

## Stephen P Cohen: Strong man soft grip: The delicate state of

WASHINGTON - Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is widely viewed as a military strongman who should be pressed to hold free and fair elections this year. Both the characterization of Musharraf and the policy recommendation are misguided. Musharraf's problem is that he has failed to act swiftly and ruthlessly to set Pakistan's politics on a proper course, and he knows -- better than his critics -- that given the complexity of Pakistan's internal problems, the holding of free and fair elections might not check Pakistan's drift toward extremism. Musharraf does deserve criticism for the deterioration of Pakistani civil society. About his only defense is that things were worse under his predecessor, the insecure Nawaz Sharif. Musharraf had a golden opportunity to set things right and develop a strategy that would build up civilian competence and allow for the army's retreat from governance. He missed it. After his coup he rejected advice that he impose emergency rule for a few months, meanwhile ordering the intelligence services to round up the extremists they had nurtured for years. But as a strongman Musharraf had a fatal flaw: He wanted to be liked. Since then his actions as a politician and leader have been consistently flawed. He implemented a crazy scheme of local government that further destroyed Pakistan's civilian bureaucracy. He refused to allow former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Sharif to return to Pakistan and meet a real electoral test. And he fabricated a phony political party to provide the illusion of popular support. He also entered into alliances with the Islamists (only to betray them) and with a party responsible for rule by terror in certain areas of the country. As a general, Musharraf got mixed reviews from his peers. As a politician, he has shown little talent. His one strength, until Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry defied him, was that his opponents were even less inspiring. Musharraf's rule has not been without merit. Going against the views of army hard-liners, he lobbed one Kashmir proposal after another at the Indian government, putting it on the defensive. Under Musharraf, Pakistan's position has changed from insistence upon a plebiscite (something India will never allow) to one of several alternative arrangements, all designed to save face for Islamabad. Musharraf did preside over economic reform, but the World Bank has pointed out that income disparities and rural poverty have both grown while the urban elite make money hand over fist. His treatment of the press has been retrograde. It is Orwellian for American officials to claim that Pakistan is on the road to democracy. Musharraf receives unstinting American support because of his turnabout after Sept. 11, 2001, regarding support for the Taliban and Al-Qaida. No one doubts his sincerity regarding Al-Qaida; as he writes in his fanciful autobiography, these were the people who several times tried to kill him. But there is room for skepticism about Pakistan's role with regard to the Taliban. Pakistani officials freely admit that their main concerns in Afghanistan are Indian penetration (which would mean encirclement for Islamabad) and Afghan President Hamid Karzai's dependence on New Delhi. Given this strategic compulsion, it is not surprising that Pakistan tolerates, if it does not directly support, the Taliban; it has no other instrument available to it than this Pashtun tribal hammer. Whatever happens in coming days, we are not approaching the end of the "Musharraf system" in Pakistan. Even if he were forced out of the presidency and ceased to be army chief, his military colleagues would continue to rule from behind the scenes, finding a pliable politician or two to serve as their public face. Abroad, they might get tougher with India (what better way to unite Pakistanis than a crisis with New Delhi?), and they would try to fake it with the Americans regarding Afghanistan: They will not willingly give up their Taliban assets. Perhaps such a second coming of the Musharraf system would work better with a military leader more perceptive than the ebullient but shallow Musharraf. But in the end, the army cannot rule the state of Pakistan by itself. Perhaps it will come to the realization that what it needs is a strategy for a systematic withdrawal from politics. This would involve heavy investment in the quality and competence of the civilian elite, a rebuilding of liberal Pakistan, and tough measures against defiant, radical Islamists. The United States is paying lip service to a regime that is collapsing before its eyes and that may yet turn truly nasty. Washington treats Pakistan as if it were a Cold War ally, dealing only with its top leadership. The great danger is that this time around, Pakistan may not have the internal resources to manage its own rescue. If that is the case, then in years to come, a nuclear-armed and terrorism-capable Pakistan will become everyone's biggest foreign-policy problem.

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