

guest column | G. PARTHASARATHY

WHY INDIA MUST BE SILENT

THE US, AND NOT INDIA, IS TODAY THE SUBJECT OF PEOPLE'S WRATH IN PAKISTAN. IT'S BEST TO KEEP IT THAT WAY.



When General Musharraf seized power in 1999 overthrowing the popularly elected, but increasingly unpopular Nawaz Sharif, many of his countrymen welcomed the ouster of a prime minister, whose goons led by his information minister Mushahid Hussein, had attacked the Supreme Court, and who had sought to muzzle freedom of the press by pressuring, or arresting, respected editors. Musharraf allowed the press a degree of freedom it had seldom experienced earlier and even opened the floodgates to private television channels. Post-9/11, he became America's "frontline ally" in the "war on terrorism" and the recipient of huge western and Chinese assistance.

Like all dictators, Musharraf overreached himself. He sought to arbitrarily fire the Supreme Court chief justice Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, on March 9. Following countrywide demonstrations, Chaudhry was reinstated by a full bench of the Supreme Court. He has since taken several momentous decisions, including the grant of permission for deposed Sharif to return to Pakistan. The Supreme Court is now considering petitions that may well disqualify Musharraf from seeking re-election while still in uniform. Even if he survives this challenge, Musharraf has virtually no chance of remaining army chief (the real source of his power and authority) beyond the end of this year, given the present judicial activism in Pakistan.

Musharraf also confronts a worsening security situation within Pakistan. Responding to American pressures to "do more" against the Al Qaeda and Taliban, Musharraf has deployed over one lakh troops in the tribal areas of the Northwest Frontier Province, along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. With his defences

against India weakened by deployments in Waziristan and Balochistan, Musharraf has had to lie low in promoting Jihad in Jammu and Kashmir. Hence, the reduction in infiltration across the LOC. Worse still, the Pakistan Army is showing little stomach to fight the pro-Taliban forces in Waziristan along the Pak-Afghan border. Suicide attacks have so demoralised the army that in recent days nearly 300 officers and men have meekly surrendered, without firing a bullet. The Jehadi forces, for long backed by ISI, have be-

refused to back the deal, as it would have amounted to signing their own political death warrant. It is no secret that the deal was being promoted with direct involvement of the Americans and the British. Bhutto's credibility and political standing have inevitably been severely eroded.

These developments have led to the once discredited Sharif today appearing as a knight in shining armour. He will get a hero's welcome if, as scheduled, he returns on September 10 and is allowed to proceed on a road journey from Islamabad to his hometown Lahore. In these circumstances, he will prevail over Musharraf's supporters in any free election—that will spell deep trouble for Musharraf. In this volatile atmosphere nothing can be ruled out, including the imposition of martial law and the emasculation of the judiciary by Musharraf. Hopefully, better sense will prevail.

Apart from some ill-advised comments from National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan, which suggested a certain measure of empathy for Musharraf, Delhi has wisely remained silent on developments in Pakistan. The US and the UK, and not India, are today the subject of peoples' wrath in Pakistan. In response to one of his overzealous aides suggesting that the assumption of office by Bhutto in 1988 was the "best option" for India, prime minister Rajiv Gandhi had retorted: "Never forget that she is the prime minister of Pakistan". The approach of any leader in Pakistan to relations with India will be determined not by sentimentalism, but by objective realities of the ground situation and national power. Our television anchors and scribes would be well advised to stop speculating on who is the "best bet" for India, in Pakistan.



come so emboldened after the siege of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad that they feel free to mount suicide attacks at the Pakistan Army's heart in Rawalpindi.

Politicians in Pakistan now realise that public perception that they are colluding either with Musharraf, or the US, is a virtual kiss of death. Even a few months ago, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party would have swept any free elections. But, faced with serious charges of corruption, Bhutto sought to do a "deal" with Musharraf which would lead to a withdrawal of charges and enable her to return to Pakistan, with amendments effected to the Constitution, permitting her to get another term as prime minister. Not surprisingly, Musharraf's supporters

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