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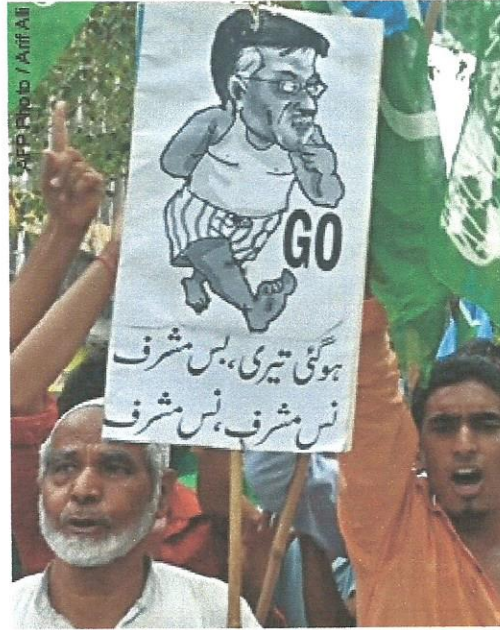
August 2008

# Step Down, Mr. Musharraf

by Frank Schell

*Posted August 16, 2008*

**The Punjab has** spoken. The provincial assembly in Lahore was the first assembly to call upon President Pervez Musharraf to resign or endure a no confidence vote in the national parliament by an overwhelming majority of 321 to 25. This was the beginning of the end for Mr. Musharraf, who will likely resign in the next few days, once his safety is guaranteed, either inside Pakistan or in exile abroad.



While this is clearly the end for Mr. Musharraf's political career in Pakistan, it is an opportunity for the Bush administration—long a supporter of Mr. Musharraf, who until recently was seen as a reliable if not indispensable ally in the war on terror—to realign itself with the forces of political legitimacy within Pakistan.

In recent days, momentum has increased to oust Mr. Musharraf, who has enjoyed the support of his handpicked senior officers in the Pakistani army since he took power in a coup in 1999, overthrowing Nawaz Sharif. It is the army that has controlled Pakistan most of the time since independence and partition from India in 1947. The influence of the Punjab legislative assembly vote

was felt almost immediately, as the Northwest Frontier Province and Sindh provincial assemblies followed with similar actions. At this writing, the Baluchistan provincial assembly is expected to follow suit.

Fears of destabilization within Pakistan are growing in the West. But these fears are overblown. With support from Washington and other leaders there is no reason why the post-Musharraf transition cannot be relatively orderly and nonviolent. The Punjab, or Land of the Five Rivers as it is known in Persian, is not a lawless place of tribal chieftains taking blood money, insurgents creating mayhem, and opium producers who abstain from the evils of alcohol. It is not a region where children tote assault rifles and shoulder-fired grenade launchers and shake their fists at CNN cameras. Unlike the porous border areas of Pakistan and adjacent Afghanistan, the Punjab is not a place beyond the law, where boundaries mean nothing, and where some thirst daily for vengeance.

The Punjab is the backbone of modern Pakistan: It has a concentration of industry and transport arteries and is the nation's wheat producing breadbasket. It has traditions of soldiering and has historically contributed its disciplined, martial clans to defending the British Empire. Punjabis wield the most influence in Pakistan, representing about 63% of the country's population and a higher percentage of the army.

Lahore, the Punjab provincial capital, is a city with a refined culture and vibrant history, with some of its structures resembling those of Delhi, as the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, grandson of Akbar the Great, was the same architect with a passion for grand monuments such as sandstone forts, tombs such as the Taj Mahal, and giant mosques. It has an educated elite and members of the professions who are strongly oriented toward Britain, and more recently the United States. It has an entrepreneurial culture which is compatible with America's. Like the Punjab of India, the Pakistani province is highly respected for its achievements of past and present. It is basically a no nonsense place where extremists are very unwelcome.

Clearly, President Musharraf's political career is at an end. It is one thing to be unpopular in the Northwest Frontier Province where Pashtoon separatist sympathies have run deep for centuries. It is also one thing to be unpopular

in the remote Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which lie outside of Pakistan's four provinces and are controlled by local chieftains who embrace no authority save their own. But it is quite another matter to be asked to resign by the Punjab provincial assembly, and then that of Sindh whose provincial capital is Karachi, the center of finance and banking with its own economic and commercial elite.

Most of the world will benefit from a strong central government in Islamabad, civilian or military, to prevent the further Balkanization of this region. We have already seen that Afghanistan is a failed state, and some of the provinces of Pakistan could follow that hideous route, if there is a collapse at the center, which holds the software of nuclear Armageddon.

At this crucial crossroads, America needs to support the people of Pakistan and the democratic process there, not Mr. Musharraf. Pakistan's leadership has long suffered from a lack of legitimacy. Its military governments have expressed the desire for democracy over the horizon, yet they have repeatedly pushed back the horizon. The Punjab and other provincial assemblies have voted that they want legitimacy. It's time Washington helped the people of Pakistan find it.

*Mr. Schell, a former senior vice president of a major U.S. bank, was involved with issues in international trade, treasury, and investment. He served in the U.S. Peace Corps in India in the state of Haryana, earlier a part of the Punjab, and speaks Hindi-Urdu.*



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