

Fateful choices

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Events are pushing the Bush administration toward a fateful decision on Pakistan: Is President Pervez Musharraf still the best bet to keep nuclear-armed Pakistan safe, stable, pro-Western and a vital ally in the war against terrorism? President Bush thinks so, even as he disapproves of Musharraf's declaration of a state of emergency, suspension of Pakistan's constitution and crackdown on political opponents. But others in the Bush administration, and many in Congress, are clearly wondering if time is running out for Musharraf. They're wondering, too, if Washington should even now be aligning itself with a post-Musharraf successor; say, opposition leader Benazir Bhutto.

Clearly, Washington's preferred option still would be a political compromise between Musharraf and Bhutto. In this scenario, Musharraf would take off his army commander's uniform, lift the state of emergency and proceed with fair parliamentary elections in January. After that, he would remain as a civilian president but form a power-sharing coalition government with Bhutto as prime minister. That could unite Pakistan's powerful military with Bhutto's likely majority of moderate, pro-democracy Pakistanis. For U.S. and Western interests, that would be the ideal way out of this crisis.

Alas, it may be too late for a Musharraf-Bhutto compromise. Musharraf has twice put Bhutto under house arrest, and many of her supporters have been jailed. Fed up, apparently, she has publicly called for him to resign as president. A prospective Plan B would see a Musharraf exit, succeeded in power by Bhutto at the head of a civilian government and with a pro-Western successor to Musharraf as army commander in chief. Gen. Ashfaq Kiyani, now deputy army commander, who shares Musharraf's pro-Western stance, would appear to be a safe choice. Musharraf's meeting Saturday with Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte may have strengthened the case for a Plan B option. Negroponte reportedly minced no words in urging Musharraf to end the state of emergency, step down as the chief of Pakistan's armed forces and release the several thousand people arrested since emergency rule was decreed. To underscore the point, Negroponte reportedly warned Musharraf that U.S. aid (\$10 billion, mostly in military assistance, since 2001) could be cut if emergency rule continues.

Musharraf says he will give up his military post (but he won't say when) and that parliamentary elections will be held on schedule in January. Negroponte's blunt response: "Emergency rule is not compatible with free, fair and credible elections."

Dire as all this looks, Washington knows it could get worse, far worse. A generation ago, the United States abandoned an unpopular shah of Iran, only to get the Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamic revolution as a replacement. Pakistan has nuclear weapons. It's an indispensable ally against al-Qaida and the Taliban. There is no room, here, for reckless moves as the Bush administration ponders its options.

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