

# Headaches for Washington: Anarchy In Afghanistan, Elections in Pakistan

by Ramtanu Maitra

Despite occasional reassurances from Washington suggesting that things are getting better in Afghanistan, on the ground, all indicators point the other way. Afghanistan is steadily returning to the state of lawlessness and anarchy that dominated the 1980s, including that most of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has ceased to exist. The lawlessness has spilled over into the tribal areas of Pakistan and the port city of Karachi.

In addition, mainstream Pakistan, represented by Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi, is bracing up for new political upheavals, and fresh problems associated with the Oct. 10 general elections are bound to affect U.S.-Pakistan relations in a most adverse way. That is to say, Washington will soon find that its main anchor in Pakistan, President Pervez Musharraf, is enjoined in a battle, not against al-Qaeda or the Taliban, or even Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalists, but against a vast majority of people who had welcomed both President Musharraf and the United States in their war against terror—a development that could only sour U.S.-Pakistan relations. But overextended itself, the United States may not be able to dig Musharraf out of trouble.

## **Afghanistan: Situation Untenable**

Washington would have been on a stronger footing in Pakistan, had it ushered in even a semblance of stability in Afghanistan. But the Afghanistan situation, which is by no means an easy one to solve, is worse than ever. Washington is shouldering a weak Pushtun leader, Hamid Karzai, who is now physically protected by the U.S. State Department's security detail. President Karzai stays inside his Presidential residence in Kabul. Meanwhile, the warlords in the provinces continue fighting each other for territorial control. A major clash is expected to break out between the Tajiks and the Uzbek-Turkmen combine in northern Afghanistan. In the south and east, Pushtuns are now under the control of the opium warlords, who may or may not be with Kabul.

The situation is worse than untenable. Mass graves of Pushtuns, imprisoned and killed by the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance troops, who are very much a part of the present set-up in Kabul, were found last year, but highlighted only recently, and cannot be investigated because of the tenuous situation, according to UN representative Lakhdar Brahimi.

Earlier, two of Karzai's Cabinet ministers were assassinated, but Karzai could not conduct an investigation, for fear of the consequences. The assassination of Haji Abdul Qadir, one of Karzai's three Vice Presidents, and Kabul's inability to find the culprit has virtually demolished the President's credibility with other Pushtuns.

Beyond Kabul, the parched fields were abloom with opium poppies. Once again, about 3,000 tons of opium will be produced this year, strengthening the financial and military power of the opium warlords. Meanwhile, the bombed-out irrigation canals, which used to bring water to the farmlands, remain clogged for lack of funds to clear them.

Kabul is flooded with refugees, hoping to renew their lives and give their children a better future. It is estimated that up to 1.5 million refugees have returned so far—far more than the 400,000 predicted earlier. There are still 2.5 million Afghans living in refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan, and many of them will show up soon. Kabul, however, is a devastated city. Water is short and infested with *E. coli* and other deadly bacteria. Reports of water-borne diseases, such as cholera, have surfaced.

Thousands of miles away in Washington, well-heeled Congressmen and Senators, oblivious to realities, talk about rebuilding Afghanistan. What they don't talk about, includes the fact that, at the Tokyo Conference last January, the world's richest nations had pledged \$1.8 billion in aid by the end of the year, but so far, only \$570 million has shown up and has gone entirely to easing the daily miseries of millions. The U.S. stands out as the biggest donor, having delivered the promised \$250 million.

With such deterioration, the Afghan environment is becoming highly insecure, particularly for American and British troops. Reports of attacks against U.S. troops are filtering out; Afghans have pulled in the "welcome mat." American zeal to nab al-Qaeda and the Taliban is hardly shared by the Afghans, particularly since the effort has brought death to many innocents.

## **'Restoring Democracy' in Pakistan**

In the neighboring tribal areas of Pakistan, where reportedly a large number of al-Qaeda and Taliban fugitives have taken shelter, the local leaders have warned Islamabad that

U.S. troops will be attacked if they make incursions into the region to strike at al-Qaeda.

Washington's "man" Musharraf is in dire straits. Even if one chooses to ignore reports of at least three recent assassination attempts, including one on Pakistan's Independence Day, Aug. 14, the President is no more secure than is Karzai in Kabul. General Musharraf stays mostly in his army residence in Rawalpindi and, according to the Jamaat-e-Islami Emir, Qazi Hussain Ahmed, who was called in to work out an election strategy, President Musharraf is "shaken up."

In the wake of Sept. 11, President Musharraf was told by Washington to get on the bandwagon. He allowed the United States to have four airbases within Pakistan, allowed the FBI to post their operatives in hundreds of district offices, and agreed to dismantle the Islamic fundamentalist structure in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which he had nurtured over the years. In reality, he did not dismantle the Islamic fundamentalist groups, nor did he rein in the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), but did say in public, that they should be contained. Washington pressed him no further than that, perhaps because someone finally realized that truth is more difficult to deal with than fiction.

But for President Musharraf, the Damocles' sword was his promise that he would restore democracy. When he seized power through a bloodless coup on Oct. 12, 1999, he had to promise Washington a "free and fair" election by October 2002. The post-Sept. 11 American reactions, and Pakistan's direct involvement in the war against terrorism, made the situation dicier for the President. On one hand, he is courted by the highest levels in Washington for help. On the other, he antagonized the Islamic fundamentalists, the pro-fundamentalist faction within the Army, who were his friends, and many others, who chafe at the physical presence of Yankees on Pakistani soil. Washington tends to forget that the American troop presence in Saudi Arabia was one of the predicates that helped Osama bin Laden recruit and build his network among Saudi Arabia's faithful.

In all this, Musharraf, despite his closeness with Washington, missed the point. He does not know, that Washington may ignore many of his oversights, such as his half-hearted clamping down on terrorists, or restraining the ISI "nasties" who are in cahoots with al-Qaeda, but will not allow wrecking democracy. Being the champion of democracy, Washington would never relent on its demand for free and fair elections, a weapon it has used so often, that it has become standard issue in its foreign policy. This, Pervez Musharraf had not realized.

However, when he did, President Musharraf began to scramble. He set up the National Reconstruction Board (NRB) to outline the constitutional amendments he needed to strengthen his hands. He rammed through a referendum which made him President and chief of armed services till the year 2007. In August, Musharraf adopted 29 amendments (the United States in its 226-year history has 26) allowing

him to dismiss an elected government and Parliament, and appoint and sack heads of important constitutional offices, powers previously entrusted to the elected Prime Minister. Washington watched all these developments coolly, but did not protest.

But now, a new phase has begun. Pakistan is preparing for elections. President Musharraf has already helped to bring about convictions against three important political leaders: Nawaz Sharif, the two-term Prime Minister and leader of the PML(N), whom Musharraf overthrew, and who is now in forced exile in Saudi Arabia; Mrs. Benazir Bhutto, another two-term Prime Minister, leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), who is in self-imposed exile in Dubai and London; and Altaf Hussain, leader of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), in self-imposed exile in London. PPP and the PML(N) are the two largest political parties in Pakistan, while MQM is a force to be reckoned with in the province of Sindh. President Musharraf said all these leaders will be arrested, if they come to Pakistan, and they will not be allowed to contest in the elections.

Musharraf then floated the PML(Q) and brought in a number of PPP and PML(N) deserters to lead the group. He also contacted the religious groups to lend support and work out a power-sharing arrangement. The plan, however, began to founder early in August, when news reports suggested that the PPP is sure to sweep the elections, if they are free and fair; PML(N) will also do well, the reports claimed. On the other hand, the PML(Q)—known to the cynics as the "King's Party"—and the Majlis-e-Amal, the religious political grouping, will bite the dust unless the elections are rigged.

The reports rejuvenated both Mrs. Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. They filed their nominations from abroad and have threatened to land in Pakistan and campaign. Their plans have already become a subject of popular discussion, although their nomination papers have not been certified. The U.S. State Department has issued a statement that it cannot ensure that Mrs. Bhutto would not be arrested if she returns to Pakistan.

Washington defended its good name as champion of democracy, when President George W. Bush told reporters, that Musharraf "is still tight with us in the war against terror and that is what our priority [is] and which we all appreciate. . . . However, we will continue to urge Musharraf to promote democracy, give people a chance to express their opinions the proper way." (Washington's private Project Democracy think-tank Freedom House is also calling for free and fair elections.)

President Musharraf is worried that if the PPP-PML(N) combine is allowed to back in power, the National Assembly will not get to ratify his constitutional amendments. From there, it is a short step out of power. There is no doubt that the elections must be "fixed," but will Washington allow him to do that? This is the worry of President Musharraf and a big headache for Washington.