Today, Pakistan is at its most important and potentially dangerous point since the country was founded in 1947 and the direction in which Pakistan goes will be critical for the United States. Pakistan has reached this point partly in reaction to the strong pro-Washington stance of the government of President and General Perez Musharraf and partly because of growing domestic opposition to his military rule.

Musharraf is under intense pressure from Washington, which has supported his government with money and training for Pakistan’s armed forces. The Musharraf government, which has controlled Pakistan since he took control in a bloodless coup in 1999, has been a staunch and faithful ally of the Bush administration in its fight against terrorism in Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Pakistan’s strategic geographic location and diverse, often volatile, population makes it a critical—if uneasy—component in Washington’s antiterrorism strategy. Consequently, no other single country is as important to the current U.S. effort to defeat al Qaeda and the resurgent Taliban as Pakistan. At the same time, Musharraf’s government is being increasingly undermined by four important domestic forces that threaten his rule and, thereby, threaten to derail Pakistan’s central role in U.S. strategy.

The first of these forces is Musharraf’s conflict with the Supreme Court of Pakistan, which has a long tradition of independence. Last March Musharraf removed Chief Justice, Iftikhar Chaudhry, from his position on the court because of Chaudhry’s propensity to accept cases that challenged the government. The removal of Chaudhry led to widespread demonstrations by most of the Pakistani legal community and some violence perpetrated by those opposed to Musharraf’s rule. By mid summer, as Pakistan’s legal system ground to a halt, Musharraf was forced to reinstate Chaudhry to his position on the court. As a result, Chaudhry has been emboldened and Musharraf weakened, not only within the legal community, but within Pakistan’s “pro-democracy” constituency, which adheres to a strict separation of powers.
At the end of September, the Supreme Court ruled that Musharraf could run for a third term as president. But this decision has not settled all issues between the court and Musharraf and actually has further emboldened opposition to him among the pro-democracy forces in the country. The decision led to large demonstrations and some violence in Pakistan’s largest cities. The election for president will be held on 6 October under a system that combines votes from the national Parliament and provincial legislatures. Although Musharraf, with powerful U.S. backing, wants to remain as president and army chief of staff, he has promised to “take the uniform off” if, as is now likely, he is re-elected president, but only after the poll has been taken. However, he has promised before to retire from the military and has always reneged on that promise. Consequently, the opposition is not satisfied with Musharraf’s promise, thus setting up a potentially dangerous confrontation with the court. Because of the strong possibility of this confrontation, there is increasing speculation—reinforced by the comments of several government officials—that Musharraf will assume emergency powers, which will allow him to dismiss Parliament, postpone the elections, and suspend the constitution. If Musharraf were to assume emergency powers, though that seems increasingly unlikely, the repercussions would extend far beyond guaranteeing permanent hostility between the court and the Musharraf government; it almost certainly would guarantee a nationwide outcry, demonstrations, and violence that could bring down an already weakened government.

The second force is Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League, one of the country’s most important “pro-democracy” political parties. Sharif was the prime minister whom Musharraf and the Army overthrew in 1999. Sharif, who was forced into exile to Saudi Arabia in 2000, promised not to return to Pakistan for ten years. But, the newly assertive Supreme Court under a resentful Chaudhry ruled the deal unconstitutional and said Sharif could return. When he tried to do that last month, agents of Musharraf’s government sent him packing back to Saudi Arabia within hours of his arrival in Islamabad. Sharif has vowed to continue to fight and his supporters in Pakistan, already opposed to Musharraf’s rule, will step up the pressure and may find common cause with those already upset over the confrontation over Chaudhry and the court.

Third, there is Benazir Bhutto and her Pakistan People’s Party. As with Sharif, Bhutto has been Prime Minister before (twice) and wants to assume the position again. But she, too, is living in exile, charged by the Musharraf government with corruption. Unlike Sharif and the Muslim League, however, Musharraf is willing to consider allowing Bhutto to return to Pakistan, which she has declared she will do on 18 October. She met with Musharraf earlier this year in Abu Dhabi to discuss conditions for her return and a possible power sharing arrangement with the Musharraf government. Those and subsequent talks have not produced an agreement because Bhutto insists that Musharraf needs to resign as army chief of staff in exchange for her support for another term as president. Despite this, the government is allowing Bhutto to return on the understanding that she must face trial on the corruption charges.
An accommodation between Musharraf and Bhutto has risks for both of them. Musharraf understands his growing weakness and isolation and that his best bet for hanging on to power is to find allies. Bhutto is in a similar boat. She cannot return to Pakistan and an influential position in political life without the government’s approval, despite the risk of conviction on the corruption charges. Consequently, they each can turn weakness into at least a modicum of strength through cooperation. If it works and is durable, a coalition agreement between Bhutto and Musharraf would provide the Bush administration with the best—and perhaps only—palpably pro-American political arrangement available in Pakistan. However, Bhutto and Musharraf are not natural allies and a deal has not yet been struck. Moreover, if and when a deal is made, it likely will be fragile and if, after a few months, it collapses, both Musharraf and Bhutto will be weaker than they are now and U.S. policy in and for Pakistan will also be weaker.

The fourth force comes from the challenge of what might be called, collectively, Muslim hardliners. Although there are several disparate groups in this category, what ties them together is more important from the perspective of U.S. policy than what divides them. They all are basically opposed to the Musharraf government, to Pakistan’s alliance with the U.S., and to the anti-Taliban and anti-terrorist stance of Washington and Islamabad. They want to establish Sharia law (which is already ensconced in the Constitution) as the legal basis for Pakistani society.

Although Muslim hardliners can be found in large numbers throughout Pakistan, they are most influential in the remote, rugged, mountainous northwest frontier areas that border Afghanistan where Osama Bin Laden is supposed to be hiding and the Taliban and al Qaeda are prominent. The Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA, the United Council of Action), which is itself an amalgam of several Islamic religious parties, controls the government of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and is intimately entwined with the clans and tribes that are prominent in the area. It is enormously difficult for the central government in Islamabad to control this region and, from the perspective of the U.S., it is exactly the area that needs to be controlled because it, along with the tribal areas on the Afghan side of the border, is the seedbed and safe haven for terrorists. Late last year the Musharraf government struck a deal with many of the tribal leaders in the northwest that promised to keep government forcers out of the region in exchange for the tribal leaders’ cooperation in controlling the Taliban and al Qaeda. The deal has since been rescinded by the government and Islamabad has, once again, tried to introduce troops to the area with very little success in bringing order to the Northwest.

At worst, from the perspective of the U.S., Musharraf and his government may be on their way out of power. At best, he will be able to hang on to both the presidency and his army position, but not without declaring a state of emergency, a move that will generate widespread and violent opposition. It is much more likely that he will have to resign his military position if he wants to remain as president. In any case, Pakistan’s strong pro-U.S. stance likely will suffer. Even the military government has had a very difficult time challenging the Taliban and al Qaeda in the Northwest, and a government
controlled by either of the two most important democratic parties—the Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan People’s Party—would find the challenge even more daunting. They would not control the army as fully as Musharraf has and the weakening or collapse of the military government will further embolden radical Muslim forces not only in the Northwest, but throughout the country. Osama bin Laden’s “declaration of war” against the Musharraf government last month will put more pressure on Islamabad to attempt to control the situation in the Northwest and will strain even further the relationship between the government and the religious parties.

A U.S. official in the American Embassy in Islamabad recently described Musharraf as the “ideal” president for U.S. interests. This is a remarkable comment, given the Bush administration’s democracy agenda. Ever since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration has argued that the best way to combat terrorism and to ensure peace, stability, justice, and economic development is for non-democratic and rogue states to adopt democracy and free enterprise as the bases for state and society. In fact, in the president’s cover letter to the 2002 National Security Strategy he argues that there is no other acceptable model. And, presumably, the administration has gone to war in Iraq to make the point. Yet, in Pakistan not only has the administration seemingly ignored its own advice, it has purposefully endorsed and supported an authoritarian regime headed by an “ideal” authoritarian leader. The hypocrisy in the administration’s stance is palpable.

The administration’s position on Pakistan also demonstrates that, despite its constant, lofty rhetoric, what really guides its policy and action is not the promotion of democracy, but a narrow conception of short-term interests in prosecuting its “war against terrorism.” Consequently, as is so often necessary, this administration—as many before it—allies with and supports authoritarian (and even totalitarian) regimes when that course suits its purposes. Moreover, the administration not only willingly supports an authoritarian regime in Islamabad, it does virtually nothing to encourage the development of democratic norms and institutions in Pakistan. If this were an administration operating on thoroughly realist assumptions, its position would be understandable, but realism in the classic sense does not characterize Bush foreign policy. This administration has cast its lot with a full-fledged Wilsonian-style idealism that, in theory at any rate, leaves little room for the support and encouragement of authoritarian regimes to satisfy short term policy goals while sacrificing the careful, harder, long term objectives of helping the “developing world” to build civil societies and mature democracies.

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