

Pakistan's people want an end to the nightmare

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Declaring a state of emergency in Pakistan would only prove Pervez Musharraf's inability to break from a brutal, shabby legacy, says Tariq Ali.

Every Pakistani leader, civilian or military, sits on a throne that is placed on a volcano periodically shaken by convulsions. As a crisis-ridden country prepares to commemorate the 60th anniversary of its foundation next week, the government is seriously divided, and its uniformed president was reported to be considering the imposition of a state of emergency, usually the last act of a government about to fall.

In most countries the very existence of a military leader symbolises a state of emergency, but not in Pakistan. The military has ruled the country for more than 30 years, survived the hot lava of numerous uprisings and assassinations, and always returned to power, largely unscathed. This political cycle is now well established: military rule - angry protests - civilian government - corruption, rigged elections and worse - military rule. The country's 200 million people deserve better.

Bar talk of a neocolonial variety among western diplomats and their media adjuncts in Islamabad, to the effect that the chaos in Pakistan is an indication of a people incapable of self-government, was recently given global prominence by the thoughtless rhetoric of US presidential hopeful Barrack Obama, trying to act tough in the face of strong domestic competition. By now, even a fool should understand that imposing a Baghdad-style green zone in northern Pakistan and importing the chaos of occupied Afghanistan could only make matters worse.

The two crises that recently engulfed the country were polar opposites in nature. The first, a constitutional struggle triggered by the crude suspension of the supreme court chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, was dominated by civil society, with judges, lawyers, law students and activists from opposition parties and broadcasters demanding a separation of powers and an independent judiciary. This ended in a victory of sorts, with the regime accepting the reinstatement of Chaudhry by the court.

Simultaneously a group of preachers in a mosque in the heart of Islamabad began to take violent direct action by kidnapping "prostitutes", attacking libraries and demanding religious laws to further increase the social control of women and a special religious police to ensure their implementation. In the face of this provocation, the government dithered. Its religious affairs minister, Ijaz ul-Haq, was confident that he could broker a deal. And not without reason. The valuable urban land given by the state to build the mosque and madrasas over two blocks was a legacy of Ijaz's father, Zia ul-Haq, the country's previous military dictator (1977-89). The people are still paying the price for what was the darkest, coldest, most brutal and shabby period in Pakistan's history. The father of the two preachers who directed the violence from the mosque had worked for military intelligence. Musharraf proved too weak to break from this legacy. A scratch turned to

gangrene. The military doctors resorted to amputation.

There were no mass mobilisations to support the judges or the jihadis. Even the alliance of moderate religious parties that has power in the North-West Frontier Province has not defended the Red Mosque jihadis group, apart from requesting that women and children are protected. The pro-jihadi demonstration in Peshawar attracted a thousand people, which is why the talk about imposing a state of emergency and suspending fundamental rights is largely an internal manoeuvre by power brokers, led by the venal politicians from Gujrat at present backing Musharraf but fearful he might dump them to do a deal with Benazir Bhutto in order to appease Washington.

The multitudes remain silent and passive, seeing neither struggle as being fought in their interests. The average citizen is caught between the violence - arbitrary, deliberate and indiscriminating - of both sides, jihadi extremists and the state. The dominating desire is for an end to the nightmare.

The whole issue raises an old question: what is the degree of Islamist penetration of the military? Is it fear of exacerbating divisions in the military and its agencies that resulted in the extraordinary caution displayed by the regime. I don't think so.

Two considerations unite the senior officers inside the army. First, military unity must be preserved. No breach in the command structure will be tolerated. Second, they will not accept domination or interference in matters military by politicians. One reason is the fear that they might lose the comforts and privileges they have acquired after decades of rule; but there is also a deep aversion to democracy that is the hallmark of most armies. Unused to accountability within their own ranks, it's difficult for them to accept it in society at large.

In Pakistan the military gave up being a lobby that tries to influence an elected government a long time ago, and became a permanent conspiracy to replace any government that did not do its bidding. The three popular figures within the military academies in Pakistan are Napoleon, De Gaulle and Kemal Ataturk. The first provided a legal code still in force. The second pulled France out of Nato and denounced US imperialism. The third separated religion from the state. Pakistan's uniformed despots have so far failed on every count.

P.S.

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