

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan - General Pervez Musharraf: Neither Enlightened nor Moderate

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Musharraf's lasting legacy is upending the constitutional order, death and destruction in Balochistan, sowing the winds of Talibanisation for which the country reaps the whirlwinds, and a career full of lies and deceit.

Can you tell me the [names of my dogs](#)?"

"Dot and Buddy, Sir!"

The man asking the question was Pakistan's canine-loving, whiskey-imbibing, cigar-smoking, philandering Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Pervez Musharraf. He was speaking from the cockpit of the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) flight PK 805 that was airborne from Colombo to Karachi on October 12, 1999, but had been directed by Pakistan's civil aviation officials not to land at the destination. The man answering with that password of sorts was Major General Malik Iftikhar Ali Khan, the commander of an army division in Karachi, whose troops had secured the airport and had asked that the PIA's commercial flight carrying 198 passengers to make its landing. The then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had removed Musharraf and appointed Lieutenant General Zia-ud-din Butt as the new COAS, just when that fateful flight had taken off from Colombo.

This was Musharraf's second journey into Karachi under tumultuous circumstances. On the eve of Partition 1947, a four-year-old Musharraf had taken a train from Delhi along with his parents and two brothers, to arrive in Karachi on August 15. Syed Pervez Musharraf was born on August 11, 1943 in Old Delhi. His father Syed Musharraf Uddin was a graduate of the Aligarh University and worked as an accountant in the foreign service. Musharraf's mother Zarin had a degree in English literature from the Indraprastha College for Women, Delhi. She became a schoolteacher, and later joined the Pakistan Customs, to supplement what he described as a "not very well off" family's income.

The family moved to Turkey when Musharraf's father was posted in Ankara. The young Musharraf was deeply influenced by Mustafa Kemal Pasha and through his adult life, considered the father of modern Turkey - Ataturk - his hero. He joined the Pakistan army in 1961 during the country's first martial law, imposed by General Ayub Khan. Musharraf was an artillery man who later joined the Special Services Group (SSG) or the Commandos, fought in two wars with India without much gallantry to write home about, became the Director General Military Operations (DGMO), and eventually commanded a strike corps.

Musharraf was picked as the COAS by PM Nawaz Sharif, after [General Jehangir Karamat tendered his resignation](#) when Sharif dressed him down for publicly calling for an army-dominated National Security Council that would play a key role in determining government policy. Sharif is said to have erroneously assumed that as a *Muhajir* - an émigré from India - Musharraf may not be able to

muster enough support in a Punjabi-dominated army, to pose a threat to him. In Pakistan, however, chief is the army and army the chief, and their mutual conduct serves the organisational imperatives that the army has at that particular time to preserve and perpetuate its preeminence. It does not matter whether the army is led by a Hindko-speaking ethnic Pashtun like Ayub Khan, a Persianate Qizilbash like Yahya Khan, or a Punjabi Muhajir like Ziaul Haq, the institutional self-preservation informs the conduct of both the outfit and its chief.

Personal ambition and character traits of a chief do play a limited part in the army's posturing. General Karamat's bowing out, for example, was a personal decision over which many in the brass, including Musharraf, were not happy. In the months leading up to Musharraf's dismissal, he and Sharif were like dueling dragons waiting for a chance to pounce on the other. Nawaz Sharif was deeply upset that Musharraf had kept him in the dark over the army's Kargil misadventure and then pleaded with him to beseech the Americans to pull their chestnuts out of the Indian Bofors' fire. And when he did, the army tried to make the defeat and retreat look like his weakness.

The former PM was keen on mending fences with India and had felt betrayed by the Kargil misadventure undermining his joint efforts with Atal Bihari Vajpayee culminating in the latter's Bus Yatra and the [Lahore Declaration](#) for peace. The brass, on the other hand, was in no mood for a General Karamat redux or worse, when Zulfikar Ali [Bhutto had fired](#) and put under house arrest the acting Commander-in-Chief General Gul Hassan Khan and Air Marshal Abdul Rahim Khan, on charges of what he had called their Bonapartism. Musharraf later claimed to have conveyed to Sharif via emissaries that he was not Karamat and won't take it lying down. Sharif rightly suspected that a coup was in the works but tried quite shoddily to preempt it by sacking Musharraf after all.

The news, announced on the state-owned Pakistan Television (PTV), was not received well by the brass, but it was ready. The generals on the ground immediately sprung into action to launch what Musharraf later called a "countercoup" to what he described as the PM's "*coup d'état*". The most disingenuous use of the term coup notwithstanding, that a coterie of generals including the Chief of General Staff Lt. General Mohammad Aziz Khan, DGMO Maj. General Shahid Aziz, commander of the Corps X at Rawalpindi Lt. General Mahmood Ahmed, the commander of the Corps V at Karachi Lt. General Muzaffar Usmani, commander of the notorious coup-making Triple Brigade Brigadier Salahuddin Satti *et al*, had launched and successfully executed the putsch while the deposed COAS still in the air, shows that the rebellion was an institutional, not an individual's, decision.

Pakistan army was the coup-maker and Musharraf merely its face. As soon as PK 805 landed, Musharraf was taken to the corps headquarters, where he penned [his short speech](#) to declare the army takeover. [Martial law was formally declared](#) two days later. Before recording the first speech in Karachi, Musharraf realised that he was wearing a suit. He was clearly underdressed for the occasion. So, he grabbed a flak jacket from an SSG commando and put it on for the cameras, while his mufti trousers were hidden by the desk. Chairman PTV Akhtar Waqar Azeem, whose crews were recording, [chronicles](#) that even when Musharraf got up for stills, they made sure that the pictures captured only an above-the-waist image. The newly-minted dictator was to later describe the uniform as his skin, which he refused to doff for nearly a decade.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Musharraf was nothing without the institutional power that installed him and every decision he took in the years leading up to the coup, and each one thereafter, was the army's decision. The regime tried and convicted Nawaz Sharif for hijacking that airplane and terrorism, and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Under pressure from international powers, especially Saudi Arabia, Sharif's sentence was commuted, and he was [exiled to Riyadh](#). Taking a page from the army's martial law playbook, Musharraf eventually dissolved the suspended national and provincial assemblies, and – like Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq before him – [appointed himself the president](#) in June 2001.

Three months later the al-Qaeda attacked the mainland US, leading to American officials delivering a [dire warning to the Musharraf regime](#). The army under Musharraf had continued to be the chief patron of the Taliban Emirate in Afghanistan, which was hosting the al-Qaeda. The US meant business and Musharraf got the message. To flout the US would have meant serious consequences. Musharraf pledged a total and complete cooperation but meant neither. The brass under Musharraf devised a duplicitous policy under which it collaborated with the US and its allies in hunting down mid and even certain high-level al-Qaeda leaders, but protected the Taliban leadership. Musharraf regime provided logistic support, including bases for the CIA drones and ground lines of communication (GLOCs), for the US troops which had invaded Afghanistan, while simultaneously moving its Taliban clients into Pakistan, especially Pashtun regions including the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Peshawar, and Quetta.

The Taliban's one-eyed emir, Mullah Omar and his Kandahar-based clique was relocated to the Quetta region and became known eponymously as the Quetta Shura (council), the Haqqani Network was retracted into North Waziristan, Peshawar and even Rawalpindi and Islamabad. While [pledging 500% commitment to the defeat of the Taliban](#), and collecting [billions of dollars from the US in rent](#) for the bases and GLOCs, the Musharraf regime was actually laying the foundation of a Taliban comeback. Musharraf, a verbose man with horrible Urdu and English accents, was able to peddle rather successfully to the west, what he called [an Enlightened Moderation](#) to counter faith-based extremism. But what he did, especially in the Pashtun lands and Balochistan, was the exact opposite, and more.

To prepare ground for the Taliban resurgence, the Musharraf regime enabled a conglomerate of Pakistan's religio-political parties called the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) to prevail against the secular Pashtun and Baloch nationalists, in what was seen as a manipulated election in 2002. Prior to that he had proclaimed [victory in a fraudulent referendum](#) to remain president for another five years. He unleashed the army's relentless political engineering machine to break up his nemesis Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and created a king's party called the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q). The Musharraf regime also carved up slices from Benazir

Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

The Taliban-friendly MMA formed the government in [Balochistan](#) along with Musharraf's PML-Q and on its own in the [Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa](#) (KP) provinces. The MMA governments were dubbed the Military-Mullah Alliance for turning a blind eye to the literal and ideological Talibanisation underway in the two provinces under its sway. In the federal parliament, the MMA served as a friendly opposition to the PML-Q, which [passed a bill to let Musharraf stay on as the army chief](#), despite his pledge to give up the job that year. Musharraf reneged on his promise in the name of unity of command during turbulent times, and the army fully backed him in that.

Musharraf also used the MMA as a scarecrow to make the US and the west fear the rise of religious zealots to power in Islamabad, where he – the enlightened moderate – abandoned by them. The west may or may not have been able to see through the duplicitous façade but many jihadists did and held Musharraf responsible for selling them out to the west. A direct consequence of this was coalescing together of assorted Pakistani jihadists into the menacing Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Musharraf regime's double game won it the US largesse and support but also entailed a vicious reaction from the TTP and al-Qaeda. Musharraf himself survived three assassination attempts by the jihadists but the army's stakes in the Afghan Taliban's resurgence and reinstallation in Kabul were way too high to abandon that project. Musharraf regime opted to make an arbitrary distinction between the so-called good Taliban i.e., the one who attacked the Americans and the Afghan government vs. the bad Taliban *a la* TTP, which attacked Pakistan. [Musharraf later conceded](#) on record that on his watch the Pakistan army harboured and cultivated the Afghan Taliban and its deadly affiliate, the Haqqani Network, to counter India's influence in Afghanistan. Tens of thousands of Pakistani lives, mostly ethnic Pashtuns and religious minorities, were the [cost of doing business](#), in the army's calculus.

The jihad in Afghanistan was not the only unholy war that the Musharraf regime prosecuted. He also imposed a dirty war on Balochistan that rages on till this day with the army abducting, disappearing, torturing, killing and dumping Baloch young men. It started after a female doctor working in the Sui gas fields in the Bugti tribal territory was [raped by an army captain](#) in her living quarters. Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, a maverick Baloch nationalist leader and influential tribal chief who had previously served as the federal defence minister and provincial chief minister and governor, along with his tribesmen demanded justice for the woman. The incident was perceived as a [breach of their tribal code of honour](#) by the Baloch, who were already seething with anger over the Pakistani state's highhandedness and unfair distribution of resources and gas royalties.

With no justice in sight, they attacked the gas fields. The army under Musharraf responded by sending in thousands of troops supported by armour and aviation. As missiles and bombs rained, a defiant Nawab Bugti took to the mountains. Speaking of Nawab Bugti's resistance, Musharraf had infamously quipped that it wasn't the 1970s – a reference to the Baloch insurgency of 1973 – and he wouldn't know what hit him. Nawab Bugti was neither a separatist nor was he opposed to negotiations that the regime had started but attempted to conduct from a position of strength. [Nawab Bugti was eventually assassinated](#) by a missile attack in August 2006 and Musharraf was later indicted for his murder but predictably acquitted. The rapist was also not brought to book, thanks to Musharraf and his outfit's protection.

The ostensibly liberal general was a case study in why imbibing booze and dancing is not liberalism. Musharraf's regime had infamously put travel restrictions on a gang rape victim, Mukhtaran Mai, precluding her travel to the US. Ironically, Musharraf himself used to turn up in the US quite often. On one such visit he told the *Washington Post*: *"You must understand the environment in Pakistan. This has become a money-making concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped."* The [crass remark, an audio](#)

[of which](#) is still available on the internet, reflecting the general's bigoted mindset started a flurry of rebuke. Musharraf responded by denying that he ever made the comment. The *Washington Post* [stood by its story and called Musharraf exactly who he was – a liar!](#)

Pretty much everything in Musharraf's years in power was usurped, stolen or deceitful. He claimed to have come up with the idea of devolution of power to the local governments. In reality, it was a rehash of the army's so-called Basic Democracy, which it had used under Ayub Khan for political engineering and undermining the established political parties and help him win a fraudulent election against a widely popular Fatima Jinnah. It was subsequently repeated under Ziaul Haq, when he allowed local bodies elections on a non-party basis. Similarly, putting a secular façade on was also adapted from Ayub Khan, who would pretend to be a liberal for his western paymasters but also espoused a [hodgepodge of Islamism and anti-Indian jingoism](#). Ayub Khan had opposed the Indian no-war declaration offers made to Pakistan's civilian rulers, only to propose a joint defence to India, when he himself became the ruler. Musharraf's undercutting, through the Kargil war, of the Sharif-Vajpayee peace effort, only to try something similar himself at the [Agra summit 2001](#), wasn't much different than Ayub Khan's somersault. And like the previous army dictators, Musharraf lied about restoration of democracy for years on end.

With both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto in exile, Musharraf may have been able to hang on to power a bit longer than he did. But he made an unforced error by dismissing the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, whom he had himself appointed. Chaudhry chose to buck the diktat and several judges and thousands of lawyers joined him in protesting Musharraf's decision. In the ninth year of his rule Musharraf and the army had become so unpopular that the brass had to issue a directive that servicemen should avoid visiting public areas in their uniform. The opposition political parties also joined what became a rainbow coalition comprising of parties and groups ranging from the Islamist right wing to small leftist parties. But the lawyer leaders led the charge in a bar vs the garrison battle duked out on the streets and the courtrooms. The army's intelligence apparatus, however, seemed to be standing neutral in the fight, suggesting that it was an institutional need to send the chief out to the pasture. But they seemed to be in no hurry.

The Supreme Court [restored Justice Chaudhry in July 2007](#). Musharraf, however, got himself another presidential term in October 2007, from the same electoral college that he had sired in 2002. Facing a legal challenge to his so-called elections, Musharraf suspended the constitution a second time, declared an emergency and put the chief justice under house arrest again, but this time along with 51 more judges of the superior judiciary. He got a [validation from a set of his handpicked judges](#) but that was an untenable situation. A weakened Musharraf was [forced to announce general elections](#), as his rubberstamp assembly's term was ending. He finally [doffed his uniform](#) in November 2007. He also had to allow Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif back, under international pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia, respectively. Both leaders cast their lot with the lawyers' movement, giving impetus to the protests, which by then overlapped with their elections campaign as well. Benazir Bhutto was tragically killed in a terrorist attack shortly after her return, and years later [Musharraf was indicted for her murder](#). But for the time being Musharraf managed to cling on to power, even after [Bhutto's party formed a coalition](#) government in the spring of 2008.

It was not until the political parties joined forces and [threatened an impeachment](#) in August that year when he finally was [forced to resign](#). But he was still sent off with a guard of honour. His outfit wanted him out but not down. And the army did everything it needed to do protect him after retirement. He chose to leave Pakistan shortly after stepping down. Full of himself and [flush with cash](#), Musharraf [formed his political party](#) called the All Pakistan Muslim League and pledged to contest the 2013 general election. The party was a dud and didn't even attract Musharraf's former cronies and political lackeys. He himself was [barred by a court](#) from contesting elections. His nemesis Nawaz Sharif, however, returned to power in the 2013 elections. Musharraf was finally

indicted in 2014 for high treason and subverting the constitution, and a special court was formed for his trial. In stark contrast to his past bravado of being a commando, Musharraf ran from the trial like a field mouse. He remained holed up in an army hospital on the pretext of an illness. The army stonewalled its former chief's trial on sedition charges, and eventually [helped him flee the country](#). Musharraf himself acknowledged that the then COAS [General Raheel Shareef had helped him leave](#). The special court, headed by the late [Justice Waqar Ahmed Seth](#), however, did convict Musharraf in absentia and awarded the death penalty. Musharraf spent his last years in the UAE first bragging about his days in power and then grappling with a real illness, to which he eventually succumbed over the weekend.

Musharraf's lasting legacy is upending the constitutional order, death and destruction in Balochistan, sowing the winds of Talibanisation for which the country reaps the whirlwinds, and a career full of lies and deceit. As we go to press, his [mortal remains are being flown back](#) to Pakistan. His third major, and final journey into Karachi is an ignominious one – as a convicted dictator, who was neither liberal nor moderate.

Mohammad Taqi

P.S.

- The Wire. 06/FEB/2023:
<https://thewire.in/south-asia/general-pervez-musharraf-neither-enlightened-nor-moderate>
- *Mohammad Taqi is a Pakistani-American columnist. He tweets [@mazdaki](#).*