

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1497
June 11, 2007

American Interests in Pakistan Are Larger than One Man

Lisa Curtis

Pakistan's judicial crisis, sparked by the Musharraf government's March 9 dismissal of the country's Chief Justice, has grown into a broader movement to restore democratic, civilian rule to the country. The U.S. response to the crisis so far has been cautious, due to concerns that political instability in the country could jeopardize counterterrorism cooperation, especially against Taliban and al-Qaeda forces that are re-trenching in Pakistan's Tribal Areas. But Musharraf's popularity has slipped considerably in recent weeks and U.S. public support for him is growing increasingly irrelevant in the current political environment.

U.S. reluctance to speak out against curbs on civilian freedoms also risks deepening anti-American sentiment, which Islamic extremists could exploit to further their anti-American agendas. Blindly supporting Musharraf—who is seeking reelection from a five-year-old parliament, while maintaining his role as Army Chief—is not worth the cost. Instead, Washington should encourage and support a transition to democracy.

Focus on Democratic Principles. The United States is in a position to play a positive role in encouraging a transition to civilian-led democracy in Pakistan, without backing any particular leader or party. A U.S. State Department spokesman's remark last Tuesday that Pakistan should not roll back advances in press freedom was a step in the right direction and had an immediate positive impact: Pakistan suspended the media restrictions it had decreed the day before and dismissed hundreds

of cases against journalists who had defied a government ban on rallies in Islamabad.

The ideal scenario is a smooth transition to democracy, with Musharraf playing a strong role. But if Musharraf continues to respond to the current political crisis with an increasingly autocratic hand—taking away press freedoms and arresting opposition politicians and peaceful protesters—he will further undermine his credibility and lessen his chances of playing a role in any transition to civilian rule.

The Bush Administration has only dealt with a military-ruled Pakistan and therefore has trouble envisioning an alternative. Throughout the 1990s, there were three power centers in Pakistan: the army, the president, and the prime minister. Today, all power is centered in one individual—President Musharraf—an inherently unstable situation for a country with a vibrant civil society and developed political parties. The Pakistani people have agitated for democracy in the past, which led the military to share power with the civilian leaders.

U.S. policymakers worry that a civilian-led government would not be committed to the fight against terrorism, particularly in the tribal areas

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1497.cfm

Produced by the Asian Studies Center

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

bordering Afghanistan. But this fear is largely unfounded. In any new political order, the military would retain a major role in decision-making on security matters. The military, in turn, seeks to maintain its strong relationship with the U.S., due at least in part to large-scale military and economic assistance programs from the U.S., and so would continue its counterterrorism operations. A civilian-led government with broad support from Pakistani society could even strengthen Pakistan's support for countering terrorism, especially if part of the civilian leader's mandate was to halt the Talibanization of Pakistani society that has begun in the Northwest Frontier Province.

Promote Transition to Democracy. The U.S. can help bring about a peaceful transition to civil-

ian-led democratic rule in Pakistan by continuing to speak in favor of civilian and democratic freedoms. If Washington stays in step with the evolving political situation in Pakistan and focuses on enhancing democratic institutions in the country, its credibility with the Pakistani people will grow as it works to encourage a peaceful transition to a civilian-led government representative of the Pakistani people. The alternative—blindly supporting one ruler—would likely bring greater political instability and anti-U.S. sentiment, a dangerous mix that could threaten U.S. interests in the region for years to come.

—*Lisa A. Curtis is Senior Research Fellow for South Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*