

The end of the general

Omar Waraich

By turning on Pakistan's judiciary and media, Musharraf may have hastened his regime's end

General Pervez Musharraf has little patience with traditional notions of democracy. Pakistan's president, who seized power in a coup eight years ago, prefers to measure public approval

by his own standards. "The vast majority is with me," he insisted in an interview with the BBC last year. "The day I come to know I'm not popular, I'll quit. But more than that, they'll be out in the streets, and I would not be allowed to stay." Over the past month, vast numbers have been doing just that – taking to the streets in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi in opposition to London and Washington's favourite military dictator. But so far he shows no sign of quitting.

The trigger for the protests was Musharraf's decision on March 9 to sack Iftikhar Chaudhry, chief justice of the supreme court, whose case is due to be heard today. Lawyers' strikes, court boycotts and demonstrations erupted across the country. Within days, their ranks were fortified by civil society groups and opposition parties. The police responded with baton-charges, rubber bullets and tear-gas.

The press was also punished for relaying images of bloodied protesters and the mushrooming hostility towards the regime. Geo TV had its offices smashed by police and its staff beaten, Aaj TV was temporarily taken off the air, and

journalists elsewhere have spoken of attempts by senior government officials to frustrate their reporting.

When Musharraf appointed himself president in October 1999 it was, he claimed, in order to throw off "the yoke of despotism" and "sham democracy". Many Pakistanis were discreetly optimistic as he pledged to roll back the years of corruption, arbitrary rule and economic disaster that had exhausted the country under the elected governments of Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto.

Such hopes have long since dissipated. Musharraf's supporters point to the economy, growing at a rate of 6%. But that has been achieved with billions of dollars in aid from the US and has done nothing to diminish the grinding poverty of the majority. The gap between rich and poor has markedly widened under Musharraf, according to his government's own figures.

From the outset, the general assumed all executive powers and proceeded to install uniformed officials in positions of authority. Within months he banned strikes, demonstrations and public rallies – measures that remained in force through the rigged 2002 elections.

The chief source of strain, however, has been Musharraf's close alliance with George Bush and Tony Blair. He defied the will of 80% of Pakistanis by signing up to Bush's war on terror. The fallout from the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan has brought hardline Islam-

ist parties to power in the North-West Frontier province, introducing al-Qaida and Taliban elements into Pakistan, and triggered waves of terrorism that now threaten the major cities.

Musharraf, who trained the Taliban in its earlier incarnation, is now under US pressure to crack down harder on its Pakistani bases. Air strikes have killed many innocents and further inflamed hatred towards Islamabad and Washington. Other measures – torture, unlawful detention, disappearances, extrajudicial executions – have provoked a similar reaction, also attracting denunciations by human rights groups and Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

Musharraf has said he intends to continue as president and chief of army staff for the foreseeable future. To do so he needs a pliant judiciary – hence the move against Chaudhry, who had made clear he would not countenance this continued double role.

There are signs Musharraf's US sponsors may be tiring of him and toying with a return to office by Bhutto and Sharif, who lead the main parties. By assaulting the media and judiciary, he may have done his people a favour. It now seems likely that a popular movement for free and fair elections and the restoration of democracy will haunt his regime to its end.

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