

A New Musharraf in Town

As America's vassal general steps down, Pakistan faces an uncertain future.

By Eric S. Margolis

MOST PAKISTANIS hailed the Aug. 18 resignation of the nation's widely despised president and former military dictator, Pervez Musharraf. But his long-expected departure comes as Pakistan plunges ever deeper into political uncertainty and rising violence.

The United States has an unhappy record of using pliant monarchs, generals, and dictators. For examples, one need only think back to the Shah of Iran or Egypt's Anwar Sadat. In both cases, Washington arm-twisted or bribed these rulers into pursuing policies that were violently opposed by their people. Après these despots, the déluge: Iran's anti-American Islamic revolution and the birth of the Egyptian arm of al-Qaeda. Now it's Pakistan's turn.

I interviewed Gen. Pervez Musharraf when he first came to power in a 1999 military coup that overthrew Pakistan's unpopular prime minister, Nawaz Sharif. Having known every Pakistani leader since the very tough President Zia ul-Haq in the mid 1980s, I was interested to meet Musharraf. To my dismay, I found him a small, sour man who seemed to lack the qualifications, intellect, or strength to lead maddeningly complex, unstable Pakistan.

The 9/11 attacks on the U.S. transformed Musharraf from a minor figure into one of our key allies and a leading enforcer of the American Raj. Pakistan's then director of intelligence, Gen. Mahmud Ahmad, told me the Bush administration gave an ultimatum to Islamabad: open your bases to us; give us use of your army and intelligence service; and abandon Pakistan's old ally the Taliban or face being bombed back to the

Stone Age. Musharraf confirms this story in his autobiography.

Musharraf caved in to U.S. demands with unseemly haste. Pakistan quickly became the primary base for the American invasion of Afghanistan and its ensuing war against its southern Pashtun tribes collectively known as the Taliban. In fact, without the use of three secret airbases in Pakistan and supply depots that provide 80 percent of the fuel and heavy war materiel for U.S.-led forces in Afghanistan, as well as deployment of 120,000 Pakistani troops along the border, the Western powers would not be able to sustain their occupation of Afghanistan.

Washington compelled Musharraf to use his armed forces to attack pro-Taliban Pashtun tribesmen in Pakistan's autonomous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). These attacks, in which 3,000 Pakistani civilians and 1,000 soldiers died, outraged Pakistanis and generated fierce anti-Americanism. Musharraf was widely denounced as a traitor and Washington's stooge for using his army to assist America's war in Afghanistan while abandoning the struggle to "liberate" Indian-ruled Kashmir, where renewed violence has recently surged. The Indian-Pakistani confrontation over Kashmir remains the world's most dangerous nuclear threat.

But \$12 billion of payments to Musharraf's regime from Washington, and at least as much in secret CIA stipends to senior Pakistani officers, politicians, and media, rented co-operation, at least until this year when time ran out for the isolated Musharraf and the U.S. cut him adrift.

Now even the most astute fortune-tellers in the Peshawar bazaar cannot decipher what comes next for Pakistan. Inflation is running at 25 percent. The unnatural coalition formed by the two leading parties, Asif Ali Zardari's People's Party and Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League-N, broke up in the third week of August. It was doomed from the start, rent by bitter rivalries between their leaders, basic differences over military operations in FATA, and restoration of the judiciary, which Musharraf purged with Washington's approval.

Zardari, the widower of Benazir Bhutto, who was killed last December, says he will stand for president in a Sept. 6 vote. But what kind of president remains uncertain. Nawaz Sharif wants to become prime minister again, but with a ceremonial president. Zardari wants to be an all-powerful chief executive.

Many Pakistanis, including, ominously, the military brass, do not want to see the flamboyant Zardari, long known as "Mr. Ten Percent," as their nation's leader. Serious allegations of corruption continue to dog him, though he claims all are politically motivated. Swiss magistrates were investigating Zardari for kickbacks paid by Swiss firms but recently dropped the charges. His large foreign property holdings and the questionable dealings of his relatives also hurt his image. But Washington is likely to back Zardari.

Benazir Bhutto's 19-year-old son Bilawal is being groomed for People's Party leadership, which the Bhuttos consider their family fiefdom. I met Bilawal in London with Benazir shortly before she left on her ill-fated return to

Pakistan. He is bright and mature, but not yet ready for a senior position.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif would seem a more seasoned leader, but he is also haunted by corruption and cronyism charges. He too claims they were cooked up by his enemies. But more important, Nawaz is not liked in Washington. He is regarded as too independent-minded, averse to continuing the war in FATA and Afghanistan, and is considered too "Islamist"—which he is not. Sharif returns the bad feelings, having been humiliated in 1999 by the Clinton administration and prevented from returning to Pakistan by the Bush White House.

If Zardari and Sharif cannot forge a working compromise, if Pakistan falls into political paralysis and chaos, all eyes will then turn to the only national institution that still works: the 650,000-man armed forces.

The general who replaced Musharraf as commander in chief, Gen. Afshaq Kayani, is a respected professional. My sources say he was selected by Washington 18 months ago as a replacement for the faltering Musharraf. The U.S. needs a compliant ally in Islamabad pursuing the war in Afghanistan. But no one knows what the dour, enigmatic general is thinking. So far, he has been trying to shake off the military's negative image from the Musharraf era and keep the armed forces scrupulously out of politics. He is believed to favor pursuing Islamabad's war in the tribal areas.

Throw into this steaming stew India's attempts to dominate Afghanistan: the inexorable spread of the Afghan war into Pakistan; violent unrest in the Northwest Frontier, FATA, and Baluchistan; and Iranian intrigues among Pakistan's Shia minority.

Add the very worrying threats by the Bush administration to intervene militarily in FATA, a foolhardy act that would get the U.S. stuck in an ever-widening guerrilla war in Pakistan, a

nation of 165 million. Even more dangerous, neocons are now clamoring for an attack to destroy Pakistan's heavily guarded, well-dispersed nuclear arsenal.

America does not need, nor can it handle, any more foes. We should remember that a key component of Osama bin Laden's so far successful strategy for expelling U.S. power from the Muslim world has been to drag it into a war in Pakistan, where anti-American feeling is incandescent. Yet Washington

blunders on, supporting dictatorship while ignoring democratic, popular forces. The White House has become so obsessed with the unwinnable war in Afghanistan that it cannot see that faithful old ally Pakistan is turning into a cauldron of anti-Western hatred and jihadism. ■

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Radical Chic

Why liberals love Tibet

By Brendan O'Neill

WHENEVER A PROTESTER wins the fulsome praise of politicians, the media, and especially the radical's own mother and father, I get suspicious.

In 1993, as an angry 19-year-old, I marched against police racism in East London, coming nose-to-nose with truncheon-wielding, hot-blooded coppers. In 1994, I joined an irate throng outside the American Embassy in London to register my opposition to Clinton's invasion of Haiti. I also marched against NATO's bombing of the Bosnian Serbs in 1995, its air assault on Yugoslavia in 1999, and its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Not once did I receive a pat on the back from a politician or sycophantic coverage in a sympathetic broadsheet. As for my parents, they thought I was certifiably off my rocker.

How different it has been for Lucy Fairbrother, the British 23-year-old Free Tibet protester who was deported from Beijing after hanging a banner reading "Tibet will be free" outside the Bird's Nest stadium. On Aug. 6, two days before the Olympic Games kicked off, Fairbrother

and three other Free Tibet activists scaled 120-foot-tall lighting poles close to the stadium and unfurled their banner for the clicking cameras of the world media. Overnight, Lucy—the daughter of a former director of Barings Bank—was transformed into a plucky hero. Upon her arrival at London City Airport, she was snapped by swarms of paparazzi and asked for her views on the future of China and Tibet. Her grinning mug shot graced the pages of every newspaper the following day, where she was described as "brave," "committed," and the "best of British." Her mother beamed with pride. "I'm so proud of her. She is doing what she feels is right, and what I feel is right," she declared. Normally, parental approval would sound the death knell to the career of any self-respecting protester, yet in the Tale of Lucy Fairbrother, her mother's voice merely joined the deafening chorus of approval.

This should confirm that there is nothing remotely radical, much less progressive, about jumping on the Free Tibet bandwagon. Instead, yelling "Free