

# Riding the tiger

President Musharraf has survived assassination attempts and fierce Islamic opposition. Can he tame Pakistan?

BY ANTHONY SPAETH

LONDON—Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf ended 2003 on a crescendo of high notes. Last week, the country's National Assembly passed constitutional amendments that legitimised the army general as the lawful President of Pakistan, four years after he seized power in a bloodless coup. Pakistan's economy is the healthiest it's been in years—GDP grew more than 5% in 2003—while chances for peace in strife-torn Kashmir appear greater than at any time in recent memory: over the weekend, Musharraf welcomed to his capital city of Islamabad leaders from six South Asian countries, including his nemesis Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, against whom

lice officer stepped into the path of the white van, which hit one of the first cars in the motorcade and instantly exploded. Less than a minute later, about 40 kilos of explosives in a car detonated just meters away from the presidential limo, shattering the windshield. Sixteen people were killed, including the bombers, police officers, army security personnel and bystanders; the President was unhurt. Just 11 days earlier, Musharraf eluded a similar attack when a bridge near his residence blew up seconds after his car crossed it.

The assassination attempts underscored just how fragile Musharraf's authoritarian government is as he tries to steer a moderate course for Pakistan, a nuclear-armed nation seething with militant Islamic fundamentalists. After the 9/11 attacks, Musharraf quickly aligned himself with U.S. President George W. Bush, helping rout the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Months later, when conflict with India loomed, he succumbed to U.S. pressure to stop sending insurgents into the Indian-controlled part of Kash-

mir, easing the threat of war in the disputed territory. Washington praised his promises to replace one-man rule in Pakistan with a more democratic system.

But after two brushes with death in 12 days, the Bush Administration is now wondering how vulnerable Musharraf is—and what would happen to Pakistan, and its nuclear weapons, if someone took the general out.

(Revelations from the International Atomic Energy Agency in the past few weeks show that both Libya and Iran once received technical help from Pakistan on uranium enrichment.) "[Musharraf's] survivability is very important to us," says a senior foreign-policy aide in the U.S. Senate. "What succeeds him could only be worse." Yet his safety can hardly be guaranteed. "He is riding many angry tigers in that country," says U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "and some are reaching back to bite him."

Musharraf mounted those tigers voluntarily, reversing his own military's pre-9/11 support for the Taliban and the insurgency in Kashmir. These moves strengthened his international support—but hardened opposition to his government both regionally and within Pakistan. "There are forces in India not interested in peace," says Muhammad Ali Durrani, a pro-Musharraf senator. "Forces in Afghanistan who don't want stability in the region, and forces in Pakistan who are not interested in a progressive, Muslim democracy—all of these are linking together to hit Musharraf." The Dec. 14 attackers used powerful explosives, which, combined with the sophistication of the attempt, led Pakistani officials to suspect al-Qaeda involvement. The driver of the car that got closest to the President on Christmas Day had his face blown off by the blast; from that grisly evidence he was identified as Muhammad Jamil, a 23-year-old from the Pakistani-controlled section of Kashmir, who was affiliated with a mili-

tant Islamic group that Musharraf has tried to curb. "Whoever has done this," says Major General Shaukat Sultan Khan, a spokesman for the military, "they have some kind of objective. They will keep trying until they reach it."

After Pakistan's full-blooded support of the US in the Afghan war, revenge from al-Qaeda and the Taliban was expected, especially as many of them are believed to be hiding out in remote tribal areas of Pakistan itself. With his crackdown on the militants—many of whom Pakistan had previously trained and helped sneak into the Indian-controlled part of Kashmir—Musharraf has been playing a perilously nuanced game. To satisfy both the U.S. and India, he closed the offices and training camps of militant organisations, but has yet to dismantle them. For his efforts, he's been branded a traitor by supporters of the Kashmiris' fight for independence from India.

The scariest scenario is that Musharraf's fellow military officers are plotting against him. (Musharraf could cede control of the military in months; under the agreement with legislators legitimizing his presidency, he promised to step down as army Chief of Staff by 2005.) Many in the military are more Islamic-minded than the President; others are angered by his abandonment of the Taliban, which the Pakistani armed forces helped create, and of Kashmiri jihadis, whom they aided. The circumstances of the December attacks suggest inside help. The plotters apparently knew the President's route and schedule and, in the Christmas attack, how to distinguish the real presidential motorcade from a decoy that is routinely dispatched whenever Musharraf travels.

The military hotly denies the possibility of complicity in the ranks. However, the President is being more cautious. Last weekend, 10,000 security personnel, including soldiers brandishing machine guns at key intersections in Islamabad, descended on the capital in preparation for the

regional South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) conference. And last week's oath-taking by Nazim Hussain Siddiqi, the new Chief Justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court, was held at Musharraf's Rawalpindi residence rather than the grand presidential palace in Islamabad, the customary venue. "That's like having your Chief Justice sworn in at the Pentagon," says Aitzaz Ahsan, an opposition parliamentarian.

Some US officials view the President's heightened vulnerability as a perverse kind of proof that they're backing the right man. "Frankly, the assassination attempts are another indication that Musharraf is going in the direction that we'd like him to," confides a Bush Administration official. "These are people who in the past thought they could get him to do what they wanted," the Administration official continues. "They now feel that the only course open to them is violence. That, I hope, is a sign of desperation and not of strength." And the murder attempts might backfire on the militants, the official adds, goading Musharraf into a crackdown similar to the one in Saudi Arabia, where 600 suspects were arrested after suicide bombings against foreign residential compounds in Riyadh killed 35 people last May. "Pakistan is now fighting its own very clear war against terrorism," the official says. "It's not just helping us."

In Pakistan, there's a confusing range of opinion about Musharraf. A Taliban-inspired political grouping called Muttahida Majlis-e-Amals (MMA), which formed in two Pakistani states after America's war in Afghanistan, condemns him for his lack of Islamic fervor. (The MMA-affiliated government of the northern city of Peshawar has prohibited mannequins from being displayed in shop windows and also disapproves of male doctors treating female patients.) But it was the MMA that gave Musharraf support in the parliamentary maneuvers that last week recognized him as an

elected President. Middle-class Pakistanis wonder if he's become yet another slippery pol, although few accuse him of the corruption that tainted civilian administrations of the past. Businessmen think he's the only person who can hold Pakistan together, at least for the next few years. "If he dies," says Nazim Haji, a Karachi-based industrialist, "there will be total chaos and confusion. We don't have institutions."

Moreover, without Musharraf the Kashmir conflict would likely heat up again. In November, he declared a unilateral cease-fire along the Line of Control bisecting Kashmir, bringing peace to those districts for the first time in memory. Last month, he made a statement suggesting that Pakistan might not insist on a plebiscite in Kashmir to resolve the dispute—an iron demand for five decades. India has responded with several conciliatory gestures, including the lifting of a ban on flights into the country by Pakistan's national airline.

Last week's amendments to Pakistan's constitution strengthen the role of the President. Still, the U.S. can't count on Musharraf escaping future attacks. In the event of his death, the law prescribes that he be succeeded by Senate chairman Illahi Bakhsh until an election is held. But given its dominant role in Pakistani politics, the military could well seize power. That might keep Pakistan's nuclear weapons safe; the program has always been controlled by the generals, even during civilian governments. Bush told reporters on New Year's Day he believed Pakistan's nuclear arsenal was secure. "Obviously, terrorists are after [Musharraf], and he sounded very confident that his security forces would be able to deal with the threat," Bush said after a telephone conversation with Musharraf. If that confidence proves unfounded, those prosecuting America's war on terror will have a new worry: whether Musharraf's successor will conclude that taking on Islamic radicals is too hazardous to one's health. —TIME

