



BACKGROUND

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The Peril of Pakistan

Keep Elections Fair to Restore a Critical Ally in the Fight Against Terrorists

John Neffinger and Jessica Tacka, Truman National Security Project

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The toughest battleground in the fight against violent terrorists is not Iraq, or even Afghanistan. It is Pakistan, home to the world's second largest Muslim population, a fully operational arsenal of nuclear weapons, and the world's most wanted man, Osama bin Laden. America's fight against al-Qaeda will be won or lost there.

But the U.S. has been on the wrong course. Our continued support for President Musharraf in the face of his anti-democratic crackdown and Benazir Bhutto's assassination has damaged our standing with the majority of Pakistanis: moderates who now stand against terrorists. Nor is supporting Musharraf buying us security: the Pakistani military is still deeply ambivalent about fighting the radicals, who have been on their payroll for years.

Pakistan's parliamentary elections on February 18 offer a crucial window of opportunity to restore democracy and set the country on a new course. With deft U.S. diplomacy and the help of Pakistan's strong middle class, Pakistan could develop a stable democratic government and renew its efforts to eradicate al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in its mountainous border regions. Poor diplomacy or domestic turmoil will allow the Taliban in the border regions to continue to thrive, destabilizing Pakistan and Afghanistan and allowing al-Qaeda to threaten America. The U.S. cannot make the difference alone, but it has a key role to play to guide Pakistan towards a brighter future.

BACKGROUND: MISPLACED U.S. ALLEGIANCES UNDERMINE THE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM

Pakistan has a Large, Pro-Democracy Middle Class. The U.S. does not need to fear democracy in Pakistan. Pakistan has a large middle class of

moderate Muslims who favor democracy and reject terrorism. There are several major political parties, all secular, whose platforms emphasize social welfare, democratization and economic growth. The two main secular parties that oppose Musharraf have the backing of 72% of Pakistanis polled this week. The few conservative Islamist parties together claim less than 10% of total votes, and all have renounced violence. Musharraf is not our only potential ally against violent extremists: in recent polling, 89% of Pakistanis agreed that "Pakistan should cooperate with the U.S. on its war against terror."¹

In fact, while many Pakistanis used to be more ambivalent about extremists, a recent wave of terrorist violence across the country has turned Pakistanis solidly against terror: support for Osama bin Laden has fallen from 46% last August to 24% now, while support for the Taliban has dropped by half, to 19%.²

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Aligning with Musharraf Has Damaged Our Support Among the Middle Class. Since 9/11, the U.S. has allied itself closely with General Musharraf. This policy made sense at first: after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, General Musharraf helped the U.S. track down numerous al-Qaeda leaders fleeing to Pakistan. For several years Musharraf was also a boon for civil society, allowing a free press and the nonprofit sector to

¹ Polling on support for the war against terror and party support was conducted Jan 19-29, 2008 by the International Republican Institute, a U.S. government funded nonprofit that supports democracy.

² Polling from Terror Free Tomorrow, a U.S. nonprofit that conducts polls in multiple Islamic countries.



flourish. He also eased tensions with India and promoted economic growth. But last fall Musharraf showed his authoritarian impulses, suspending the constitution, firing the well-respected Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, temporarily imposing martial law, and restricting press freedoms. And although Musharraf has stepped down as Army Chief, the position which had prompted his clash with the Court, he first had himself elected to another five-year Presidential term.

Pakistanis strongly objected to these heavy-handed actions, and Musharraf's popular support has suffered severely. In a poll this week, he has just 15% approval ratings. The Bush administration's failure to condemn Musharraf's actions strongly enough has left the impression that the U.S. cares more about "our dictator" Musharraf than about Pakistanis. By the end of last year, 68% of Pakistanis held an unfavorable opinion of the U.S.³

Stakes Are High: Lawless Tribal Areas Harbor Taliban and Terrorists. The fight against violent extremists will be won or lost along Pakistan's porous northern border with Afghanistan. The mountainous Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are populated by self-governing tribes over whom the federal government has almost no authority. These tribes are hostile to the U.S. and have been welcoming to Taliban and al-Qaeda radicals. Our goal must be to help create a government that will root out the radicals without causing a backlash that creates more hostility.

Musharraf's Security Forces Are Ambivalent about Eliminating Taliban. The U.S. has a history of close security cooperation with Pakistan's military and intelligence services (the ISI), which maintain tight control over its nuclear arsenal. But for years, the ISI sponsored the Taliban (with U.S. support) in the mountainous northern regions to wage proxy war in Afghanistan. The ISI retains some connections to these and other assorted radical elements who now make their homes in the FATA. Since 9/11, the military has made some serious efforts to eliminate radicals from the tribal areas, but these have not succeeded.

It is not entirely clear to what degree this failure is due to the inherent difficulty of rooting out insurgents from a supportive population in very challenging terrain, and to what degree the military is simply reluctant to pursue the radicals vigorously because of their previous relations. The military has repeatedly called "truces" in the frontier territories, including one in effect now. These truces are supposed to allow local tribes to control the Taliban without military interference, but in practice

they have allowed the Taliban to regroup and expand their capacity. The recurrence of these truces seems emblematic of the military's reluctance to take the problem seriously.

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The Taliban's increasing terror attacks may force the military's hand. In the past year, militants have been stepping up terrorist attacks not only across the border in Afghanistan, but inside Pakistan itself. As this trend escalates, the military may be unable to claim that its radical clients are someone else's problem, or just a nuisance. As U.S. Director of National Intelligence Mike McConnell recently testified, "In the last year, the number of terrorist attacks and deaths were greater than the past six years combined... Pakistan has now recognized that this is an existential threat to their very survival."

The U.S. Must Act Carefully. While Pakistanis want to fight terror, they also are proud of their sovereignty. In addition to ongoing military training and development aid to Pakistan, the U.S. has offered more direct assistance in moving against radicals in the FATA. But Pakistan's military is reluctant to invite Americans in, as that would anger both the tribal populations and the moderate Muslim population in the country at large. Any large-scale incursion by the U.S. in the FATA would cause a severe political outcry in Pakistan and risk rupturing the alliance entirely. That would make it harder for the U.S. to ensure the safety of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, as well as increasing terrorist recruitment.

RECOMMENDATIONS: STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY IS THE KEY TO SECURITY

The U.S. must tread carefully to make the best of a difficult situation. We have three major goals:

- ⌘ Rooting out terrorist organizations now residing in Pakistan;
- ⌘ Ending terrorists' ability to retreat easily into Pakistan after attacking U.S., NATO, and government forces in Afghanistan;

³ Polling from the Pew Global Attitudes Project, "The View from Pakistan", December 28, 2007



⌘ Strengthening democratic institutions to create a state whose people and government reject terrorism and extremism and are friendly to America.

Recommendations:

1 Push for Fair Elections. The best way to stabilize our ties to an increasingly unstable Pakistan is to support the people, not any one leader. Making sure that Pakistan's upcoming parliamentary elections are seen as free, fair and transparent is critical to moving forward. Congress and America's leadership should press for free and fair elections and warn that we will not turn a blind eye to manipulation. Tampering with voting will incite more riots and create more turmoil, when what we need is a steady partner and a clear transition of power to a new government with a mandate to rule.

2 Build a Relationship with Pakistan Independent of Musharraf. Our relationship with Musharraf has been too close and has hurt our standing with the Pakistani people. Beyond supporting elections, we must reach out to more elements of Pakistani leadership and society, so that we have friends across the moderate political spectrum. In a volatile country, it is foolish to put all our eggs in one basket.

3 Strengthen Pakistan's Democratic Institutions. Given Pakistan's nuclear weapons, strategic location, and Muslim population, we have much to gain from keeping Pakistan as a long-term ally. To shape this future, we must encourage democratic institutions that will ultimately create a state whose people and government are friendly to America. We should support nonprofits and provide aid to strengthen Pakistan's democratic institutions and state infrastructure, schools, courts, and other elements vital to a democracy. If development assistance can help turn the tide and stabilize the tribal areas, the U.S. can and should help there as well without taking credit that might damage these programs in the eyes of their recipients. The aid is for our security, not our spin room.

4 Press for Counter-Terrorism Enforcement. The Taliban now cross from Pakistan into Afghanistan with impunity, attack coalition troops, and retreat across the border where they cannot be followed. We need effective border control to win the war in Afghanistan. Increasing border control is vital to both American and Pakistani interests, and we must press for it diplomatically at the highest levels.

The September 11th attacks did not come from Iraq:

they were planned by al-Qaeda masterminds living in the border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan that remain their home today. The war in Afghanistan and the larger fight against violent extremism will be won or lost in these regions. And the only way for us to win in Afghanistan or Pakistan is to win in both.

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1 Massachusetts Ave NW, Suite 333

Washington, DC 20001

Telephone: 202-216-9723

Fax: 202-682-1818

info@trumanproject.org

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