

Musharraf Feared Rebellion

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Pakistan's leader feared a coup by pro-Taleban army officers, after pledging support for the US-led anti-terrorist campaign.

General Pervez Musharraf's little-noted purge of senior army and intelligence officials earlier this month was, it seems, an attempt to head off a bid by Pakistan's secret services to overthrow him.

Many in the all-powerful, Inter Services Intelligence, ISI - involved in advising and propping up the Taleban since the mid-1990s - were enraged by Musharraf's declaration of support for the US-led campaign against the Kabul regime and the al-Qaeda network, in the wake of September 11 atrocities in New York and Washington.

The agency's opposition to the move built up through late September, effectively sabotaging the Pakistani leader's new policy. Apparently fearful it was plotting to get rid of him, Musharraf moved against top ISI operatives and sympathisers on October 7, just hours before the US-led air strikes against Afghanistan began.

The purged military chiefs - either forced into early retirement or moved sideways - were heavily involved in engineering the coup that brought Musharraf to power in October 1999. And all of them identified strongly with the Islamist tendency in the Pakistani military.

Musharraf went to great lengths to insist that the purge was a "routine activity", but analysts instantly linked it to nervousness over growing public and political opposition to his support for the US-led anti-terrorist campaign.

The most significant casualty of the reshuffle was the ISI director general Lt-Gen Mahmood Ahmad, who chose early retirement after being replaced by a junior officer. Mahmood was given the agency's top job in 1999, when, as corps commander of the 10 Brigade in Rawalpindi, he initiated the coup that toppled former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Another officer to lose his post was Lt-General Muzaffar Usmani, the deputy chief of staff. As corps commander of Karachi in October 1999, he ordered his troops to occupy the international airport in order to facilitate the landing of General Musharraf, on his way back from Sri Lanka at the time of the coup.

The new ISI chief, Lt-General Ehsanul Haq, is a Pashtun and old intelligence hand, having served as director of military intelligence and as a corps commander of Peshawar. His liberal credentials and inside knowledge of Pashtun affairs make him an ideal partner for the CIA.

Musharraf has also consolidated his personal grip over the ISI by creating a new cadre of loyalist officers wedded to his pro-US tilt in terms of Afghan policy.

Apparently anticipating trouble from the ISI, the general ordered the withdrawal of all its officers acting as advisors to the Kabul regime, on the eve of his U-turn on relations with the Kabul regime. And then, after formally pledging support for Washington's anti-Taleban's policy, he came under pressure to do more to rein in the agency, especially its pro-Islamic faction.

Instances of ISI defiance of official policy had been piling up thick and fast in the Pakistani's in-tray, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks.

Matters reportedly came to head when Washington expressed unease over Mahmood's role in leading a visit of 10 Pakistani religious leaders to Kandahar, in a last ditch-effort to avert a US offensive against Afghanistan.

According to members of the delegation, Mahmood had impressed upon the clerics the need to lend support to the beleaguered Kabul regime, and they duly returned endorsing its decision to refuse to surrender Osama bin Laden.

These moves by the ISI added up to the effective sabotage of Musharraf's stated policy of unstinting cooperation with the US. The CIA was also concerned about sharing intelligence with the agency' undisguised pro-Taleban chief.

The implications of the reshuffle are enormous for the ISI , which has been running Pakistan's Afghan policy since 1980, and, more recently, has been heavily involved in influencing political developments within Pakistan, through a combination of bribes and dirty tricks.

With the change in the ISI leadership, the agency's role as an operator working outside official policy stands to be greatly diminished.

The army purge may even affect the direction of the ISI's long-held policy of providing covert support to what India calls Islamic insurgents in Kashmir. This was hinted at when Musharraf called Indian prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee immediately after the reshuffle announcement.

What it may also bring, as a by-product, is Musharraf's much needed fence-mending with the political class, which has been relentlessly smeared in an ISI-initiated campaign since the 1999 coup. The general remains an isolated figure, enjoying no open support from the parties he estranged.

One pro-Musharraf, liberal weekly, the Friday Times, counselled the general to start a dialogue with the Benhazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party to secure himself some constituency beyond the army, in view of the gathering protest on the street against Pakistan's support of US raids in Afghanistan.

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