

■ By Hasan Zaidi in Karachi

May is always a cruel month for sitting governments in Pakistan. As temperatures soar and people suffer ever-more frequent power breakdowns because of perennial bad planning by state agencies, tempers can run notoriously short. Inevitably, the ire of populations turns against their governments. But for dispensations such as that of General Pervez Musharraf's, which has been in power for almost eight years and which many now consider as having passed its sell-by date, May can be unusually brutal.

The mayhem in Pakistan's commercial and media capital, Karachi, on May 12 was an indicator of how wrong things have gone for the General since he attempted to sack the Chief Justice (CJ) of Pakistan, Iftikhar Chaudhry, on March 9. The violence—which at last count had taken 42 lives and injured hundreds—was a direct fallout of the Government's attempts to counter the growing popularity of Chaudhry, who has become the unlikely icon of a grow-



AP PHOTO/ARID KHAN

PAKISTAN THE BLOODBATH IN KARACHI HAS TURNED WHAT HAD STARTED AS AN AGITATION FOR THE JUDICIARY'S INDEPENDENCE INTO A POLITICAL POWDER KEG FOR PRESIDENT PERVEZ MUSHARRAF

GENERAL UNREST

ing civil society movement by those disaffected with army rule.

From all accounts, it seems the Government was shaken by the tumultuous reception the CJ—whose case against the President's actions is still being heard by a full bench of the Supreme Court—received on a road trip from Islamabad to Lahore. Chaudhry's motorcade, which had swelled to thousands of cars driven by supporters by the time it reached Lahore on May 6, had completed the four-hour journey in some 26 hours and was greeted en route by crowds showering rose petals. When the CJ finally arrived at the

Lahore High Court where he had been invited to address the bar, his audience included 17 sitting judges of the court and thousands of others who had been waiting for him overnight.

Perhaps, particularly unnerving for Musharraf and his supporters is that what had primarily begun as an agitation by lawyers for the judiciary's independence now seems to be snowballing into a much more politically dangerous crisis. Even the opposition political parties—criticised by Musharraf for “trying to make political capital from a legal issue”—seem to have taken a backseat to popular opinion. “That day and

night,” wrote columnist Ayaz Amir in *Dawn*, referring to the ambience in the Lahore High Court, “it felt as if the idea of Pakistan, first voiced in Lahore 67 years ago, was being reborn.”

This show of popular support seems to have convinced Musharraf to dig in his heels and re-assert his power. According to *The News*, a senior official source quoted the President telling a recent meeting convened to discuss the judicial crisis, “I cannot be defeated.” Thereafter, the Government's supporters were asked to mobilise shows of force in favour of the general. One large rally was organised by the king's party,



AP PHOTO/ANJUM NAVEED

the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Q), in Islamabad on May 12, the same day the CJ was to address the bar in Karachi. Meanwhile, Musharraf's main ally in Karachi, the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM), which forms a major part of the coalition government in Sindh, also announced its own counter-rally against the CJ in the city. The scene was set for a showdown.

The MQM has a history of militant politics. Many of its militant cadres were killed in army-led crackdowns in the mid-1990s. But the party, in power

under Musharraf, had tempered its public face. On May 12, it seemed it had been given *carte blanche* to do whatever it took to foil what was expected to be another massive rally in support of the CJ. From the night before, armed activists took to the streets of Karachi, blocking roads with trailers and buses and laying virtual siege to the entire city. The police and paramilitary forces stood back. Even the city's main artery, which leads from the airport and which is never closed, was blocked to stop the CJ's procession that opposition political parties had vowed to participate in to show their solidarity.

Scare tactics may have been all that was intended. What transpired was far more sinister. Faced with equally determined supporters of the CJ from the opposition political parties—some of whom were also armed—the MQM activists stoked a bloodbath that shocked a nation watching live coverage on television. As gunfights erupted

INFLAMED: Karachi after the May 12 mayhem; (below) Iftikhar Chaudhry

FEARS AND FALLOUTS

- Sacking the Chief Justice has triggered a violent backlash, culminating in the Karachi clash.
- The Musharraf-Benazir deal may be off amid fears that army may impose a state of emergency or even martial law, allowing the General to postpone elections and continue in power.
- Fighting for survival, Musharraf may yield to fundamentalist groups.
- Militants are ruling the roost with increasing Talibanisation of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

across Karachi, the CJ was left stranded at the airport, having refused a Government offer to fly him in a chopper to his destination at the Sindh High Court. After nine traumatic hours, he flew back to Islamabad along with the lawyers who had accompanied him. The Government's goal of preventing another expression of public support for him may have been accomplished but at a cost that has shaken the very foundations of Musharraf's dispensation.

Questions are being raised about the Government's complicity in the vio-

lence in Karachi and the fallout on international perception of the city and Pakistan itself. Fears are being expressed about a possible resurgence of political and ethnic warfare in Pakistan's largest city. Opposition political leaders are speculating that these events had been “engineered” by the Government to later justify imposition of a state of emergency or even martial law that could allow the General to postpone elections and continue in power. Musharraf's future, both as President and as army chief, tops every debate. The widespread perception is that with both terms set to expire in October, concern for his own future in politics had prompted the attempt to sack a non-cooperative CJ.

Well-placed sources indicate that the Karachi fiasco has also “seriously disturbed” certain elements within the establishment. In particular, the MQM's show of militancy has reminded them—including the army—of the dark days of militant street politics. “It showed how the last few years have been utilised by militant groups of Karachi to re-group and re-organise themselves,” says Zaffar Abbas, *Dawn's* Resident Editor in Islamabad, who had as a reporter witnessed the turbulent period of Karachi from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s. “They now have a greater potential to paralyse Pakistan's commercial hub in a matter of hours. This, of course, raises the question whether the peace witnessed in the last few years was just a facade.”

Events of the last few days may also have seriously dampened prospects of a patch-up between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which claimed that its activists and that of the mainly Pukhtoon Awami National Party (ANP) comprise 15 of those killed in the firing. Many—including the US and British governments—consider the secular PPP and the ANP as Musharraf's natural allies as he combats rising religious extremism within the country. Ironically, activists of these two parties bore the brunt of the fight with the equally secular MQM, which claimed that 10 of its workers were killed. With rank and file anger towards the Government at its peak, Benazir may find it difficult to justify the “deal” with Musharraf she

has publicly admitted to negotiating.

If the deal were to collapse, it would no doubt suit the PML-Q, in particular its leader Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain and his cousin Chaudhry Pervez Elahi, the current chief minister of Punjab. They fear political marginalisation should Musharraf work out a rapprochement with Benazir. Now, it would seem, the General will be even more reliant on them. The other fallout would be to throw Musharraf back into the arms of the religious lobby for political support, a section the conservative Chaudhrys from Gujrat are infinitely more comfortable dealing with than the PPP. Leaving aside a recalcitrant Jamaat-e-Islami, the Chaudhry brothers are confident the other religious parties will play ball.

The Chaudhrys will also not lose sleep over the widespread revulsion for the MQM since it effectively clips the party's ambitions to launch itself in parts of Punjab which the brothers consider their turf. If anyone has emerged a winner from this debacle, it is them.

How this plays out over the coming weeks will be critical to Pakistan's and Musharraf's future. For now, the best the General can do is prevent the pot from boiling over till the elections. Those close to him feel that if he manages to tread water till then, he may still survive since the elections are sure to fragment the united opposition once again. They point to the TINA—There Is No Alternative—factor in current Pakistan politics. His supporters are also desperately hoping for some distraction to divert people's attention from the current crisis. What is, however, clear is that Musharraf seems to be blundering from one mistake to another. The downward political spiral also threatens his legacy which includes media glasnost, greater foreign investment and apparent economic stability, movement towards peace with India and affirmative action in favour of women and religious minori-

MUSHARRAF SEEMS TO BE BLUNDERING FROM ONE MISTAKE TO ANOTHER, JEOPARDISING HIS LEGACY OF INCREASED GLOBAL INVESTMENT AND ECONOMIC STABILITY

AP PHOTO/SHAKIL ADIL



REALITY CHECK: There's growing disillusionment with Musharraf ties. This is a legacy that has found favour among most of Pakistan's chattering classes.

So, why is popular secular opinion turning against the General? Columnist Masood Hasan, writing in *The News*, related an incident from towards the end of Pakistan's first military ruler General Ayub Khan's regime in the 1960s that finds echoes in today's scenario. When the movement against the secular Ayub began to pick up pace, his supporters rallied to urge people to "strengthen his hands", much like Musharraf does in public rallies. "But what," wondered a Lahori wit of that time, "about his feet?"

Apart from the disenchantment towards long-term incumbency that can tarnish any ruler in the world—and which has a lot to do with the current disaffection—there are some serious underlying issues as well. Perhaps, the

key reason for Musharraf's problems is a crisis of legitimacy. In 1999, most Pakistanis were willing to put up with a general who came to power through a coup. But eight years down the road, they are not so enamoured. For some, Musharraf has not lived up to the promises he made when he assumed the rein, such as cleaning up governance and ensuring accountability. Many of those surrounding the General as his ministers and advisers are the same tainted politicians he had vowed to remove from the political scene. He is increasingly seen as beholden to them for his own survival and his hubris against former prime ministers Benazir and Nawaz Sharif is perceived as a selective personal vendetta.

Musharraf's proximity to the US administration, in particular President George W. Bush, may have reaped a windfall for the Pakistan army but it has also antagonised many others. Several people in Pakistan—and not just the religious conservatives—consider American global policies, particularly its role as a global policeman, detrimental. Increasingly, the General is viewed not as an American ally but as an American pawn. The lack of due

process accorded to scores of “disappeared” persons—mostly religious and Baloch activists—suspected to have been picked up by state agencies, some at American prompting, has also fuelled the feeling that the rule of law is not a priority for this Government. Privatisation of state-owned enterprises is also largely perceived as bias towards international business goodwill against national interests.

The Government’s inability to curb growing Talibanisation of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and even the settled North-West Frontier regions have eroded its legitimacy as has the insurgency in Balochistan.

While the army is embroiled in a costly battle against militants hiding out in the tribal no-man’s land near the Afghan border, inside Pakistan, suicide attacks are on the rise even as militants forcibly shut down girls schools, music and video shops, and even barber shops in areas such as Bajaur, Swabi and Charsadda.

The most startling instance of the apparent erosion of the writ of the state is the continuing stand-off between the Government and Islamabad’s Lal Masjid administration, which is accused of fanning extremism, encroaching on state land and attempting to establish a parallel Taliban-style government, including vigilante morality squads. Despite numerous provocations from the Lal Masjid militants, the Government seemingly backed down following an attempt by Chaudhry Shujaat to negotiate with them. Observers argue that if the Government cannot enforce its writ in the capital, there is little chance of it being obeyed elsewhere in the country. “It seems the Government is pandering to the Lal Masjid administration, in effect, to hold it in reserve when a more serious confrontation is

needed for political reasons,” says Professor Pervez Hoodbhoy of Islamabad’s Quaid-e-Azam University.

Attempts to clip the wings of an assertive judiciary has received its share of opprobrium. Soon after coming to power, Musharraf had directed the judiciary to take a new oath under the Provisional Constitutional Order. The judges who refused were unceremoniously sacked, including the then Chief Justice, without as much reaction from the legal fraternity. However, those were different times with different connotations of legitimacy.

INTERPRETING THE LAW: Lawyers at an anti-Government rally in Lahore

AP PHOTO/K.M. CHAUDARY



INSIDE PAKISTAN, SUICIDE ATTACKS ARE ON THE RISE EVEN AS MILITANTS SHUT DOWN GIRLS SCHOOLS, AND MUSIC, VIDEO AND BARBER SHOPS

Yet again, while the economy may be growing at a decent clip—GDP is expected to rise by 7 per cent this year—so are the prices of basic commodities. Inflation over the last two years has been almost double that of the first five years of Musharraf’s rule. Perhaps more ominously, while per capita income has grown by leaps and bounds, the economic disparity between the most well-off and the least is wider than it has ever been in Pakistan’s history. “The signs of dispa-

rity are more visible and stark than ever before,” says political economist Akbar Zaidi. “From the bus stand outside McDonald’s, you can see who is inside and who is out. That feeds into a perception of unfairness.”

Involvement of the military in all facets of political and economic life is also beginning to grate on those aspiring for greater participation in administrative decision-making.

A recent survey revealed that 239 high-level civilian posts are occupied by serving or retired military officers. The military’s involvement in administrative matters fans speculations of bias and institutional corruption.

Perhaps the one silver lining is a significant change in Pakistan’s civil society. Previously content to watch from the sidelines, Pakistanis are today more willing to express outrage and engineer political change. The change in mindsets was apparent in the country-wide strike on May 15 to protest the Karachi carnage. Without much prompting or any coercion, people stayed away from work *en masse* to make the strike an absolute success. The independent electronic media—ironically, a product of Musharraf’s liberal policies—has certainly played its part in this transformation. No newspaper could have

matched the power and immediacy of live television coverage. Events that may have seemed remote are now beamed directly into living rooms. Discussions on television have also put a human face to politicians and analysts.

Ultimately, civil society has taken its cue from a legal fraternity that led from the front and refused to be cowed down by military strong-arm tactics. It has found its hero in a Chief Justice who, unlike his predecessors, simply said ‘No’ to the establishment. ■