



Pakistan's sorry state

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Pakistan has been in the downward spiral of a political meltdown for some time now.

The big question is whether this spiral can be contained and reversed, even as terrorist violence escalates.

The emergency rule declared last week by President General Pervez Musharraf, if viewed charitably, is a preventive measure taken against the country sliding deeper into anarchy. This is what the president contends.

Musharraf's opponents inside Pakistan, plus the Bush administration, disagree and view the suspension of normal political activity -- with the postponement of January elections - - as possibly worsening the country's domestic plight.

The military under Musharraf following the coup of October 1999,

and historically since Pakistan's independence, sees itself as the guardian of order saving the country from the abuses of corrupt and inept politicians whenever they held power.

The strategic location of Pakistan in a resource rich (oil) and yet volatile region of southwest Asia meant that military rulers, though distasteful to democratic sensibilities, were given the nod by Washington, which prefers order and stability over the uncertainties of democratic politics.

The thinking in Washington changed dramatically after 9/11 with the Bush administration publicly pushing for democracy in the Middle East to effectively disarm the appeal of Muslim fundamentalists and the cohorts of Islamist terrorists behind them.

In the war against terror Pakistan is an indispensable ally of the United

States, but as a country under military rule the situation is disagreeable to the Bush administration's democratic agenda for the Arab-Muslim world.

The demand made by the Bush administration on Pakistan and its military to eliminate domestically based Islamist organizations and foreign terrorist groups -- Taliban and al Qaida -- from sanctuary within the country, or be labelled as a terrorist state, has been deeply divisive.

Pakistan's support for the Afghan freedom fighters in the war against the former Soviet Union, and then for the Taliban regime, was consistent with its self image as a Muslim country striving to build an Islamic state and society.

The shared obsession of most Pakistanis is with India, a Hindu majority country, against which three wars and many skirmishes have been fought and lost.

The entire thinking of the Pakistani military establishment has been focused on confronting India and, consequently, the military was unprepared and poorly motivated to fight Islamist terrorists.

The result shows. Pakistani soldiers have been killed and taken hostage

by terrorists despite the superiority of arms and logistics.

Moreover, it remains an open question whether the military's rank and file will fight the terrorists as the senior officer corps under Musharraf's command insist they do.

The uncertainties of Pakistani politics are further compounded by the fear that the military establishment might not be able to guarantee the security of the country's nuclear weapons if the meltdown of the state accelerates, or unhinged elements in the society provoke a conflict with India to subvert the fight against the terrorists.

In the eight years of Musharraf's rule Pakistan's political situation has worsened even though economic indicators have been generally favourable.

The odds are that Musharraf's time is over, and he probably will be replaced by another general promising a quick return to democracy, while letting politicians scramble to come up with an effective policy of holding the country together in the face of mounting terrorist violence.

And then the cycle of military rule likely will be repeated.