

The plan to topple Pakistan's military?

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Editor's note

The following article in the Asian Times and New Nation, Pakistan was published several weeks prior to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

Islamabad - On the evening of September 26, 2006, Pakistani strongman Pervez Musharraf walked into the studio of Comedy Central's Daily Show with Jon Stewart, the first sitting president anywhere to dare do this political satire show.

Stewart offered his guest some tea and cookies and played the perfect host by asking, "Is it good?" before springing a surprise: "Where's Osama bin Laden?"

"I don't know," Musharraf replied, as the audience enjoyed the rare sight of a strong leader apparently cornered. "You know where he is?" Musharraf snapped back, "You lead on, we'll follow you."

What General Musharraf didn't know then is that he really was being cornered. Some of the smiles that greeted him in Washington and back home gave no hint of the betrayal that awaited him.

As he completed the remaining part of his US visit, his allies in Washington and elsewhere, as all evidence suggests now, were plotting his downfall. They had decided to take a page from the book of successful "color revolutions" where Western governments covertly used money, private media, student unions, NGOs and international pressure to stage coups, basically overthrowing individuals not fitting well with Washington's agenda.

This recipe proved its success in former Yugoslavia, and more recently in Georgia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

In Pakistan, the target is a president who refuses to play ball with the US on Afghanistan, China and Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan.

To get rid of him, an impressive operation is underway:

- . A carefully crafted media blitzkrieg launched early this year assailing the Pakistani president from all sides, questioning his power, his role in Washington's "war on terror" and predicting his downfall.

- . Money pumped into the country to pay for organized dissent.

- . Willing activists assigned to mobilize and organize accessible social groups.
- . A campaign waged on the Internet where tens of mailing lists and “news agencies” have sprung up from nowhere, all demonizing Musharraf and the Pakistani military.
- . European- and American-funded Pakistani NGOs taking a temporary leave from their real work to serve as a makeshift anti-government mobilization machine.
- . US government agencies directly funding some private Pakistani television networks; the channels go into an open anti-government mode, cashing in on some manufactured and other real public grievances regarding inflation and corruption.

Some of Musharraf’s shady and corrupt political allies feed this campaign, hoping to stay in power under a weakened president.

All this groundwork completed and chips were in place when the judicial crisis broke out in March. Even Pakistani politicians were surprised at a well-greased and well-organized lawyers’ campaign, complete with flyers, rented cars and buses, excellent event-management and media outreach.

Currently, students are being recruited and organized into a street movement. The work is ongoing and urban Pakistani students are being cultivated, especially using popular Internet Web sites and “online hangouts”. The people behind this effort are mostly unknown and faceless, limiting themselves to organizing sporadic, small student gatherings in Lahore and Islamabad, complete with banners, placards and little babies with arm bands for maximum media effect. No major student association has announced yet that it is behind these student protests, which is a very interesting fact glossed over by most journalists covering the story.

Only a few students from affluent schools have responded so far, and it’s not because the Pakistani government’s countermeasures are effective. They’re not. The reason is that social activism attracts people from affluent backgrounds, closely reflecting a uniquely Pakistani phenomenon where local non-governmental organizations are mostly founded and run by rich, Westernized Pakistanis.

All of this may appear to be spur-of-the-moment and Musharraf-specific. But it all really began almost three years ago, when, out of the blue and recycling old political arguments, Akbar Bugti launched an armed rebellion against the Pakistani state, surprising security analysts by using rockets and other military equipment that shouldn’t normally be available to a smalltime village thug. Since then, Islamabad has sat on a pile of evidence that links Bugti’s campaign to money and ammunition and logistical support from Afghanistan, directly aided by the Karzai administration and India, with the US turning a blind eye.

For reasons not clear to our analysts yet, Islamabad has kept quiet on Washington’s involvement with anti-Pakistan elements in Afghanistan. But Pakistan did send an indirect public message to America recently.

“We have indications of Indian involvement with anti-state elements in Pakistan,” declared the spokesman of the Pakistan Foreign Office in a regular briefing in October. The statement was terse and direct, and the spokesman, Tasnim Aslam, quickly moved on to other issues.

This is how a Pakistani official explained Aslam’s statement: “What she was really saying is

this: We know what the Indians are doing. They've sold the Americans on the idea that [the Indians] are an authority on Pakistan and can be helpful in Afghanistan. The Americans have bought the idea and are in on the plan, giving the Indians a free hand in Afghanistan. What the Americans don't know is that we, too, know the Indians very well. Better still, we know Afghanistan very well. You can't beat us at our own game."

Bugti's armed rebellion coincided with the Gwadar project entering its final stages. No coincidence here. Bugti's real job was to scare the Chinese away and scuttle Chinese President Hu Jintao's planned visit to Gwadar a few months later to formally launch the port city.

Gwadar is the pinnacle of Sino-Pakistani strategic cooperation. It's a modern city that is supposed to link Pakistan, Central Asia, western China with markets in Mideast and Africa. It's supposed to have roads stretching all the way to China. It's no coincidence that that country has also earmarked millions of dollars to renovate the Karakoram Highway linking northern Pakistan to western China.

Some reports in the US media, however, have accused Pakistan and China of building a naval base in the guise of a commercial seaport directly overlooking international oil-shipping lanes.

The Indians and some other regional actors are also not comfortable with this project because they see it as commercial competition.

What Bugti's regional and international supporters never expected is Pakistan moving firmly and strongly to nip his rebellion in the bud. Even Bugti himself probably never expected the Pakistani state to react in the way it did to his betrayal of the homeland. He was killed in a military operation where scores of his mercenaries surrendered to Pakistan army soldiers.

United States intelligence and their Indian advisors could not cultivate an immediate replacement for Bugti. So they moved to Plan B. They supported Abdullah Mehsud, a Pakistani Taliban fighter held for five years in Guantanamo Bay, and then handed him over back to the Afghan government, only to return to his homeland, Pakistan, to kidnap two Chinese engineers working in Balochistan, one of whom was eventually killed during a rescue operation by the Pakistani government.

Islamabad could not tolerate this shadowy figure, who was creating a following among ordinary Pakistanis masquerading as a Taliban while in reality towing a vague agenda. He was eliminated earlier this year by Pakistani security forces while secretly returning from Afghanistan after meeting his handlers there. Again, no surprises here.

This is where Pakistani political and military officials finally started smelling a rat. All of this was an indication of a bigger problem. There were growing indications that, ever since Islamabad joined Washington's regional plans, Pakistan was gradually turning into a "besieged-nation", heavily targeted by the US media while being subjected to strategic sabotage and espionage from Afghanistan. Afghanistan, under America's watch, has turned into a vast staging ground for sophisticated psychological and military operations to destabilize neighbouring Pakistan.

During the past three years, the heat has gradually been turned up against Pakistan and its military along Pakistan's western regions:

. A shadowy group called the BLA, a Cold War relic, rose from the dead to restart a separatist war in southwestern Pakistan. . Bugti's death was a blow to neo-BLA, but the shadowy group's backers didn't repent. His grandson, Brahmdagh Bugti, is currently enjoying a safe shelter in the Afghan capital, Kabul, where he continues to operate and remote-control his assets in Pakistan.

. Saboteurs trained in Afghanistan have been inserted into Pakistan to aggravate extremist passions here, especially after the Red Mosque operation.

. Chinese citizens continue to be targeted by individuals pretending to be Islamists, when no known Islamic group has claimed responsibility. . A succession of "religious rebels" with suspicious foreign links have suddenly emerged in Pakistan over the past months claiming to be "Pakistani Taliban". Some of the names include Abdul Rashid Ghazi, Baitullah Mehsud, and now the Maulana of Swat. Some of them have used, and are using, encrypted communication equipment far superior to what the Pakistani military owns.

. Money and weapons have been fed into the religious movements and al-Qaeda remnants in the tribal areas.

Exploiting the situation, assets within the Pakistani media started promoting the idea that the Pakistani military was killing its own people. The rest of the unsuspecting media quickly picked up this message. Some botched US and Pakistani military operations against al-Qaeda that caused civilian deaths accidentally fed this media campaign. This was the perfect timing for the launch of *Military, Inc: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy*, a book authored by Ayesha Siddiqa Agha, a columnist for a Pakistani English-language paper and a correspondent for "Jane's Defence Weekly", a private intelligence service founded by experts close to British intelligence.

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Target: Pakistan military

The book was launched in Pakistan in early 2007 by Oxford Press. And, contrary to most reports, it is openly available in Islamabad's biggest bookshops. The book portrays the Pakistani military as an institution that is eating up whatever little resources Pakistan has.

The Pakistani military's successful financial management, creating alternate financial sources to spend on a vast military machine and build a conventional and nuclear near-match with a neighboring adversary five times larger - an impressive record for any nation by any standard - was distorted in the book and reduced to a mere attempt by the military to control the nation's economy in the same way it was controlling its politics.

The timing was interesting. After all, it was hard to defend a military in the eyes of its own proud people when the chief of the military is ruling the country, the army is fighting insurgents and extremists who claim to be defending Islam, grumpy politicians are out of business, and the military's side businesses, meant to feed the nation's military machine, are doing well compared to the shabby state of the nation's civilian departments.

A closer look at Siddiqa, the author, revealed disturbing information to Pakistani officials. In the months before launching her book, she was a frequent visitor to India where, as a

defense expert, she cultivated important contacts. On her return, she developed friendship with an female Indian diplomat posted in Islamabad. Both of these activities – travel to India and ties to Indian diplomats – are not a crime in Pakistan and don't raise interest anymore. Pakistanis are hospitable and friendly people and these qualities have been amply displayed to the Indians during the four-year-old peace process.

What is interesting is that Siddiqa left her car in the house of the said Indian diplomat during one of her recent trips to London. And, according to a report, she stayed in London at a place owned by an individual linked to the Indian diplomat in Islamabad.

The point is this: Who assigned her to investigate the Pakistani Armed Forces and present a distorted image of a proud and efficient Pakistani institution?

>From 1988 to 2001, Siddiqa worked in the Pakistan civil service and the Pakistani civil bureaucracy. Her responsibilities included dealing with Military Accounts, which come under the Pakistan Ministry of Defense. She had 13 years of experience in dealing with the budgetary matters of the Pakistani military and people working in this area.

Siddiqa received a year-long fellowship to research and write a book in the US. There are strong indications that some of her Indian contacts played a role in arranging financing for her book project through a paid fellowship. The final manuscript of her book was vetted at a publishing office in New Delhi.

All of these details are insignificant if detached from the real issue at hand. And the issue is the demonization of the Pakistani military as an integral part of the media siege around Pakistan, with the US media leading the way in this campaign.

Some of the juicy details of this campaign include:

- . The attempt by Siddiqa to pit junior officers against senior officers in Pakistan Armed Forces by alleging discrimination in the distribution of benefits. Apart from being malicious and unfounded, her argument was carefully designed to generate frustration and demoralize Pakistani soldiers.

- . The US media insisting on handing over Khan to the US so that a final conviction against the Pakistani military can be secured. . Benazir Bhutto demanding after returning to Pakistan that the ISI be restructured; and in a press conference during her house arrest in Lahore in November she went as far as asking Pakistan army officers to revolt against the army chief, a damning attempt at destroying a professional army from within.

Some of this appears to be eerily similar to the campaign waged against the Pakistani military in 1999, when, in July that year, an unsigned full-page advertisement appeared in major American newspapers with the following headline: "A Modern Rogue Army With Its Finger On The Nuclear Button."

Until this day, it is not clear who exactly paid for such an expensive advertisement. But one thing is clear: the agenda behind that advertisement is back in action.

Strangely, just a few days before Bhutto's statements about restructuring the ISI and her open call to army officers to stage a mutiny against their leadership, the conservative US magazine The Weekly Standard interviewed an American security expert who offered similar ideas:

“A large number of ISI agents who are responsible for helping the Taliban and al-Qaeda should be thrown in jail or killed. What I think we should do in Pakistan is a parallel version of what Iran has run against us in Iraq: giving money [and] empowering actors. Some of this will involve working with some shady characters, but the alternative – sending US forces into Pakistan for a sustained bombing campaign – is worse,” Steve Schippert was quoted as saying a November 2007 issue of Weekly Standard.

In addition to these media attacks, which security experts call “psychological operations”, the US media and politicians have intensified over the past year their campaign to prepare the international public opinion to accept a western intervention in Pakistan along the lines of Iraq and Afghanistan:

Newsweek came up with an entire cover story with a single storyline:

Pakistan is a more dangerous place than Iraq.

. Senior American politicians, Republican and Democrat, have argued that Pakistan is more dangerous than Iran and merits similar treatment. On October 20, Senator Joe Biden told ABC News that Washington needs to put soldiers on the ground in Pakistan and invite the international community to join in. “We should be in there,” he said. “We should be supplying tens of millions of dollars to build new schools to compete with the madrassas. We should be in there building democratic institutions. We should be in there, and get the rest of the world in there, giving some structure to the emergence of, hopefully, the reemergence of a democratic process.” . The International Crisis Group (ICG) has recommended gradual sanctions on Pakistan similar to those imposed on Iran, e.g. slapping travel bans on Pakistani military officers and seizing Pakistani military assets abroad.

The process of painting Pakistan’s nuclear assets as pure evil lying around waiting for some do-gooder to come in and “secure” has reached unprecedented levels, with the US media again depicting Pakistan as a nation incapable of protecting its nuclear installations. On October 22, Jane Harman from the US House Intelligence Panel gave the following statement: “I think the US would be wise – and I trust we are doing this – to have contingency plans [to seize Pakistan’s nuclear assets], especially because should [Musharraf] fall, there are nuclear weapons there.”

The US media has now begun discussing the possibility of Pakistan breaking up and the possibility of new states of “Balochistan” and “Pashtunistan” being carved out of it. Interestingly, one of the first acts of the shady Maulana of Swat, after capturing a few towns, was to take down the Pakistani flag from the top of state buildings and replace them with his own party flag.

The “chatter” about Musharraf’s eminent fall has also increased dramatically in the mainly US media, which has been very generous in marketing theories about how Musharraf might “disappear” or be “removed” from the scene. According to some Pakistani analysts, this could be an attempt to prepare the public opinion for a possible assassination of the Pakistani president.

Another worrying thing is how US officials are publicly signaling to the Pakistanis that Bhutto has their backing as the next leader of the country. Such signals from Washington are not only a kiss of death for any public leader in Pakistan, but the Americans also know that their actions are inviting potential assassins to target Bhutto.

If she is killed in this way, there won't be enough time to find the real culprit, but what's certain is that unprecedented international pressure will be placed on Islamabad while everyone will use their local assets to create maximum internal chaos in the country. A dress rehearsal of this scenario has already taken place in October when no less than the UN Security Council itself intervened to ask the international community to "assist" in the investigations into the assassination attempt on Bhutto on October 18. This generous move was sponsored by the US and, interestingly, had no input from Pakistan which did not ask for help in investigations in the first place.

Some Pakistani security analysts privately say that US "chatter" about Musharraf or Bhutto getting killed is a serious matter that can't be easily dismissed. Getting Bhutto killed can generate the kind of pressure that could result in permanently putting the Pakistani military on a back foot, giving Washington enough room to push for installing a new pliant leadership in Islamabad.

Getting Musharraf killed isn't a bad option either. The unknown Islamists can always be blamed, the military will not be able to put another soldier at the top, and circumstances will be created to ensure that either Bhutto or someone like her is eased into power.

The US is very serious this time. They cannot let Pakistan get out of their hands. They were kicked out of Uzbekistan last year, where they were maintaining bases. They are in trouble in Afghanistan and Iraq. Iran continues to be a mess for them and Russia and China are not making it any easier. Pakistan must be "secured" at all costs.

This is why most Pakistanis have never seen US diplomats in Pakistan active like this before. And it's not just the current US ambassador, who has added one more address to her other most-frequently-visited address in Karachi, Bhutto's house. The new address is the office of GEO, one of two news channels shut down by Islamabad for not signing the mandatory code-of-conduct. Thirty-eight other channels are operating and no one has censored the newspapers. But never mind this. The Americans have developed a "thing" for GEO. No solace of course for ARY, the other banned channel.

There's also Bryan Hunt, the US consul-general in Lahore, who wears the national Pakistani dress, the long shirt and baggy trousers, and is moving around these days issuing tough warnings to the Pakistani government and Musharraf to end emergency rule, resign as army chief and give Bhutto access to power.

Pakistan's options

So what should Islamabad do in the face of such a structured campaign to bring Pakistan down to its knees and forcibly install a pro-Washington administration?

There is increasing talk in Islamabad these days about Pakistan's new tough stand in the face of this malicious campaign.

As a starter, Islamabad blew the wind out of the visit of US Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte who came to Pakistan recently "to deliver a tough message" to the Pakistani president. Musharraf, to his credit, told him he won't end emergency rule until all objectives are achieved.

These objectives include:

. Cleaning up northern and western parts of the country of all foreign operatives and their domestic pawns.

. Ensuring that Washington's plan for regime-change doesn't succeed. . Purging the Pakistani media of all those elements that were willing or unwilling accomplices in the plan to destabilize the country.

Musharraf has also told Washington publicly that "Pakistan is more important than democracy or the constitution". This is a bold position. This kind of boldness would have served Musharraf better had it come a little earlier. But even now, his media management team is unable to make the most out of it.

Washington will not stand by watching as its plan for regime change in Islamabad goes down the drain. In case the US insists on interfering in Pakistani affairs, Islamabad, according to sources, is looking at some tough measures:

. Cutting off oil supplies to US military in Afghanistan. Pakistani officials are already enraged at how Afghanistan has turned into a staging ground for sabotage in Pakistan. If Islamabad continues to see Washington acting as a bully, Pakistani officials are seriously considering an announcement where Pakistan, for the first time since October 2001, will deny the US use of Pakistani soil and air space to transport fuel to Afghanistan.

. Reviewing Pakistan's role in the "war on terror". Islamabad needs to fight terrorists on its border with Afghanistan. But our methods need to be different to Washington's when it comes to our domestic extremists. This is where Islamabad parts ways with Washington. Pakistani officials are considering the option of withdrawing from the war on terror while maintaining Pakistan's own war against the terrorists along Afghanistan's border.

Talks with the Taliban. Pakistan has no quarrel with Afghanistan's Taliban. They are Kabul's internal problem. But if reaching out to Afghan Taliban's Mullah Omar can have a positive impact on rebellious Pakistani extremists, then this step should be taken. The South Koreans can talk to the Taliban. Karzai has also called for talks with them. It is time that Islamabad does the same.

The US has been telling everyone in the world that they have paid Pakistan \$10 billion over the past five years. They might think this gives them the right to decide Pakistan's destiny. What they don't tell the world is how Pakistan's help secured for them their biggest footprint ever in energy-rich Central Asia.

If they forget, Islamabad can always remind them by giving them the same treatment that Uzbekistan did last year.

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