

STILL IN COMMAND

Despite the odds being against him, President Musharraf manages to turn the tables on his opponents and stay on top, but he may emerge considerably weakened by the political battle

Photographs by REUTERS

THE SURVIVOR:
General Musharraf



MUSHARRAF DIVIDED THE OPPOSITION AND MANIPULATED THE POLITICAL SYSTEM TO ENSURE HIS CONTINUITY.

■ **By Hasan Zaidi in Karachi**

During the 11-year reign of military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, a wit had dubbed him “Pakistan’s greatest politician”, in deference to his mastery of the rough and tumble of realpolitik. The title consciously eschewed reference to ‘statesmanship’, which Zia projected as his forte. After the events of the last 10 days, General Pervez Musharraf could easily surpass Zia in his claim to the same title.

Not only was Musharraf able to successfully divide an ominous opposition movement against him, he also brought Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)—ostensibly the largest and most credi-

ble Opposition party—to his side, something Zia had never managed to do.

Although the results of the October 6 presidential elections cannot be officially notified until the Supreme Court delivers its verdict—expected on October 17—on the legitimacy of Musharraf standing for a re-election, most observers believe that the General has sailed past the worst. Given an earlier judgement wherein the Supreme Court had dismissed the petitions against Musharraf as “unmaintainable”—much to the shock of the Opposition—not many expect the apex court to hurl the country in crisis by annulling the President’s re-election. If the comments of the judges on the bench during the hearings are any

indication, the court seems to be weary of politicians who abdicate their responsibilities in Parliament and rely on the court to be their political battering ram. “The superior judiciary, all said and done, is a part of this establishment and state,” says veteran journalist M.B. Naqvi. “The political changes the lawyers and public want require political action by political parties, but that is missing.”

For their part, the stock markets—always a barometer of how businessmen perceive future stability—reacted with jubilation at the news of Musharraf’s victory, rocketing up-



WITH A BHUTTO DEAL IN PLACE AND CLOSE AIDE KIYANI AS VICE-CHIEF OF ARMY, MUSHARRAF IS ALL SET TO RETAIN POWER.

wards to break all index records.

Ever since March 9, when his troubles began with the attempted sacking of the Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, he has never looked as confident in power as he does now. Only a month ago the threat of exiled premier Nawaz Sharif returning to a tumultuous welcome and the political momentum gathering against the General were giving his advisers sleepless nights. However, some deft manoeuvring on Musharraf's part and a surprising amount of luck have vastly changed the political scenario. First, Musharraf promised in the court that he would step down as the army chief before taking oath as a re-elected president, a vow that, at least superficially, acknowledged the public mood against him continuing as the head of the state in uniform. Lending credibility to this promise was the appointment of the former Inter-Services Intelligence head and close confidant, General Ashfaq Kiyani, as the vice-chief of army staff. Kiyani, widely respected for his professionalism, is

expected to take over as the army chief once Musharraf gives up his uniform. Another senior general and confidant, General Tariq Majeed, has been promoted as chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff committee—the titular head of the three armed forces. These appointments—in place of retiring generals—indicate that Musharraf would like to have trusted figures as military heads before becoming a civilian president.

Second, and more importantly, Musharraf secured an understanding with former premier and current American favourite Benazir Bhutto, as her PPP refused to join other political parties in resigning from the assemblies. PPP's mere abstention during the presidential elections provided Musharraf the cover of a legitimate election that may not have been so clear had the entire Opposition quit in protest. He himself said in an interview, "Only 163 members or so out of an electoral college of 1,169 resigned, so where's the problem of legitimacy?"

KEY PARTNERS: PPP chief Bhutto (left), Vice-Chief of Army Kiyani

The resignation of the members of All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) and abstention of PPP means that Musharraf did not face any challenge. He secured 57 per cent of the total electoral college votes and 98 per cent of the votes cast. The lawyers' candidate, former Justice Wajihuddin Ahmed, secured only 8 votes.

The Government was also able to drive a wedge between Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) and Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), the two major components of religious alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA). Many believe the premature announcement by JUI leader Maulana Fazl ur-Rahman that his party's chief minister in the North-West Frontier Province would call for the provincial assembly's dissolution to break up Musharraf's electoral college, was calculated by the Maulana to provide the Federal Government the time to counter the move. As it transpired, the Federal Government's allies in the provincial parliament

immediately initiated a no-confidence move against the chief minister, which prevented the Assembly from being dissolved until after the presidential elections. JI's provincial legislators then resigned in a huff, to no avail, as the larger JUI members did not. The simmering tension between the two parties was out in the open, which put a question mark on the future of the Opposition religious alliance.

Two fortuitous circumstances also bolstered Musharraf's position. The first was the failure of the Sharif-led APDM in mobilising the masses to welcome the former prime minister. It made deportation of Sharif easy for the General even though it meant flouting the Supreme Court ruling which allowed him to return to Pakistan.

The second was the Supreme Court judgement throwing out the initial petitions against Musharraf's candidature and allowing the elections to be held on schedule. The 6-3 majority judgement unnerved even the lawyers' movement and many of its leading lights, who had been singing paeans to a "new independent judiciary", were reduced to questioning the motives of the apex court judges. It was a big blow to the credibility of the movement. Television commentators questioned if the lawyers were supportive of a judiciary that gave judgements only in their favour.

The coup de grâce from the Musharraf camp was the promulgation of the National Reconciliation Ordinance, which provided indemnity to the actions of politicians and bureaucrats during the "democratic decade" from 1988 to 1999. This had been one of the long-standing demands of Bhutto, who faced a number of serious corruption allegations. Coming a day before the presidential elections, the Ordinance was the surest indication that a deal had been struck between Musharraf and Bhutto. Bhutto even admitted that she had approved the text of the Ordinance.

The Ordinance, which will require ratification by the new Parliament after the general elections and which

has also been challenged in the courts, has led to a public outcry. Many, including members of the ruling Muslim League, see it as allowing the corrupt to go scot-free. Despite her attempts to justify it as not specific to a person—the Ordinance will benefit many including Sharif and members of the ruling coalition—the credibility of Bhutto and her party has been seriously damaged. Most people believe she has made a pact with the devil—compromising on their anti-military rule principles—simply to save her skin and the allegedly looted wealth.

MISSION FAILED: Sharif-led APDM could not mobilise mass support



WHILE GENERAL MUSHARRAF HAS SEEMINGLY BACKED BHUTTO, SHARIF COULD BENEFIT FROM PPP'S LOSS OF CREDIBILITY.

There is also widespread resentment at Bhutto having played into the hands of the Americans just to grab power. In two widely reported statements to the American media, she has promised that if elected to power, she would allow the International Atomic Energy Agency access to Pakistan's disgraced nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan. She has also hinted that she could allow the US forces to hunt for Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. Bhutto may have got what she wanted—US Foreign Secretary Condoleezza Rice went out of her way to express support for Bhutto's role in a future set-up—

but the reaction in Pakistan has been anything but positive. Even liberal commentators such as former ambassador Tariq Fatemi labelled her statements as "completely uncalled for".

How such perceptions impact the electoral fortunes of PPP still remains to be seen. But they do not bode well for long-term relations between Bhutto and Musharraf. In a tersely worded rejoinder to Bhutto's statements, the President discounted the possibility of such "compromises to national security."

Analysts are also questioning if Bhutto—who has been out of the country in self-imposed exile for more than

eight years—is clued in to the sea changes that have taken place in Pakistan. The same questions are valid for Sharif, if he also makes a comeback. "When they left, for example, all that existed was a state-controlled news media," says Azhar Abbas, head of Dawn News, one of over 50 new television channels. "Can they even deal with the kind of assertive, almost disrespectful, media that has mushroomed in their absence?"

For his part, Musharraf may have had his powers clipped when he agreed to step down as the army chief. But he retains the power to dismiss governments. He even said he had not changed his mind about Bhutto's misdemeanours but "the reconciliation was necessary in the larger interest of the country in order to fight the threat of extremism". With casualties mounting every day in the fight

against militants in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, the army will play a major role in guiding elected governments in countering militancy.

PPP is hoping that the dynamics of a general election next year will make people forget Bhutto's deal-making, and are attempting to put up a brave face. Almost overnight, billboards, banners and graffiti have sprung up all over Karachi, where she is scheduled to land on October 18, welcoming her back as the "saviour of democracy and the people of Pakistan". Whether the people of Pakistan see it the same way is debatable. ■