

# Musharraf's Second Coup

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After months of feverish speculation, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, in his capacity as chief of the army staff, carried out what appeared, on the face of it, to be a coup against his own government. Employing a method that has long been a staple for Pakistan's military dictators, he issued a provisional constitutional order (PCO) whereby the nation's constitution stands suspended until further notice. Tellingly, it was simultaneously pointed out that only those provisions of the constitution that relate to basic human rights would in fact be "held in abeyance".

The federal and provincial governments and assemblies are also to remain intact for the time being. Which matters little, given that even before the proclamation of emergency they were primarily serving a cosmetic purpose. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told a press conference on Sunday that the general elections that were supposed to be held in early January are likely to be put off for a year or so. That doesn't really come as a surprise: polls under the existing conditions would be even a bigger farce than usual. On the other hand, there is no particular reason to take Aziz at his word. He is among those who were insisting until the very eve of General Musharraf's announcement that emergency rule or martial law was not on the cards.

It's not inconceivable, of course, that the former banker was out of the loop until the last minute. It's the corps commanders that Musharraf needed to have on side; his civilian collaborators can invariably be taken for granted. Although the latter are well-tutored in prevarication, their enthusiasm for the emergency is probably quite genuine, as the extraordinary provisions improve their chances of staying in power. The majority of them were deeply uncomfortable about the western-brokered deal between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto, as it implied that the days of their perks and privileges were numbered. Under the existing conditions, cohabitation between Bhutto and Musharraf appears unlikelier than before.

In his proclamation and an address to the nation, Musharraf cited two primary reasons for his crackdown: the "war against terror" and judicial interference in political affairs. The first excuse is patently absurd. It's true that military action against the "Pakistani Taliban" and their allies in the country's northern areas, bordering Afghanistan, has been less than successful, and Islamist terrorism has also reared its ugly head in Pakistan's urban centres. The point, however, is that considerable national resources were already being devoted to that fight: it is extremely difficult to see how the emergency laws can help to ward off further failures in that sphere. The militants, after all, are hardly likely to be intimidated by Musharraf's power-grab.

Judicial activism is a different matter, and in more ways than one it makes sense to construe Musharraf's action as, essentially, a coup against the Supreme Court. It is certainly no coincidence that a seven-judge bench of the court decreed the general's move illegal as soon as it became public. None of those judges, including chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, holds office any longer. They have been replaced by more pliant justices, who have formally pledged allegiance to the PCO. Chaudhry survived an attempt to oust him last March and in the process acquired a popular following. His reinstatement at the insistence of his peers dealt a huge blow to Musharraf's credibility. Now Chaudhry, like many other opponents of the military regime, is under house arrest.

Chaudhry earned the government's ire when he began entertaining petitions from relatives of Pakistan's desaparecidos - people who have "gone missing" in the name of anti-terrorism initiatives,

as a result of being kidnapped by police or military intelligence. In many a case the chief justice demanded, with limited success, that they be produced in court. Some of them were set free. Musharraf implies that there is no place in Pakistan for human rights of this nature. On the merest suspicion of some tenuous connection with possible terrorist activities, people can be whisked away and subjected to torture, without any charges against them, let alone recourse to a judicial process. Apart from being morally reprehensible, this is precisely the sort of approach that makes it so easy for militants bent upon violence to gather fresh recruits. The developments of the past few days mean that legal niceties are once more going to be ignored. In the medium term, this will make it harder, rather than easier, to tackle the terrorist threat. But Musharraf, much like George Bush and his gang, is evidently blind to this probability.

It is no coincidence, of course, that the axe fell on the Supreme Court just days before it was expected to announce its verdict on whether the army chief's candidacy in last month's presidential "election" was legal. Chances are Musharraf got wind of the court's intentions and opted for a pre-emptive strike. He had promised to step out of his uniform by November 15, provided the court upheld his election. Now that issue appears to have been rendered academic. This will be the second time Musharraf breaks a promise to give up his military post, reinforcing the fact that the army is his only constituency.

It remains to be seen how stringently the new curbs on the freedom of the media will be enforced. Shortly before the emergency announcement last Saturday, all independent TV channels went off the air, and newspapers have been warned against any attempt to ridicule or bring into disrepute the head of state, the army as a whole, as well as the "ideology of Pakistan". That's nebulous enough to cover almost all adverse comment. Relative media freedom is one thing Pakistan has enjoyed under Musharraf: its absence, should it come to that, will be sorely felt across the nation, and will no doubt contribute towards limiting the tenure of this unpleasant new phase in the nation's development.

Pakistanis shouldn't, however, expect much assistance from the self-proclaimed defenders of democracy. In his address to the nation, Musharraf reserved the final section for an appeal to his western benefactors, reminding them that they should not expect to find in Pakistan the standards of democracy and human rights that they are accustomed to. Pakistanis, by implication, deserve less. Chances are that, barring token rhetoric, the US will make no effort to stand in the way of Musharraf's absolutism, even though it should be pretty obvious that the measures he has opted for won't in any way advance the "war on terror", let alone benefit Pakistan.

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