



PAKISTANI PRESIDENT MUSHARRAF LEAVES MILITARY POST

November 28, 2007

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf stepped down as commander of the military Wednesday -- a move which comes after months of intense pressure from the United States, which said his curbs of civil liberties threatened democracy.

Musharraf had held both the role of president and general since coming to power in a bloodless military coup in 1999. Shedding his military role was seen as an important move toward Pakistan becoming a true democracy.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called Musharraf's decision "a good first step."

"But really, for Pakistan, the most stabilizing thing will be for Pakistan to have free and fair elections so that Pakistan can stay and return to a democratic path," Rice said.

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 power.

Tensions in Pakistan

Musharraf declared a state of emergency in Pakistan on 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 by the Pakistani parliament when the justice was removed.

Thousands of Pakistanis protested in the streets over the imposition of emergency rule. Musharraf has since released thousands of opponents and allowed all but one independent Pakistani channel to broadcast again.

He has also said that parliamentary elections will be held by Jan. 9, 2008, but he said emergency rule would continue until that time.

Facing old opponents

The elusive elections has been a hot topic in Pakistan all year, especially with the return of two of Musharraf's old opponents, former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif.

Both returned to the country this year after being in exile, though Bhutto's was self-imposed, for many years. They have pressured Musharraf to hold fair elections and both filed nomination papers this week for the parliamentary elections.

Sharif and Bhutto are leaders of different parties, but both parties are part of a coalition considering a boycott of the elections if emergency rule does not end.

Musharraf was re-elected last month as president, but 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.

Musharraf's rise to power

Musharraf became Pakistan's leader in 1999 in a coup overthrowing then-Prime Minister 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 grant 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.

-- Compiled by Talea Miller for NewsHour Extra

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