

# As US talks of liberty, Musharraf scorns it



By Paula R Newberg

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**T**O understand the dangers of ignoring the anti-democratic consequences of US policies, look at Pakistan. The country's deepening political crises — largely creations of President Pervez Musharraf under the patronage of the US — threaten the state more than at any time since the general's coup in October 1999. As a result, the chance for peace in Southwest Asia is growing smaller.

Musharraf's scorn for the democracy he once promised to his citizens runs wide and deep. He has not only extended his own term in office but also changed Pakistan's constitution by decree, granting himself the power to dismiss the prime minister and parliament. He rejects even the idea of an opposition. Demonstrations are banned, political leaders are arrested or remanded to judicial custody, media coverage of politics is limited or squelched and lawyers' moots cancelled.

To many Pakistanis, the country's mainstream parties seem stagnant and too respectful of outmoded, exiled and corrupt leaders. But the government's reprisals against legitimate political activities — even bans on the kinds of informal tribal convocations that the US has encouraged in Afghanistan — underscore its contempt for participatory politics.

Strange as it may seem, among the most vocal opponent of political repression is the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, the coalition of Islamic parties that, with Musharraf's help, won control of Pakistan's border areas with Afghanistan. The coalition was to be Musharraf's nationalist and Islamist foil to limit US anti-terrorism demands on him. But it now accuses Musharraf of limiting its democratic

right to enforce Sharia, or Islamic law, in the Northwest Frontier Province in order to appease Western interests. The parties also object to the Pakistan army's flat-footed tactics in pursuing Al Qaeda loyalists. Border villages have been burned, residents taken into custody without being charged and quasi-military rule has been imposed on a region long accustomed to ruling itself. You don't have to agree with the coalition's ideology to grasp its point.

After negotiations with the countries

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political parties last year, Musharraf agreed to step down as chief of the army in order to remain president. But when the parties objected to his constitutional amendment to create a national security council that effectively removes power from parliament to give the army an explicit political role, Musharraf went to war against the coalition. The "uninformed president", as Pakistan's lawyers call him, now says he may stay on as army chief. The logic of the combat soldier thus determines political life. Its latest victim was Prime Minister Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, who resigned last weekend after losing a long argument about parliament's prerogatives.

For Musharraf, who is more a general than a president, repression seems an easy

fix. But political assassinations, sectarian carnage and reversions to tribal politics are usually consequences, not just causes, of instability. When the military ruled under a US security umbrella in the 1960s and 1980s, the country's economy and politics imploded. That didn't stop Musharraf and the US from renewing its alliance after Sept 11.

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The problem for the US is clear: Unstable allies are unreliable partners. Even more telling, military governments rarely reform themselves. Their repressive tactics thwart the democratic actors who would otherwise create a dynamic for change. When democracy advocates are jailed and their activities stopped, and media expression is limited by government edict, there is no spokesperson for open politics.

These issues are critical for countries like Pakistan. Curiously, though, the Bush administration seems unworried about some of its post-Sept 11 allies, whose backtracking on democracy is virtually a spectator sport. President Bush routinely uses the language of democracy but most often in pursuit of US security, not to further democratic movements in the allied countries. Such equivocations mock the potentially harmful consequences of the security commitments they make and, by extension, undermine US foreign policy.

It's been left to Democrats to reopen a debate about clear-sighted realism and robust idealism in US foreign policy. This will take some work. For example, when Sen John F Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee, calls Musharraf "a strongman of sorts", he sidesteps not only the importance of civil liberties but also the obligations of states to honour them. If US policy neglects citizens who seek political change in repressive states, there is little hope for challenging the prevailing cynicism that has turned diplomacy into commerce, and stability into a chimera. COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES