



21

Pakistan's Musharraf: Playing a balancing act

by Claude Rakisits

President Pervez Musharraf's state visit to Australia in June 2005—the first by Pakistan's head of state—highlights Australia's increasing interest in Pakistan, an interest demonstrated even more so by Canberra's response to the devastating earthquake in Pakistan this October. In this ASPI *Strategic Insight* I review the key domestic and foreign policy issues confronting President Musharraf and ask what are the Australian Government's interests and options in supporting the

president as he tries to handle his country's challenging domestic and external environment.

Why the Coup?

Six years ago, on 12 October 1999, Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Musharraf overthrew the elected Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, in a bloodless *coup d'état*. This was the fourth direct military intervention in politics since Pakistan gained its



Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf is presented with a baggy green and gold Australian cricket cap by Australian Prime Minister John Howard at Parliament House in Canberra, 15 June 2005. AFP via AAP/Torsten Blackwood © 2005 AFP

independence in 1947. In his address to the nation a few days later, Musharraf justified the coup on the grounds that 'Pakistan's economy had crumbled, its credibility was lost, state institutions were demolished and provincial disharmony had caused cracks in the federation'.¹ Significantly, he accused the Sharif Government of 'creating dissension in the ranks of the armed forces of Pakistan'.² He was referring to deep differences that had arisen between Prime Minister Sharif and the army on two issues: the role the latter should play in running the country and the perceived concessions the prime minister was making to India on the Kashmir issue in the wake of the Kargil confrontation in Kashmir.

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Promising that he would not allow the people of Pakistan to return to 'sham democracy', Musharraf promised the army would not keep political control any longer than was necessary to pave the way for 'true' democracy. He set no deadline for achieving this goal.

How successful has Musharraf been in bringing about 'true' democracy? Aside from implementing economic reforms and making the country more attractive for foreign investors, his achievements on the domestic front have been lacklustre. It is events in neighbouring Afghanistan which have yet again given a military strongman in Pakistan a second lease of life. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 provided a golden opportunity for the then military ruler of Pakistan, General Zia-ul-Haq, to improve his relationship with the West, which was then at an all time low. Pakistan became a key frontline state and welcomed

some four million Afghan refugees, most of them only returning home after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. In return, the US gave billions of dollars of military and economic aid. Events in Afghanistan enabled President Zia to postpone several times his promise of a return to democracy and to remain in power until his assassination in August 1988.

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Similarly, al-Qaeda's attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 and the subsequent war in Afghanistan have again made Pakistan a key strategic player in the region and ally of the West and, accordingly, have bolstered Musharraf's international stature and strengthened his hand to remain in power. However, as was the case with General Zia, Musharraf might endear himself to the West but his standing at home is low. In what follows I examine this political paradox.

Rigged elections, an amended constitution and mad mullahs

In May 2000, the Supreme Court of Pakistan gave Musharraf until October 2002 to curb corruption, introduce reforms and return the country to democracy. However, in April 2002, he received a 'massive mandate' in a referendum in which he sought to extend his presidential term by five years, following the forthcoming October 2002 elections. This referendum was widely boycotted, with estimates of only 30% or less of the population participating. In order to give his rule a veneer of legitimacy, Musharraf created for the October 2002 elections his own party, the Pakistan Muslim League—Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q). However,

while his party won the greatest number of seats in parliament, Musharraf still had to negotiate with the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA), an alliance of six Islamic parties, to have the constitution amended and have his presidency accordingly extended to October 2007. In return Musharraf agreed that he would shed his uniform and quit as head of the army in January 2005. But in September 2004, claiming ‘state necessity’, he reneged on his agreement and decided he would remain COAS.

Musharraf’s decision to do so further strained an already shaky relationship with the religious parties. The MMA had been unhappy with Musharraf’s relative liberalism and his close association with the US in the War on Terror. But what really annoyed them was Musharraf’s announcement in January 2002 that he would be clamping down on extremism. Specifically, he intended to bring all *madrassa*—religious schools—into the mainstream education system and to increase scrutiny of them by controlling their curriculum and funding. There are over 10,000 *madrassa*, mainly operated by the two largest MMA component parties, the Jamiat-e-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI) and Jamiat-i-Islami (JI). No one is quite certain how many students attend these religious schools, figures vary from half a million to three times that number. Many of these schools are located in the unruly North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Baluchistan on the border with Afghanistan. While these schools play an important social function by providing food and lodging for children of poor families, their educational value is very limited at best, with many of them using Saudi textbooks that indoctrinate the children in fundamentalist Wahhabism. But even more worrisome is that in about 15% of these *madrassa* jihadist extremism is being propagated, and this has fuelled sectarianism and Sunni-Shiite violence that are increasingly threatening the stability of Pakistan.³

Unfortunately, Musharraf has done very little in over three years to crack down on extremists and reform the *madrassa*. Following the July 2005 bombings in London and Musharraf’s public acknowledgment that the perpetrators had had links with Pakistan, he has had to reassure the West that his administration would this time do something tangible to tackle this issue. In a speech in July he issued new measures, including not allowing banned extremist groups from operating under a new name, clamping down on inflammatory material, not allowing militant groups to collect funds, monitoring hate sermons from mosques and all *madrassa* to be registered by December 2005. Knowing Musharraf’s dependence on the mullah-led religious parties for the survival of his regime, the world will be watching very closely how far he will indeed go in implementing these latest measures.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding his dependence on the mullahs for support he has been willing to clip their wings somewhat. For example, he made the August and October 2005 local elections—which were considered rigged by Pakistan’s human rights commission—‘non-party-based’, thus denying the religious parties (as well as all others) a political platform. As a result, the religious parties lost ground to the officially sponsored candidates throughout the country but



Pakistan’s Islamic alliance Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal’s leaders attend a meeting in Islamabad to discuss the political situation after local government elections in Islamabad August 29, 2005.
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significantly in NWFP and Baluchistan as well, where the MMA is the ruling party or in coalition with the PML-Q.

Adding insult to injury, the Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled on 25 August that certificates from *madrassa* did not fulfil the education criteria for local elections. This should disqualify many of the recently elected mullahs from holding office. The court has also decided that at 'an appropriate time' it would start hearing a petition questioning the validity of the *madrassa* degrees held by over fifty mullahs elected to the national parliament. And in a further blow to the MMA, the Supreme Court, in an advisory opinion, said that various clauses of a bill introducing a Taliban-style moral code in NWFP were unconstitutional. The bill includes measures to ensure people respect calls to prayer and to discourage singing and dancing. Musharraf echoed the court's sentiments by stating that the bill was in breach of fundamental human rights. Importantly, because of Pakistan's federal system, only Musharraf could revoke the bill with an executive act.

However, complicating even further Musharraf's difficult relationship with the Islamic parties and adding further stress to an already challenging domestic political scene have been two other intertwined issues: the War on Terror and Kashmir.

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Choosy on the War on Terror

President Musharraf's decision to provide 'unstinted cooperation' to the War on Terror within days of 9/11 was a fundamental policy

shift for the Pakistan Government. It was also a major strategic gain for the West. Paradoxically, it was fortunate that a military man was running the country, because it is unlikely that a civilian prime minister would have had sufficient support from the Pakistan armed forces to be able to prosecute this changed policy. In the last four years, Pakistan has successfully captured scores of al-Qaeda operatives, including 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Muhammad, and handed them over to the US.

However, Musharraf's decision to join the War on Terror has brought out into the open some of the internal contradictions in the Pakistan Government's approach to the prosecution of its anti-terrorism policy. In an attempt to avoid further annoying the Islamic parties or upsetting elements of the military, particularly the all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the government has tried to differentiate between al-Qaeda, the Taliban and the many militant groups fighting in Kashmir. Accordingly, it goes hard after al-Qaeda but goes softer on the Taliban and the Kashmiri militants supported by the religious parties. Still, it has captured Taliban members once in a while, including recently Latifullah Hakimi, one of its leading spokesmen.

The Pakistan military has suffered hundreds of casualties trying to flush out al-Qaeda operatives from their hideouts in the Taliban-friendly tribal territories. This has come at a great political cost to Musharraf, who has thus violated the long-standing central government policy (adopted under the British) of respecting tribal autonomy and has annoyed the MMA. Still, this differentiation is not easy, as there is a certain amount of fluidity of membership between these terrorist and militant groups, with individuals flowing between them. And, according to the Chinese Government, al-Qaeda has linked up with the Uigur separatists in the

Muslim-majority province of Xinjiang that borders with Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

... there is evidence that the Taliban continues to get support in Pakistan today.

For example, the Taliban, which began to pour out of Pakistan into Afghanistan in 1994 and took over Kabul in 1996, was a direct product of the JUI-run *madrassa* in NWFP and Baluchistan, and was supported and trained by the ISI. Notwithstanding the government's declared policy, there is evidence that the Taliban continues to get support in Pakistan today. Similarly, the Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba, two Islamist militias conducting terrorist operations in Kashmir and supported by religious parties and the ISI, continue to operate openly in Pakistan despite Musharraf banning their activities in 2002. So although several Pakistani groups are formally banned, their leaders have not been prosecuted under the Anti-Terrorism Act and these banned entities are allowed to continue operating under new identities with the same leadership.⁴

Slow but promising progress on Kashmir

Surprisingly, given Musharraf's military role in the Kargil clash of 1999 and Pakistan's selectiveness in prosecuting the War on Terror, including its failure to stop terrorists from crossing into Indian Kashmir, there has nevertheless been progress—albeit slow—in the bilateral talks over Kashmir over the last four years. The discussions first with then Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in Agra in 2001 were considered a failure but more recently with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh these have been more successful and substantial.

Ironically, the devastating earthquake that hit Pakistan hard this October may be the opportunity to advance further this peace process between the two nuclear rivals. The fact that India and Pakistan agreed to open their Kashmir border to facilitate the delivery of aid and Pakistan accepted twenty-five tonnes of Indian relief and medical supplies is an indication of how far relations between the two countries have improved over the last few years. Already confidence building measures are in place, such as hot lines and notification before missile tests, between the two countries. Nevertheless, while India and Pakistan recently set a deadline of January for an agreement to end their confrontation on the Siachen glacier and President Musharraf even suggested that the Kashmir dispute could be resolved in one year, there are still major differences that need to be addressed before a lasting peace can be reached.

Rewards from the West

Despite the selectiveness in Musharraf's prosecution of the War on Terror in Pakistan, the West is fully aware of the heavy political capital he expended in openly joining the West. But also indicative of the importance the US puts on the War on Terror, it was willing to put aside the fact that Dr A Q Khan—the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb and a national hero—was personally



US President George W. Bush meets his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf, on an official visit in Washington December 4, 2004.
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involved in nuclear proliferation, selling nuclear technology to North Korea, Iran and Libya. The US knows that it can only push Musharraf so far on this issue. Accordingly, it is in recognition of the difficult balancing act Musharraf has to play to survive in the challenging domestic political environment of Pakistan that the West, led by the US, has been willing to publicly embrace him and assist Pakistan financially. Needless to say, Musharraf's recent overtures to Israel and his personal involvement in the bilateral talks with India would have been well received in the US and other Western countries.

In the three years after 9/11, the US extended US\$1 billion worth of grants to Pakistan and wrote off US\$1 billion of debt. Starting in October 2004, and distributed over five years, the US provided a US\$3 billion assistance package, with roughly equal amounts going to economic aid and security assistance. Additionally, a framework agreement on trade and investment (TIFA) has been signed, and the two countries have begun negotiating a bilateral investment treaty. On the security front, the US approved a US\$1.2 billion arms-sale package. In March 2005, President Bush authorized the sale of probably about seventy-five F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan. However, according to press reports, Pakistan is reconsidering plans to buy these fighters because of the political and economic implications of making a multi-billion dollar deal in the wake of the devastating earthquake.

The US has made it clear that this latest emergency aid was also to thank Pakistan for its contribution to the War on Terror.

The US has also reinstated a military-training program through which some 300 officers have received instruction at US military

institutions since 2001. Finally, in the wake of the devastating October quake, the US has provided US\$50 million in humanitarian assistance. The US has made it clear that this latest emergency aid was also to thank Pakistan for its contribution to the War on Terror. In addition to the financial assistance, Musharraf has had high-level bilateral meetings with President Bush and the UK's Prime Minister Blair, as well as Prime Minister Howard when he visited Australia in June 2005.

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Australia and Pakistan: Interests and policy options

The Australian Government's interest in Pakistan increased significantly after 9/11, and particularly following Musharraf's crucial decision to join the West in the War on Terror. As a result of this, Australia re-established in late September 2001 bilateral defence relations, which had been suspended following Pakistan's May 1998 nuclear tests. Pakistan's important role in the War on Terror was recognised during Musharraf's visit with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on Counter-Terrorism, setting up a framework for the exchange of information and intelligence, joint training activities and capacity building initiatives. This MOU complements the presence in Afghanistan, since September 2005, of 190 Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel whose task is to assist Kabul and coalition forces destroy the Taliban and what remains of al-Qaeda. This would be an opportune time for Australia to help fast-track the training of Pakistan's counter-terrorism forces in order to take advantage of the lessons

learned from the ADF's pursuit of the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Australia has also been assisting Pakistan in the agricultural sector through its AusAID program and this has been deepened with an MOU in agriculture which was also signed during Musharraf's June visit. This MOU provides for Australia to commit, over four years, \$6.6 million including seven post-graduate scholarships in agriculture and funding for the development of linkages and exchanges between the science and technology and agriculture institutions of both countries. This complements the assistance which Australia already provides in the education sector, such as twenty scholarships awarded annually for students to undertake Masters level studies in Australia and the \$3.4 million for the Girls' Primary Education Project in Baluchistan. Given the dire state of education in Pakistan this aid will be of particular, if sadly limited, benefit to the people of Pakistan. If Canberra is serious in its desire to undercut the causes of support for terrorism in Pakistan, then we should dramatically increase our financial support for further education and training programs. This could take the form of additional scholarships as well as programs to improve the quality of education schemes in Pakistan itself.

The Australian Government's quick response to the recent earthquake ... has further consolidated this deepening relationship.

These recent MOUs and the annual development assistance of over \$3 million build on an already steady bilateral relationship including well over \$600 million in two-way trade; significant Australian investments in Pakistan's resource sector;

expanding people-to-people links; and a Pakistani community in Australia of over 10,000.

The Australian Government's quick response to the recent earthquake—providing over \$14 million in assistance—has further consolidated this deepening relationship. Importantly, a Critical Infrastructure Assessment Mission led by AusAID has been sent to Pakistan to help Islamabad assess the damage to critical infrastructure and plan for the future. One of the expected findings is the urgent need for the roads in northern Pakistan and Pakistan-administered Kashmir to be repaired—their destruction made the delivery of international aid so much more difficult. Given Australia's past experience in building roads in Pakistan, an offer from the Australian Government to assist with the reconstruction of the roads in that part of the country would be of enormous practical and lasting benefit to the people of Kashmir.

... the Australian Government should consider offering to mediate or act as a facilitator in the negotiations between the two sides.

Turning to Kashmir, the earthquake has further thawed relations between Pakistan and India, with both sides showing an increased degree of goodwill towards one another. Ironically, this disaster may be the catalyst which will allow the sides to make real progress in the negotiations on Kashmir. In this context, and to take advantage of the improved atmospherics between the two neighbours, the Australian Government should consider offering to mediate or act as a facilitator in the negotiations between the two sides. Australia has the right credentials for such a role: being a member of the Commonwealth, as are Pakistan and India;

having no vested interest in the dispute; and having good relations with both countries. Moreover, Australia has substantial recent experience in facilitating a complex border management issue between Indonesia and Timor Leste. Australian support might take the form of providing technical advice and practical assistance on negotiating border demarcations, establishing safe and agreed border policing arrangements and customs arrangements. While India, as opposed to Pakistan, has never been very keen in having external involvement, the tragic recent earthquake may bring about a changed mindset. Needless to say, a peaceful resolution of the dispute would be of benefit to all and remove in part the need for Pakistan to spend such enormous funds on its armed forces which could be better spent elsewhere.

Conclusion

Overall, Musharraf's report card is a mixed one. On the one hand, economic growth, which was 7.2% in 2004/05 and forecast at 6.5% for 2005/06, has been led by strong industrial output, strong export growth and a good agricultural harvest. However, inflation is forecast to rise (7.7%) and there is a widening trade deficit.⁵ Despite the rumblings of the Islamic parties, the political situation is relatively stable. But there are some underlying tensions which Musharraf will need to manage carefully, particularly the growing dissatisfaction in Sindh and Baluchistan provinces with the Punjab-dominated central government's approach to provincial issues and the growing sectarian violence throughout the country. The stability of his regime will come under strain in the wake of the devastating earthquake—which has killed over 50,000 people, injured well over 70,000 and has left

more than 3 million homeless—if the army appears not to be doing enough and quickly enough to assist the victims. This will be especially so given that Musharraf's claim to legitimacy is based on his 'government serving the people rather than ruling them', a promise he made at the time of the *coup*.

... the West (including, of course Australia) has little choice but to support Musharraf's 'benevolent dictatorship', particularly in this time of crisis.

At the end of the day, while Musharraf may not be everyone's preferred choice of leader of Pakistan, for the time being there is no one better to help the West in the War on Terror. Accordingly, the West (including, of course Australia) has little choice but to support Musharraf's 'benevolent dictatorship', particularly in this time of crisis. At the same time, however, the West must continue to encourage Musharraf to free up the political system, clamp down on the Taliban and stop the terrorist incursions into Kashmir, close down the more radical *madrassa*, improve education⁶ and end sectarian violence.

At present, there does not appear to be any threat to his rule from the military, and the previous two civilian prime ministers—Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif—are in exile. They are not greatly missed and have effectively been barred from holding office again. Unless Musharraf is assassinated, which is not at all impossible (there were two attempts on his life in December 2003), now that he has amended the constitution, he could remain president until 2012.

Who is Musharraf?

General Pervez Musharraf was born in August 1943, near Delhi, India and moved with his parents to Karachi, Pakistan in 1947, at the time of Partition. Musharraf's father served in Pakistan's foreign service and spent several years as a diplomat in Turkey where Musharraf learned to speak fluent Turkish. Upon returning to Pakistan Musharraf went to a Presbyterian boarding school in Lahore.

In 1961, he went to the Pakistan Military Academy and was commissioned in the artillery regiment in 1964. He later graduated from Command and Staff College, Quetta and the National Defense College. At the Royal College of Defence Studies in the UK his supervisor remarked that Musharraf was 'a capable, articulate and extremely personable officer'.

As a young officer, he fought in the 1965 war with India and was awarded a medal for gallantry. He also participated in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war as a Company Commander in the Special Service Group Commando Battalion.

Musharraf was appointed Chief of Army Staff (COAS) on 7 October 1998. He is only the second *Muhajir* (Muslim migrant from today's India) to have become COAS; previous ones have either been Punjabi or Pukhtun.

According to people who know Musharraf, he is a natural charmer, hospitable and humorous. He is Western-oriented, with a brother and son living in the US. However, because of his perceived closeness to the Bush Administration, some critics refer to him as 'Busharraf'. In the Pakistan context he is considered a liberal, promoting what he calls 'enlightened moderation'. Unlike the previous military ruler, General Zia, Musharraf is rarely seen in the traditional Pakistan attire, *Shalwar Kameez*, preferring instead to wear Western clothes. Musharraf has on many occasions expressed his admiration for the secularist reformer of Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, to the dismay of religious groups in Pakistan.

Endnotes

- 1 General Pervez Musharraf, Chief Executive, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, *Address to the Nation*, 17 October 1999.
- 2 Ibid
- 3 Samina Ahmed and Andrew Stroehlein, 'Pakistan: Still Schooling Extremists', *The Washington Post*, 17 July 2005.
- 4 International Crisis Group Asia Report No 73, *Unfulfilled Promises: Pakistan's Failure to Tackle Extremism*, 16 January 2004.
- 5 *Business Asia*, 2 May 2005, p.15.
- 6 Only 1.8% of GDP is spent on education compared to India's 4.1% of GDP.

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Dr Claude Rakisits wrote his PhD on national integration in Pakistan, examining the role of religion, ethnicity and the external environment. He has been an intelligence analyst in the Office of National Assessments, an officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and a senior adviser in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. After working in the then Deputy Prime Minister's office, the Hon Tim Fischer, as a trade adviser, he was Director of Strategic Analysis in the Department of Defence.

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