

# Pakistan's Musharraf Walks a Tightrope

by Ramtanu Maitra

The rope on which Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf is balancing himself and his country is getting less stable every day, as the United States impatiently is demanding more and more help from Islamabad to neutralize al-Qaeda, Taliban, and Afghan mujahideen leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, to ease the worsening security situation in Afghanistan. In return, Washington is offering Pakistan more money than ever. But the street view in Pakistan is different: People believe Musharraf is on an American leash.

The Pakistani President faces the dilemma of how to manage the street crowd, while ending up on the right side of the United States. This problem is nothing new for him: It began following the events of Sept. 11, 2001 and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan in November of that year. The situation, however, has grown a lot more dangerous, since the U.S.-U.K. invasion of Iraq.

## Conflict Within

President Musharraf has to watch all his flanks. The Pakistani Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) are doing their best to protect their interests in Afghanistan, and in Jammu and Kashmir. Neither the Army, nor the ISI, is too keen to protect al-Qaeda, but the problem at this time is that over the years, the non-Afghan Arab mujahideen in Afghanistan, including al-Qaeda, have become a part and parcel of various Pakistani militant groups. It is not easy to do a clean separation. Nonetheless, the Army and the ISI have given up a number of al-Qaeda members to the Americans. But the Taliban and Hekmatyar, along with the Kashmiri militants, are not negotiable items. In other words, Musharraf cannot satisfy the United States on that score, unless Washington is ready to break Pakistan's well-entrenched political system, dominated by the men in uniform. If the United States goes that far, it would create many other problems.

The tension created by the American pressure, and the growing instability in Afghanistan, is patently visible in Islamabad. Afghan President Hamid Karzai, a token Pashtun backed by the United States and India, had been scheduled to be the chief guest at Pakistan's National Day on March 23. The trip was called off, supposedly because the security situation in Pakistan was highly unstable. But that was only the official version.

The real story is somewhat different. President Karzai, besides being identified as pro-India, is strongly disliked by

the Pakistani Army and the ISI. They claim, and there is truth in it, that Karzai survives as President because he accommodates the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. Pakistani military men back the Taliban, and have always opposed the Northern Alliance for its close ties to Moscow and New Delhi. President Karzai, goaded by his benefactors, wants the Pakistani Army to stop protecting Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and the Taliban, which is now regrouping and planning to take over Kabul as soon the foreign troops leave Afghanistan. Till such a time, they will wage war against the U.S. forces and Karzai's men.

President Musharraf has personally urged President Karzai to include in his Cabinet more Pashtuns, who are closer to Pakistan. But Karzai is in no position to antagonize his benefactors; he has begun hobnobbing with New Delhi and Tehran, mostly for his personal survival. The situation is getting very tense, but Musharraf has no intent to challenge the Army and ISI on behalf of Karzai and Washington.

The situation was bad enough, but it has worsened by the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Now, Musharraf cannot get any support either from the street, or from the Islamic political groupings, to satisfy the Americans. If the war in Iraq gets bloodier, it will become that much more difficult for Musharraf to juggle all the hot items. Although Washington's help to reschedule the country's foreign debts, bounties in the form of billions of dollars of aid to Pakistan, and U.S. efforts to organize Japan to help out Pakistan in these difficult days, have all come in handy, Musharraf just cannot deliver all that Washington demands.

## A Highly Dangerous 'Way Out'

Seeking a way out of this situation, Musharraf conducted another round of missile testing on March 26. On the same day, India tested its Prithvi missile, with a 93-mile range and with a capability to carry a small nuclear warhead. The tests occurred just two days after 24 Kashmir Pandits (Hindu Brahmins of Kashmir) were slaughtered in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, and less than a week after a prominent Kashmiri militant leader, Abdul Majid Dar, was gunned down near his home. These killings enflamed the already-frayed tempers of both the Pakistani and Indian authorities. Both nations are ready to mobilize to fight each other.

President Musharraf figures this is the way out from the crisis he faces: He can mobilize the entire country against India. The divisions within the Army and the ISI; the anger of the street demonstrators against the U.S. invasion of Iraq; and all the other Pakistanis who have become wary of Musharraf's pro-U.S. policies, will join him to fight the common enemy: India.

On the other side of the border, New Delhi, now wallowing in a unidimensional anti-Muslim foreign policy, is moving in a comparably dangerous direction. An escalation of tension with Pakistan would also provide an opportunity for the Vajpayee government to brag that it has the determination to ignore the Yankees and take care of its own business.