



PAKISTAN'S PRESIDENT AGAIN PROMISES ELECTIONS AFTER PROTESTS AND CRITICISM

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Violent clashes last week in Pakistan between anti-government protesters and police renewed pressure on Pakistan's President Gen. Pervez Musharraf to steer the country toward a true democracy.

Musharraf declared a state of emergency in Pakistan Nov. 3, suspending the constitution and firing the chief judge of the Supreme Court, claiming he needed complete control of the country to combat Islamic terrorism.

The Supreme Court was reportedly close to ruling on the legality of Musharraf's October re-election when the justice was removed.

Thousands of Pakistanis protested in the streets over the imposition of emergency rule and many were arrested during rallies in support of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, a former Pakistani prime minister. Bhutto recently returned to the country after being in self-imposed exile for eight years and has been pushing Musharraf to hold elections.

After pressure from President Bush, Musharraf announced Sunday that parliamentary elections would be held by Jan. 9, 2008, but he said emergency rule would continue until that time.

Election pressure

The elusive election has been a hot topic in Pakistan all year. Musharraf is widely considered a dictator because he has never been elected president by the public and he has continued to expand his dominance in the government over his eight years in office.

In addition to being president, he holds the position of general of the military. Many Pakistanis believe he should drop the military aspect of his job and stop wearing his military uniform if he wishes to remain president.

His re-election last month as president was controversial, and it was believed the Supreme Court would have found him ineligible for another term if it had been able to deliver its verdict before the state of emergency was declared.

The United States has also called on Musharraf to step down in his role as general, and U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters he should "roll back the state of

emergency, reinstate constitutional rule and put Pakistan firmly back on that pathway to democracy."

Musharraf in power

Musharraf became Pakistan's leader in 1999 in a coup overthrowing then-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Musharraf was the army chief at the time and had the military's support.

The coup was bloodless and was over in less than a day. Musharraf promised to hold elections within three years. He declared himself president in 2000, but instead of holding the election he promised, he held a referendum in 2002 to extend his presidency by five years and granted himself new powers.

"It gave him these unlimited powers, establishing a one person, all powerful presidency that was never approved by any elected body," Walter Andersen, associate director for South Asia studies at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, told the Online NewsHour.

Pakistan and the war on terror

The United States is particularly concerned about Pakistan being in a state of unrest because the country has been its biggest regional ally in the war on terrorism. It is also concerned because Pakistan has nuclear weapons.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks Musharraf aligned himself with the United States and agreed to go after terror suspects within Pakistan.

The decision was not popular with many Pakistanis, in part because the Taliban has deep roots and many family connections in the country, and also because the United States and President Bush are not popular in the primarily Muslim region.

Musharraf has been a pivotal ally to the United States since then, though he has been criticized for not doing more to root out Taliban members living near the border with Afghanistan.

A violent year

This year has been a particularly volatile one for Pakistan. In a violent raid in July, Pakistani army commanders seized Islamabad's Red Mosque, forcing the surrender of clerics, militants and students holed up inside. More than 100 people were killed.

Violence also erupted in the country when Bhutto returned from exile in October. During a parade to celebrate her return, bombs went off in the crowd, killing more than 120 people.

Bhutto has been exploring the option of a power sharing agreement with Musharraf, which could potentially unite two conflicting groups. But his dropping popularity and controversial decisions makes that a less desirable partnership.

-- *Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra*

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