

Musharraf's About Face

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By Ahmad Faruqui

I. Introduction

This essay is by Ahmad Faruqui who is currently a Fellow at the American Institute of International Studies and author of the forthcoming book "Rethinking the National Security of Pakistan" (Ashgate Publishing, 2002). Despite the perceived short term benefits of Pakistan's latest relationship with the US, Faruqui fears a long term Muslim and minority backlash will become increasingly probable the longer Pakistan continues to support and assist the US attacks on Afghanistan.

II. Essay By Ahmad Faruqui

"Musharraf's About Face"

By Ahmad Faruqui, American Institute of International Studies

General Musharraf has made a 180-degree turn in Pakistan's long-standing policy toward Afghanistan. This sea of change was accomplished in less than 18 hours, after a marathon session with the army's senior commanders. The general made no attempt to consult the nation's opinion leaders. He simply "took the nation into confidence" during a short address on radio and television.

The change in foreign policy was followed a few weeks later by several changes in the military high command. First of all, General Musharraf's tenure as army chief was extended indefinitely. Second, three senior generals who were perceived to have pro-Taliban views, but who had also been instrumental in bringing the General to power on October 12, 1999 were sidelined or retired. Third, several other "like minded" generals were promoted to senior positions.

By eliminating dissent from within the military, General Musharraf has consolidated his grip on power. In many ways, he is echoing the footsteps of two previous military rulers: Field Marshal Ayub Khan and General Zia ul Haq. Ayub Khan took over the presidency soon after taking over as the military ruler, and introduced a form of "basic democracy" that bears a strong resemblance to the type of "grass roots democracy" that Musharraf has been slowly implementing during the past year.

Musharraf is also following in the footsteps of General Zia who also found it convenient to quickly dispatch the generals who were instrumental in bringing him to power on July 5, 1977. More directly, he decided to avail himself of the opportunities presented by a war between neighboring Afghanistan and a super power. Zia was the beneficiary of billions of dollars in US economic and military aid, for letting Pakistan become a "frontline" state in the US battle against the "Evil Empire." He was transformed from an international pariah who executed a democratically elected prime minister into a hero of the West.

The terrible legacy of that Afghan war: gun-running, drug-trafficking and migration of refugees continues to haunt Pakistan today, more than a decade later.

However, General Musharraf is cozying up to the United States much more overtly than Zia, and his new friendship with the American military is fraught with even greater dangers. Zia, with all his weaknesses, was too shrewd a strategist to let the CIA openly supply arms to the Mujahideen. They were transported through the Pakistani military (which of course took its cut in the process). No US fighters or bombers flew over Pakistan; no planes were based there; and there was no question of ground troops being deployed in Pakistan to conduct raids against Soviet formations deployed in Afghanistan. Pakistani F-16 fighters patrolled the skies near Afghanistan, and were successful in shooting down several Soviet fighter pilots who had crossed the border in hot pursuit of Mujahideen fighters.

On the contrary, Musharraf has dispensed with all such niceties. Not only has he given the US access to Pakistani air space; he has also made at least two air bases available to them. In the near future, Pakistanis may wake up one day to discover that elements of the 82nd and 101st US airborne divisions are deployed in the Frontier and Baluchistan provinces, ready to strike across the border to fight Muslim forces of the Taliban.

In choosing to so openly side with the US, he may well have strengthened his position in the short term. But whether that will help him--or Pakistan--in the long run is an open question. Economic aid, even if it arrives immediately, cannot jump start an economy that has been moribund for more than a decade. Corruption is rampant and the institutions have melted down. It will take years for Pakistan to become prosperous, and in the mean time the radical elements will have ample opportunity to alter the political geography of Pakistan.

They will point out that not even Saudi Arabia allowed the US to exploit its air bases for launching attacks against a Muslim country that was not even their neighbor. Even Iran, which has significant religious and political differences with Afghanistan, has refused to join any coalition against that nation, and has openly condemned the US bombing campaign. The examples of Muslims in Malaysia and Indonesia, who are not even in South Asia, but are opposed to the US campaign against Afghanistan, will be mentioned. People will draw attention to the Gulf War that has still not ended, and which has resulted in more than a million civilian deaths. They will talk about the lack of even-handedness in US foreign policy in the Middle East. Just about every argument will be used to portray Musharraf as having sold out to the CIA, and to discredit his standing not only in Pakistan but in the entire Muslim world.

Dissent within the Frontier and Baluchistan provinces is at an all-time high. These provinces have always felt that they have been taken for granted by the Punjabi-dominated Pakistani military. There are signs of protest even in Sindh, where the native Sindhis and Muhajirs have patched up their differences to take on the Punjabis over the allocation of water rights, even prior to the September 11 attacks.

The 180-degree switch in Pakistan's Afghanistan policy may push these three minority provinces

over the edge. At some point, dissension cannot be ruled out within the military. While Musharraf may have deposed three pro-Taliban generals, there are dozens more in the wings.

If the Anglo-American campaign drags on--and with every passing day we get statements to that effect from London and Washington--Musharraf's domestic coalition within the military may crumble. That does not bode well for either Pakistan or the Anglo-American campaign against global terrorism.

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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org