed cops. In March 1969 Ayub passed control of the country to the whisky-soaked General Yahya Khan.

Yahya promised a free election within a year and kept his word. The 1970 general election (the first in Pakistan's history) resulted in a sensational victory for the Awami League, Bengali nationalists from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The Bengalis were disgruntled, and for good reason: East Pakistan, where a majority of the population lived, was treated as a colony and the Bengalis wanted a federal government. The military-political-economic elite came from West Pakistan, however, and all it could see in the Awami League's victory was a threat to its privileges.

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party, which had triumphed in the western portion of the country, should have negotiated a settlement with the victors. Instead he sulked, told his party to boycott a meeting of the new assembly that had been called in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan, and thus provided the army with breathing space to prepare a military assault. Yahya prevented the leader of the Awami League, Mujibur Rahman, from forming a government and, in March 1971, sent in troops to occupy East Pakistan. 'Thank God, Pakistan has been saved,' Bhutto declared, aligning himself with what followed. Rahman was arrested and several hundred nationalist and left-wing intellectuals, activists and students were killed in a carefully organised massacre. The lists of victims had been prepared with the help of local Islamist vigilantes, whose party, the Jamaat-e-Islami, had lost badly in the elections. The killings were followed by a campaign of mass rape. Soldiers were told that Bengalis were relatively recent converts to Islam and hence not 'proper Muslims' - their genes needed improving.

The atrocities provoked an armed resistance and there were appeals for military aid from New Delhi, where the Awami League had established a government-in-exile. The Indians, fearful that Bengali refugees might destabilise the Indian

province of West Bengal and no doubt sensing an opportunity, sent in their army, which was welcomed as a liberating force. Within a fortnight, the Pakistan troops were surrounded. Their commander, General 'Tiger' Niazi, chose surrender rather than martyrdom, for which his colleagues, a thousand miles from the battlefield, were never to forgive him. In December 1971, East Pakistan became Bangladesh and 90,000 West Pakistani soldiers ended up in Indian prisoner of war camps. Nixon, Kissinger and Mao had all 'tilted towards Pakistan' but to little effect. It was a total disaster for the Pakistan army: the first phase of military rule had led to the division of the country and the loss of a majority of its population.

Bhutto was left with a defeated army and a truncated state. He had been elected on a social-democratic programme that pledged food, clothing, education and shelter for all, major land reform and nationalisation. He was the only political leader Pakistan has ever produced who had the power, buttressed by mass support, to change the country and its institutions, including the army, for ever. But he failed on every front. The nationalisations merely replaced profit-hungry businessmen with corrupt cronies and tame bureaucrats. As landlords flocked to join his party, the radical reforms he had promised in the countryside were shelved. The poor felt instinctively that Bhutto was on their side (the elite never forgave him) but few measures were enacted to justify their confidence. His style of government was authoritarian; his personal vindictiveness was corrosive.

Bhutto attempted to fight the religious opposition by stealing their clothes: he banned the sale of alcohol, made Friday a public holiday and declared the Ahmediyya sect to be non-Muslims (a long-standing demand of the Jamaat-e-Islami that had, till then, been treated with contempt). These measures did not help him, but damaged the country by legitimising confessional politics. Despite his worries about the Islamist opposition, Bhutto would probably have won the 1977 elections without state interference, though with a reduced majority. But the manipulation was so blatant that the opposition came out on the

streets and neither his sarcasm nor his wit was any help in the crisis.

Always a bad judge of character, he had made a junior general and small-minded zealot, Zia-ul-Haq, army chief of staff. As head of the Pakistani training mission to Jordan, Brigadier Zia had led the Black September assault on the Palestinians in 1970. In July 1977, to pre-empt an agreement between Bhutto and the opposition parties that would have entailed new elections, Zia struck. Bhutto was arrested, and held for a few weeks, and Zia promised that new elections would be held within six months, after which the military would return to barracks. A year later Bhutto, still popular and greeted by large crowds wherever he went, was again arrested, and this time charged with murder, tried and hanged in April 1979.

Over the next ten years the political culture of Pakistan was brutalised. As public floggings (of dissident journalists among others) and hangings became the norm, Zia himself was turned into a Cold War hero - thanks largely to events in Afghanistan. Religious affinity did nothing to mitigate the hostility of Afghan leaders to their neighbour. The main reason was the Durand Line, which was imposed on the Afghans in 1893 to mark the frontier between British India and Afghanistan and which divided the Pashtun population of the region. After a hundred years (the Hong Kong model) all of what became the North-Western Frontier Province of British India was supposed to revert to Afghanistan but no government in Kabul ever accepted the Durand Line any more than they accepted British, or, later, Pakistani control, over the territory.

In 1977, when Zia came to power, 90 per cent of men and 98 per cent of women in Afghanistan were illiterate; 5 per cent of landowners held 45 per cent of the cultivable land and the country had the lowest per capita income of any in Asia. The same year, the Parcham Communists, who had backed the 1973 military coup by Prince Daud after which a republic was proclaimed, withdrew their support from Daud, were reunited with other Communist groups to form the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), and began to agitate for a new government. The regimes in neighbouring

countries became involved. The shah of Iran, acting as a conduit for Washington, recommended firm action - large-scale arrests, executions, torture - and put units from his torture agency at Daud's disposal. The shah also told Daud that if he recognised the Durand Line as a permanent frontier the shah would give Afghanistan \$3 billion and Pakistan would cease hostile actions. Meanwhile, Pakistani intelligence agencies were arming Afghan exiles while encouraging old-style tribal uprisings aimed at restoring the monarchy. Daud was inclined to accept the shah's offer, but the Communists organised a pre-emptive coup and took power in April 1978. There was panic in Washington, which increased tenfold as it became clear that the shah too was about to be deposed. General Zia's dictatorship thus became the lynchpin of US strategy in the region, which is why Washington green-lighted Bhutto's execution and turned a blind eye to the country's nuclear programme. The US wanted a stable Pakistan whatever the cost.

As we now know, plans (a 'bear-trap', in the words of the US national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski) were laid to destabilise the PDPA, in the hope that its Soviet protectors would be drawn in. Plans of this sort often go awry, but they succeeded in Afghanistan, primarily because of the weaknesses of the Afghan Communists themselves: they had come to power through a military coup which hadn't involved any mobilisation outside Kabul, yet they pretended this was a national revolution; their Stalinist political formation made them allergic to any form of accountability and ideas such as drafting a charter of democratic rights or holding free elections to a constituent assembly never entered their heads. Ferocious factional struggles led, in September 1979, to a Mafia-style shoot-out at the Presidential Palace in Kabul, during which the prime minister, Hafizullah Amin, shot President Taraki dead. Amin, a nutty Stalinist, claimed that 98 per cent of the population supported his reforms but the 2 per cent who opposed them had to be liquidated. There were mutinies in the army and risings in a number of towns as a result, and this time they had nothing to do with the Americans or General Zia.

Finally, after two unanimous Politburo decisions

against intervention, the Soviet Union changed its mind, saying that it had 'new documentation'. This is still classified, but it would not surprise me in the least if the evidence consisted of forgeries suggesting that Amin was a CIA agent. Whatever it was, the Politburo, with Yuri Andropov voting against, now decided to send troops into Afghanistan. Its aim was to get rid of a discredited regime and replace it with a marginally less repulsive one. Sound familiar?

From 1979 until 1988, Afghanistan was the focal point of the Cold War. Millions of refugees crossed the Durand Line and settled in camps and cities in the NWFP. Weapons and money, as well as jihadis from Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Egypt, flooded into Pakistan. All the main Western intelligence agencies (including the Israelis') had offices in Peshawar, near the frontier. The black-market and market rates for the dollar were exactly the same. Weapons, including Stinger missiles, were sold to the mujahedin by Pakistani officers who wanted to get rich quickly. The heroin trade flourished and the number of registered addicts in Pakistan grew from a few hundred in 1977 to a few million in 1987. (One of the banks through which the heroin mafia laundered money was the BCCI - whose main PR abroad was a retired civil servant called Altaf Gauhar.)

As for Pakistan and its people, they languished. During Zia's period in power, the Jamaat-e-Islami, which had never won more than 5 per cent of the vote anywhere in the country, was patronised by the government; its cadres were sent to fight in Afghanistan, its armed student wing was encouraged to terrorise campuses in the name of Islam, its ideologues were ever present on TV. The Inter-Services Intelligence also encouraged the formation of other, more extreme jihadi groups, which carried out acts of terror at home and abroad and set up madrassahs all over the frontier provinces. Soon Zia, too, needed his own political party and the bureaucracy set one up: the Pakistan Muslim League.

With the elevation of Mikhail Gorbachev in March 1985 it became obvious that the Soviet Union would accept defeat in Afghanistan and withdraw its troops. It wanted some guarantees for the

Afghans it was leaving behind and the United States - its mission successful - was prepared to play ball. General Zia, however, was not. The Afghan war had gone to his head (as it did to that of Osama bin Laden and his colleagues) and he wanted his own people in power there. As the Soviet withdrawal got closer, Zia and the ISI made plans for the postwar settlement.

And then Zia disappeared. On 17 August 1988, he took five generals to the trial of a new US Abrams M-1/A-1 tank at a military test range near Bahawalpur. Also present were a US general and the US ambassador, Arnold Raphael. The demonstration did not go well and everybody was grumpy. Zia offered the Americans a lift in his specially built C-130 aircraft, which had a sealed cabin to protect him from assassins. A few minutes after the plane took off, the pilots lost control and it crashed into the desert. All the passengers were killed. All that was left of Zia was his jawbone, which was duly buried in Islamabad (the chowk - roundabout - nearby became known to cabbies as 'Jawbone Chowk'). The cause of the crash remains a mystery. The US National Archives contain 250 pages of documents, but they are still classified. Pakistani intelligence experts have told me informally that it was the Russians taking their revenge. Most Pakistanis blamed the CIA, as they always do. Zia's son and widow whispered that it was 'our own people' in the army.

With Zia's assassination, the second period of military rule in Pakistan came to an end. What followed was a longish civilian prologue to Musharraf's reign. For ten years members of two political dynasties - the Bhutto and Sharif families - ran the country in turn. It was Benazir Bhutto's minister of the interior, General Naseerullah Babar, who, with the ISI, devised the plan to set up the Taliban as a politico-military force that could penetrate Afghanistan, a move half-heartedly approved by the US Embassy. Washington had lost interest in Afghanistan and Pakistan once the Soviet Union had withdrawn its troops. The Taliban ('students') were children of Afghan refugees and poor Pathan families 'educated' in the madrassahs in the 1980s: they provided the shock troops, but were led by a handful of experienced mujahedin

including Mullah Omar. Without Pakistan's support they could never have taken Kabul, although Mullah Omar preferred to forget this. Omar's faction was dominant, but the ISI never completely lost control of the organisation. Islamabad kept its cool even when Omar's zealots asserted their independence by attacking the Pakistan Embassy in Kabul and his religious police interrupted a football match between the two countries because the Pakistan players sported long hair and shorts, caned the players before the stunned crowd and sent them back home.

After Benazir's fall, the Sharif brothers returned to power. And once again, Shahbaz, the younger but shrewder sibling, accepted family discipline and Nawaz became the prime minister. In 1998 Sharif decided to make Pervez Musharraf army chief of staff in preference to the more senior General Ali Kuli Khan (who was at college with me in Lahore). Sharif's reasoning may have been that Musharraf, from a middle-class, refugee background like himself, would be easier to manipulate than Ali Kuli, who came from a landed Pathan family in the NWFP. Whatever the reasoning, it turned out to be a mistake.

On Bill Clinton's urging, Sharif pushed for a rapprochement with India. Travel and trade agreements were negotiated, land borders were opened, flights resumed, but before the next stage could be reached, the Pakistan army began to assemble in the Himalayan foothills. The ISI claimed that the Siachen glacier in Kashmir had been illegally occupied by the Indians and the Indians claimed the opposite. Neither side could claim victory after the fighting that followed, but casualties were high, particularly on the Indian side (Musharraf exaggerates Pakistan's 'triumph'). A ceasefire was agreed and each army returned to its side of the Line of Control.

Why did the war take place at all? In private the Sharif brothers told associates that the army was opposed to their policy of friendship with India and was determined to sabotage the process: the army had acted without receiving clearance from the government. In his memoir, Musharraf insists that the army had kept the prime minister informed in briefings in January and February 1999. Whatever the truth, Sharif told Washington

that he had been bounced into a war he didn't want, and not long after the war, the Sharif family decided to get rid of Musharraf. Constitutionally, the prime minister had the power to dismiss the chief of staff and appoint a new one, as Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had done in the 1970s, when he appointed Zia. But the army then was weak, divided and defeated; this was certainly not the case in 1999.

Sharif's candidate to succeed Musharraf was General Ziauddin Butt, head of the ISI, who was widely seen as corrupt and incompetent. He was bundled off to Washington for vetting and while there is said to have pledged bin Laden's head on a platter. If Sharif had just dismissed Musharraf he might have had a better chance of success but what he lacked in good sense his brother tried to make up for in guile. Were the Sharif brothers really so foolish as believe that the army was unaware of their intrigues or were they misled by their belief in US omnipotence? Clinton duly warned the army that Washington would not tolerate a military coup in Pakistan and I remember chuckling at the time that this was a first in US-Pakistan relations. Sharif relied too heavily on Clinton's warning.

What followed was a tragi-comic episode that is well described in Musharraf's book. He and his wife were flying back from Sri Lanka on a normal passenger flight when the pilot received instructions not to land. While the plane was still circling over Karachi, Nawaz Sharif summoned General Butt and in front of a TV crew swore him in as the new chief of staff. Meanwhile there was panic on Musharraf's plane, by now low on fuel. He managed to establish contact with the commander of the Karachi garrison, the army took control of the airport and the plane landed safely. Simultaneously, military units surrounded the prime minister's house in Islamabad and arrested Nawaz Sharif. General Zia had been assassinated on a military flight; Musharraf took power on board a passenger plane.

So began the third extended period of military rule in Pakistan, initially welcomed by all Nawaz Sharif's political opponents and many of his colleagues. In the Line of Fire gives the official version of what has been happening in

Pakistan over the last six years and is intended largely for Western eyes. Where Altaf Gauhar injected nonsense of every sort into Ayub's memoirs, his son Humayun Gauhar, who edited this book, has avoided the more obvious pitfalls. The general's raffish lifestyle is underplayed but there is enough in the book to suggest that he is not too easily swayed by religious or social obligations.

The score-settling with enemies at home is crude and for that reason the book has caused a commotion in Pakistan. A spirited controversy has erupted in the media, something that could never have happened during previous periods of military rule. Scathing criticism has come from ex-generals (Ali Kuli Khan's rejoinder was published in most newspapers), opposition politicians and pundits of every sort. In fact, there was more state interference in the media during Nawaz Sharif's tenure than there is under Musharraf and the level of debate is much higher than in India, where the middle-class obsession with shopping and celebrity has led to a trivialisation of TV and most of the print media.

When Musharraf seized power in 1999, he refused to move house, preferring his more homely, colonial bungalow in Rawalpindi to the kitsch comfort of the President's House in Islamabad, with its gilt furniture and tasteless decor that owes more to Gulf State opulence than local tradition. The cities are close to each other, but far from identical. Islamabad, laid out in a grid pattern and overlooked by the Himalayan foothills, was built in the 1960s by General Ayub. He wanted a new capital remote from threatening crowds, but close to GHQ in Rawalpindi, which had been constructed by the British as a garrison town. After Partition, it became the obvious place to situate the military headquarters of the new Pakistan.

One of the 19th-century British colonial expeditions to conquer Afghanistan (they all ended in disaster) was planned in Rawalpindi. And it was also from there, a century and a half later, that the Washington-blessed jihad was launched against the hopeless Afghan Communists. And it was there too that the US demand to use Pakistan as a base for its operations in

Afghanistan was discussed and agreed in September 2001. This was a crucial decision for the army chiefs because it meant the dismantling of their only foreign triumph: the placing of the Taliban in Kabul.

Heavy traffic often makes the ten-mile journey from Islamabad to Rawalpindi tortuous, unless you're the president and the highway has been cleared by a security detail. Even then, as this book reveals in some detail, assassination attempts can play havoc with the schedule. The first happened on 14 December 2003. Moments after the general's motorcade passed over a bridge, a powerful bomb exploded and badly damaged the bridge, although no one was hurt. The armoured limo, fitted with radar and an anti-bomb device, courtesy of the Pentagon, saved Musharraf's life. His demeanour at the time surprised observers. He was said to have been calm and cheerful, making jocular allusions to living in perilous times. Unsurprisingly, security had been high - decoys, last-minute route changes etc - but this didn't prevent another attempt a week later, on Christmas Day. This time two men driving cars loaded with explosives came close to success. The president's car was damaged, guards in cars escorting him were killed, but Musharraf was unhurt. Since his exact route and the time of his departure from Islamabad were heavily guarded secrets the terrorists must have had inside information. If your security staff includes angry Islamists who see you as a traitor and want to blow you up, then, as the general states in his memoir, Allah alone can protect you. He has certainly been kind to Musharraf.

The culprits were discovered, and tortured till they revealed details of the plot. Some junior military officers were also implicated. The key plotters were tried in secret and hanged. The supposed mastermind, a jihadi extremist called Amjad Farooqi, was shot by security forces.

Two questions haunt both Washington and Musharraf's colleagues: how many of those involved remain undetected and would the command structure of the army survive if a terrorist succeeded next time around? Musharraf doesn't seem worried and adopts a jaunty, even boastful tone. Before 9/11 he was treated like a pariah

abroad and beset by problems at home. How to fortify the will of a high command weakened by piety and corruption? How to deal with the corruption and embezzlement that had been a dominant feature of both the Sharif and Bhutto governments? Benazir Bhutto was already in self-exile in Dubai; the Sharif brothers had been arrested. Before they could be charged, however, Washington organised an offer of asylum from Saudi Arabia, a state whose ruling family has institutionalised the theft of public funds.

Musharraf's unstinting support for the US after 9/11 prompted local wags to dub him 'Busharraf', and was the motive behind the attempts on his life. (In March 2005 Condoleezza Rice described the US-Pakistan relationship since 9/11 as 'broad and deep'.) Had he not, after all, unravelled Pakistan's one military victory in order to please Washington? General Mahmood Ahmed, who headed the ISI, was in Washington as a guest of the Pentagon, trying to convince the Defense Intelligence Agency that Mullah Omar was a good bloke and could be persuaded to disgorge Osama, when the attacks of 11 September took place. That his listeners were freaked out by this is hardly surprising. Musharraf tells us he agreed to become Washington's surrogate because the State Department honcho, Richard Armitage, threatened to bomb Pakistan back to the Stone Age if he didn't. What really worried Islamabad, however, was a threat Musharraf doesn't mention: if Pakistan refused, the US would have used Indian bases.

Musharraf was initially popular in Pakistan and if he had pushed through reforms aimed at providing an education (with English as a compulsory second language) for all children, instituted land reforms which would have ended the stranglehold of the gentry on large swathes of the countryside, tackled corruption in the armed forces and everywhere else, and ended the jihadi escapades in Kashmir and Pakistan as a prelude to a long-term deal with India, then he might have left a mark on the country. Instead, he has mimicked his military predecessors. Like them, he took off his uniform, went to a landlord-organised gathering in Sind and entered politics. His party? The evergreen, ever available Muslim League. His supporters? Chips

off the same old corrupt block that he had denounced so vigorously and whose leaders he was prosecuting. His prime minister? Shaukat 'Shortcut' Aziz, formerly a senior executive of Citibank with close ties to the eighth richest man in the world, the Saudi prince Al-Walid bin Talal. As it became clear that nothing much was going to change a wave of cynicism engulfed the country.

Musharraf is better than Zia and Ayub in many ways, but human rights groups have noticed a sharp rise in the number of political activists who are being 'disappeared': four hundred this year alone, including Sindhi nationalists and a total of 1200 in the province of Baluchistan, where the army has become trigger-happy once again. The war on terror has provided many leaders with the chance to sort out their opponents, but that doesn't make it any better.

In his book he expresses his detestation of religious extremists and his regrets over the murder of Daniel Pearl. He suggests that one of those responsible, the former LSE student Omar Saeed Sheikh, was an MI6 recruit who was sent to fight the Serbs in Bosnia. Al-Qaida fighters had also been sent there (with US approval) and Sheikh established contact with them and became a double agent. Now Sheikh sits in a death-cell in a Pakistani prison, chatting amiably to his guards and emailing newspaper editors in Pakistan to tell them that if he is executed papers he has left behind will be published exposing the complicity of others. Perhaps this is bluff, or perhaps he was a triple agent and was working for the ISI as well.

Next year there will be an election and rumours abound that Musharraf is offering Benazir Bhutto's People's Party a deal, but one that excludes her. A few years ago she could be spotted in Foggy Bottom, waiting forlornly to plead for US support from a State Department junior on the South Asia desk. All she wanted then was a cabinet position under Musharraf, so that she could remain a presence on the political scene. Musharraf is much weaker now and she may decide not to play ball with him, but to hang on for something better.

And then there is Afghanistan. Despite the fake

optimism of Blair and his Nato colleagues everyone is aware that it is a total mess. A revived Taliban is winning popularity by resisting the occupation. Nato helicopters and soldiers are killing hundreds of civilians and describing them as 'Taliban fighters'. Hamid Karzai, the man with the nice shawls, is seen as a hopeless puppet, totally dependent on Nato troops. He has antagonised both the Pashtuns, who are turning to the Taliban once again in large numbers, and the warlords of the Northern Alliance, who openly denounce him and suggest it's time he was sent back to the States. In western Afghanistan, it is only the Iranian influence that has preserved a degree of stability. If Ahmedinejad was provoked into withdrawing his support, Karzai would not last more than a week. Islamabad waits and watches. Military strategists are convinced that the US has lost interest and Nato will soon leave. If that happens Pakistan is unlikely to permit the Northern Alliance to take Kabul. Its army will move in again. A Pakistan veteran of the Afghan wars joked with me: 'Last time we sent in the beards, but times have changed. This time, inshallah, we'll dress them all in Armani suits so it looks good on US television.' The region remains fog-bound. Pakistan's first military leader was seen off by a popular insurrection. The second was assassinated. What will happen to Musharraf?

P.S.

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