

END GAME



Sharif



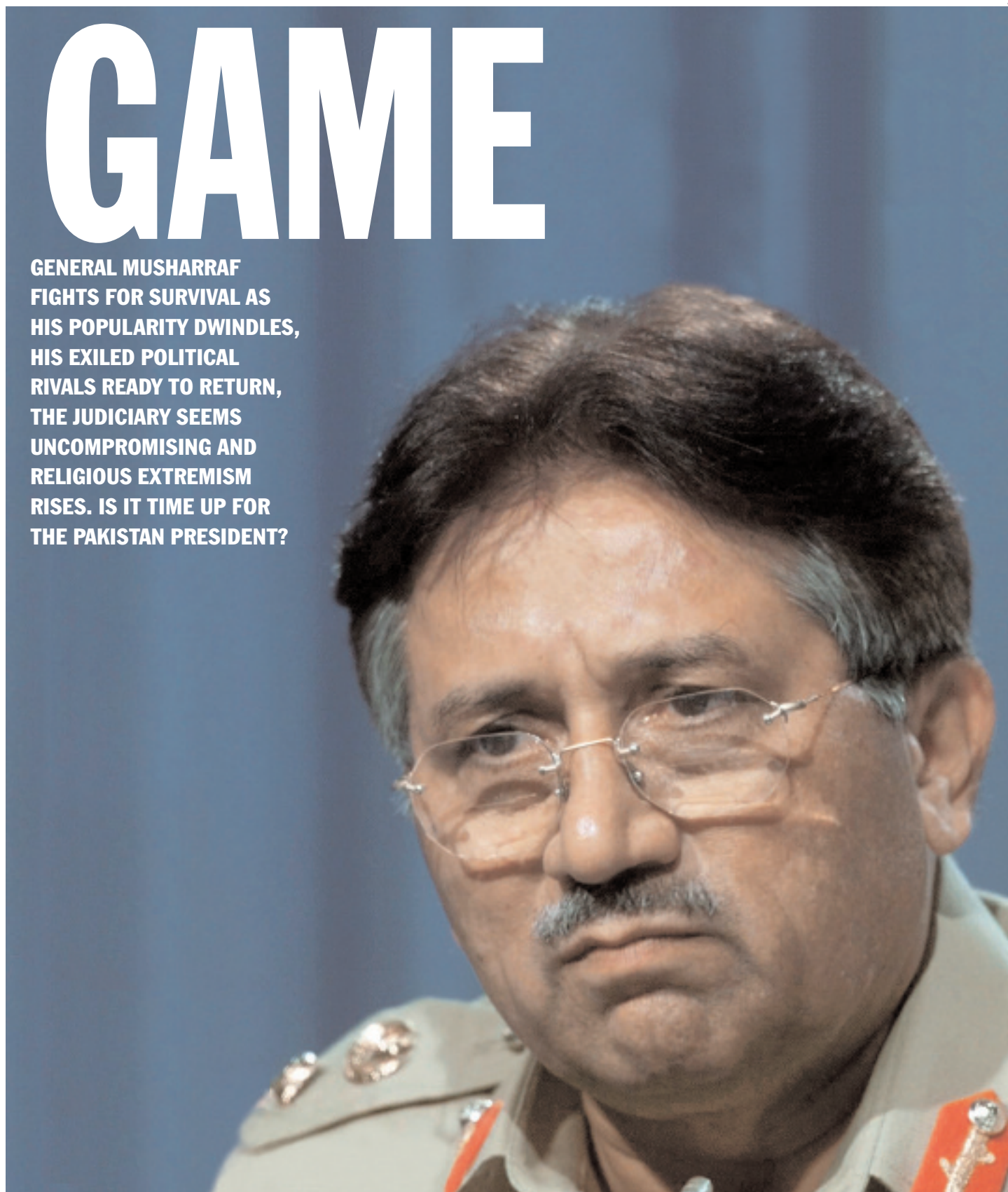
Bhutto

■ By Hasan Zaidi in Karachi

In his memoir *In the Line of Fire* published last year, Pakistan's soldier-President had waxed eloquent on the benefits of his exacting commando training. "It taught me that enduring extreme hardship has more to do with mental resilience than physical stamina," he wrote. President General Pervez Musharraf will be hoping that the lessons he had learnt on the frontlines of the army will stand him in good stead in the coming days. Because one way or the other, they are likely to be the most critical days for him.

At stake for General Musharraf is not only his continued role at the helm of affairs in Pakistan but perhaps his very survival. He is faced with a resurgent political opposition that is riding on the back of a popular lawyers' movement against him and an assertive superior judiciary that seems in no mood to compromise. All the recent Supreme Court decisions have gone against him and his Government, and further such decisions are expected. His popularity has plummeted since his futile attempt to sack Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March and since Pakistani casualties have mounted in the American-mandated "war

GENERAL MUSHARRAF FIGHTS FOR SURVIVAL AS HIS POPULARITY DWINDLES, HIS EXILED POLITICAL RIVALS READY TO RETURN, THE JUDICIARY SEEMS UNCOMPROMISING AND RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM RISES. IS IT TIME UP FOR THE PAKISTAN PRESIDENT?



against terror". His term of office as President pressure expires in November, but there are constitutional and political obstacles to his seeking re-election which he has already announced he will do. The threat of street unrest looms large with the expected return of exiled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif on September 10. The current pro-Musharraf Parliament's tenure also expires in November and there is no clarity about what kind of assemblies fresh elections will throw up. Finally, there is immense pressure—domestic and international—on the General to hang up his army uniform. But he realises that may reduce him to a figurehead without the army's clout at his command.

One can almost sense the tension in the air as the critical dates get nearer. News channels and the newspapers are full of speculative stories about the possible permutations being considered by Musharraf's advisers as well as leaked intelligence assessments of the strength of the various parties. Hourly updates about "breakthroughs" and the conflicting statements of various politicians are considerably muddying up the atmosphere as well. Even as Sharif vows to return "to rid the country of dictatorship because my country needs me", news breaks about the Saudi Government allegedly asking Sharif not to return to Pakistan. But matters are still so fluid that no two people are able to agree on what the future holds in store. In Islamabad, still reeling under the aftermath of the polarising Lal Masjid showdown and a subsequent militant campaign of suicide bombings, the mood of anticipation about "something big about to happen" is so great that some are seriously asking the question whether Pakistan stands at a crossroad similar to Iran before the revolution in 1979.

For most observers, this is the beginning of the end for Musharraf. His aides have been engaged in desperate negotiations to hammer out some sort of a deal with former premier Benazir Bhutto that might stave off the challenges to his rule. In itself, the very fact

CORNERED: Musharraf is making desperate attempts to retain power

★ Musharraf wants to be re-elected president and remain the army chief, but with his position considerably weakened he cannot be both. ★

★ GENERAL IN THE LABYRINTH ★

MUSHARRAF HAS THE AMERICANS' SUPPORT BUT BACK HOME IS FACED WITH CHALLENGES FROM A RESURGENT OPPOSITION, A CIVIL SOCIETY MOVEMENT, RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM AND JUDICIAL ACTIVISM



BENAZIR BHUTTO

The PPP leader is willing to support Musharraf as a weakened president once he steps out of uniform. Stands to gain a share of power and also benefit from the ending of corruption cases against her, but may lose credibility and votes for bailing out a military dictator on American prompting.



NAWAZ SHARIF

The PML(N) chief is unwilling to countenance Musharraf in any position because of personal history and a high wave of public support. May benefit in polls if he returns but may also face jail back home and incur the displeasure of the Saudi Government which hosted him in exile.



CHAUDHRY SHUJAAT

The PML(Q) leader fears free polls in the face of resurgence of Sharif and Bhutto. Tried to sabotage Bhutto-Musharraf deal and keep the General dependent on him and cousin Pervez Elahi, the Punjab CM. Willing to hobnob with religious lobby. Stands to lose ground in every scenario.



FAZLUR RAHMAN

Among the mullahs, the JUI leader stands to lose the most in a face-off between Musharraf and religious forces. Controls the NWFP Government and a part of the ruling coalition in Balochistan. Willing to deal with anyone but does not want to be seen as having sold out the religious cause.



GENERAL EHSAN UL HAQ

The joint chief of army staff committee backs Musharraf for now but may step in if the situation becomes dire and Musharraf begins to be considered a liability. Already feeling the heat for fighting what many in Pakistan and within the army consider US's war on Pakistan's own people.



IFTIKHAR CHAUDHRY

Enjoying public adulation since his restoration as the chief justice. Seems unhesitant to invoke suo moto powers. Has already set alarm bells ringing with judgements on disappeared persons and Sharif's right to return. May give adverse ruling about Musharraf's ability to be re-elected president.



GEORGE BUSH

The US President wants to forge a secular, liberal alliance against religious forces to bolster America's war against Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Has been pushing hard for a deal between Musharraf and Bhutto. But may be oblivious of the long-term consequences of such polarisation.



that Musharraf has been forced—through circumstances and from western allies who would like to see the forging of a 'liberal front' in Pakistan to take on the religious hardliners—to consider a compromise with Bhutto, is a strong indicator of the weakened position he finds himself in. Musharraf had made no attempt in the past eight years to hide his revulsion for the self-exiled leader and her alleged involvement in corruption cases. On her part, Bhutto has her own compulsions in dealing with Musharraf, and they are obviously strong enough for her to brave the disenchantment of her party's generally anti-military rank and file. But whether the deal materialises or not—indications are that it probably will and negotiations were on in Dubai even as this issue was going to print—the end result is likely to be a weaker Musharraf.

"One cannot say exactly when the end will come," says an Islamabad-based western diplomat, "it could be a few months or stretch out for another one or two years, but all indications are that things are moving in that direc-

tion." For the first time, the business community, which has long equated prosperity and stability with Musharraf being at the top of affairs, is also willing to look beyond him. "We would still like to see General *sahib* in place for the coming years," says a leading stock market broker who requested anonymity, "but I think we are in a position now that even if he is no longer there, we would survive. I don't think anyone new is going to fundamentally change his policies."

The personal crisis that Musharraf faces has many dimensions and a number of unpredictable stakeholders that make hazarding predictions a very risky matter. From Bhutto and Sharif to disgruntled allies such as PML(Q)'s Chaudhry Shujaat, the incensed mullah lobby of the Muttaheda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), the Supreme Court and the army itself, each player could influence the outcome of events (see box). A new, still nascent, factor is the public mood exhibited to a telling effect during the judicial crisis. There are a number of possibilities the

General may attempt in his bid to hold on to power. But perhaps none is as dangerous or unpredictable for him as his own ego.

There is widespread consensus in Pakistan that had he not made the mistake of alienating the chief justice—and with him almost the entire superior judiciary—Musharraf may have sailed through with his re-election. Certainly, the political opposition was nowhere near as potent then as it now seems. "The problem is that I am not sure Musharraf recognises that the world has changed," says a senior journalist who has attended various confidential briefings at the Presidency. "He seems still to be negotiating to retain the maximum amount of power but should be looking at things as a matter of survival. It's just not the same Pakistan it was even earlier this year."

Other analysts are even more blunt. "Two choices stand before him," writes political commentator Ayaz Amir in *Dawn* about Musharraf's prospects. "He can resist change and in the process emulate the undignified exits of (generals) Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan. Or he can become the bridge from this order to the next and still write some kind of an honourable name for himself in this country's troubled history."

Since Musharraf is unlikely to simply step down, as Amir advocates, what are the options in front of him? His first order of priority is to get himself re-elected as President. His term of office expires in November and, legally, the presidential elections must take place between September 15 and October 15. However, not only is there stiff opposition to him standing for re-election as a uniformed President—the present

Parliament had allowed him to continue to hold the position of army chief till the end of his current term—he also faces constitutional hurdles even if he were to step down from the army. Under current law pertaining to government employees—which he is one of as army chief—he may not be able to stand for election for two years of leaving government service. As such, he would require a constitutional amendment or risk the Supreme Court striking down his candidacy.

There is also the moral issue, raised by many critics, of Musharraf being re-elected from a parliament at the end of its own term, a peculiar situation that has arisen because Musharraf assumed the office of President through a referendum—later ratified—before the current parliament came into being. He now faces a presidential poll the way it



★ After the Lal Masjid showdown, fundamentalists have been strident in their opposition to Musharraf. ★

is stipulated in the Constitution, through a weighted electoral college of the federal and provincial parliaments. While he has the strength to carry through his election in the current assemblies, there is a serious risk attached to entrusting the presidential polls to a fresh parliament after general elections, since he may not have the numbers in it for a smooth sail.

On the other hand, his political adversaries, such as MMA, have threatened to resign from the assemblies should he attempt to get elected from the present parliament. Since the MMA also runs the government in the frontier province (NWFP) and is part of the coalition in Balochistan, this threat could also mean the dissolution of those assemblies, destroying the electoral college. The danger of agitation from Sharif's PML(N), which may not have the numbers in parliament but could prove a formidable foe on the

WAR ON TERROR: Religious extremists being flushed out of Lal Masjid streets, must also be considered.

In this context, the favoured option at the moment is the deal with Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Under such a deal, the PPP's support—or at least lack of opposition—would help blunt the Opposition's movement against Musharraf since it remains the largest opposition party. In the words of a government insider, "Nawaz Sharif would then become Bhutto's problem more than Musharraf's". The PPP's support in a constitutional amendment could also help overcome a possible Supreme Court challenge to Musharraf's candidacy. With PPP's support and its 81 seats in the National Assembly, the ruling coalition—which commands just over 170 seats in a 342-member National Assembly—could attain the two-thirds majority required for such an amendment.

In return, Bhutto would have the corruption cases against her quashed and a free hand to run her party's electoral campaign during the general elections. She is desperate to see an end to the corruption cases—most of which were initiated during Sharif's last tenure—and which continue to hang like the sword of Damocles over her head and tarnish her international image, especially with proceedings in international courts in Switzerland and Spain. A substantial amount of money allegedly siphoned abroad is also at stake. The cases are the prime reason she went in self-imposed exile even before Musharraf came to power.

Despite losing some ground because of the public perception of compromising with an unpopular military ruler, Bhutto's party is expected to do well in the upcoming polls, especially with good prospects of being able to form the next government. From all in-



would accept this since it would turn him into a completely toothless President but he may agree to subject his powers to oversight from the Supreme Court before using them. On their part, Musharraf's coalition—especially the King's Party PML(Q)—are apprehensive of being marginalised should a genuinely popular party such as PPP come on board with Musharraf. Having lost ground because of Musharraf's plummeting approval ratings and Sharif's resurgence, they do not want any such perception to further ruin their chances in the elections.

Bhutto would also like Musharraf's ban on prime ministers serving more than two terms to go, which would allow her—and Sharif—to contend for the top government slot again. This is something the ruling PML(Q) finds anathema, in particular, since it would

★ Musharraf's popularity plummeted following his futile attempt to sack the chief justice in March. ★



send out the message that it has been dumped for PPP, a scary prospect for it in the elections. PML(Q) leader Chaudhry Shujaat was quoted grumbling that his party "should not be made a sacrificial lamb". It has also opposed Bhutto's demands for immunity for all elected governments from 1988 to 1999.

To counter Musharraf's attempts to court Bhutto, Shujaat launched his own efforts to win over Maulana Fazlur Rahman, a key component of MMA. There is already a visible split within MMA between Rahman's Jamiat-e-Ulema-Islam (JUI) and Qazi Hussain Ahmed's Jamaat-e-Islami. Rahman, who, for all his fire-brand rhetoric, is a practical politician at heart, has the most of all MMA leaders to lose from political chaos since he has the largest number of parliamentarians in the assemblies from MMA as well as control of NWFP and Balochistan governments. While Rahman has said publicly that he would not support Musharraf's re-election, there are continuing rumours of Shujaat offering him sweeteners including premiership to soften his stance. It is unlikely, however, that Musharraf would be willing to be seen to be cozying up to an Islamist 'hardliner' in the face of American pressure. And while Rahman served as chairman of the

dications, General Musharraf has made up his mind to step down as army chief by the end of this year, which Bhutto could also take credit for as a result of her negotiations.

She has defended her deal with Musharraf as "not with an individual" but a part of her struggle for "peaceful transition to democracy". "This is critical for the other war—the war of moderation against extremism—to succeed," she wrote on the conservative US website *The Huffington Post*. "I had a choice. Engage in dialogue, or turn toward the streets. I knew that street protests against Musharraf dictatorship could lead to the deaths of hundreds. I thought about the choice

PRESSURE GROUPS: Chaudhry (top); resistance in frontier province before me very carefully. I chose dialogue; I chose negotiation."

The sticking points in the deal have to do with the future division of powers between Musharraf and the new prime minister, and with the fears of the President's current allies in parliament. Musharraf is unwilling to let go of presidential powers under Article 58(2)b to dissolve assemblies, which give him, in effect, a discretionary power over parliament. Bhutto has suffered twice as prime minister because of the same article and has demanded it be revoked as part of her bargain. It is unlikely that Musharraf



COMEBACK PLATFORM: Bhutto's supporters vouch for their leader
also likely to lead to street protests from his party.

In the worst case, a deteriorating political situation may actually cause the army to step in and ask Musharraf to step down. There is precedent for such an action, in the case of 'Field Marshal' President Ayub Khan, who was asked to step aside in 1969 to make way for General Yahya Khan after civil unrest all over Pakistan and the growing insurgency in then East Pakistan. In such a drastic situation, the army high command may decide that Musharraf's person is a liability they would be better off without. A new general at the top would also not be bound by Musharraf's promises—made to stem persistent domestic rumours and international jitters—not to impose martial law or an emergency.

Most insiders do not see any indication of such a worst-case scenario

★ Should the deal with Bhutto not work out, Musharraf may even be pushed out of power by the army. ★

Foreign Relations Committee during Bhutto's earlier stint in power, she too has been averse to accepting an arrangement with any religious party this time round, another sign of American influence in the Musharraf-Bhutto deal brokering.

In fact, Bhutto has indicated that the stumbling blocks in her talks with Musharraf have been primarily his political allies "who support the Talibanisation of Pakistan", a sarcastic reference to Shujaat who had also advocated negotiations with the Lal Masjid extremists. Should the deal with Bhutto not work out, however, for whatever reason, Musharraf will be left with very few options. One possible scenario could be to dissolve the assemblies immediately and order early elections. While that may buy Musharraf a little more time as President—at least until a new electoral college is established—and also temper the opposition against his standing for re-election as president from the current parliament, it is a strategy fraught with uncertainties. There is no guarantee then for Musharraf being able to win re-election.

Sharif's arrival on the scene with-

out a deal in place is also likely to cause much unrest in the current charged atmosphere. Having gone into exile in Saudi Arabia under a purported deal to escape a 10-year jail-term for "hijacking" and endangering a commercial flight on which Musharraf was travelling back to Pakistan—the incident that triggered the army coup against him—he had been marginalised from Pakistani politics for the last seven-and-a-half years. But the lawyers' agitation against Musharraf changed ground realities and he found the resolve to announce a date once the Supreme Court dismissed the Government's pleas of a deal as irrelevant to Sharif's fundamental rights. The Government's options in dealing with him are limited by the Supreme Court's direction that he not be prevented from returning to Pakistan. In the most likely scenario, if Sharif does live up to his promise of returning—and despite reported Saudi Government pleas for him to honour his agreement, it is now a political necessity for him to return—he would most likely be thrown into jail to serve out the conviction to circumvent which he had agreed to go into exile in Saudi Arabia. However, such a scenario is

unfolding at the present time. But it is also true that questions are already being raised about the morale within the armed forces after some 300 soldiers were captured by militants in South Waziristan without a shot being fired. The involvement of the Pakistan Army in the fight against alleged Al Qaeda and Taliban militants on the Pakistan side of the Afghan border has exacted a heavy toll and is increasingly being seen as Musharraf's fight at the behest of the US. The latest bombings, on September 4 near army GHQ in Rawalpindi, particularly of an unmarked bus carrying Inter-Services Intelligence personnel, has further shaken the confidence of the armed forces. In a dire political situation, it is not inconceivable that Musharraf loses the confidence of his army colleagues.

Beyond his commando training, Musharraf also referred in *In the Line of Fire* to his sense of being blessed because of his many narrow escapes from death, both during his military duty and the assassination attempts on him as President. If General Musharraf manages to emerge intact from his current predicament, he could well consider it another very lucky escape from political death. ■