

He spends his days watching cricket, but Pervez Musharraf is plotting his political comeback. He airs his views on the “liar” Hamid Karzai and the “double-crossing” Pakistani leadership

“I’m not a run-of-the-mill politician”

By *Jemima Khan*

Portrait by *Kate Peters*

General Pervez Musharraf, former president of Pakistan, former chief executive of Pakistan, former army chief and former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff committee, is watching the England v West Indies Test series in his neat, unostentatious flat off the Edgware Road in west London. He has spent the past three years living between here and Dubai, in self-imposed exile, watching cricket, keeping fit, playing golf, giving lectures for large fees and plotting his return to Pakistani politics. There are no armed guards, no entourage and no fanfare. His private secretary, Anjum Choudhry, a friend I’ve known as “Jim” for many years, sits quietly and reads a paper at the dining room table as the general, in a brown suit and pink shirt, welcomes me into his home and invites me to ask him anything I want. Which, given the rumour that resulted from my last interview with him (when, on the eve of the 2007 presidential election, he told me a number of things that he later regretted), is very trusting indeed.

In this way, Musharraf differs from most politicians I have met. He is unguarded, forthcoming and at times appears disarmingly naive. He tells me of his imminent return to Pakistan to contest elections, as his housekeeper offers samosas, *meethi* (Pakistani sweets) and chai. “I think one can look after one’s security. There will be danger but not as much as all my family and all my friends think.” Already there have been many attempts on his life.

Musharraf thinks that politically he is in with a good chance. In October 2010, he launched a new party, the All Pakistan Muslim League, of which he is the president, and he plans to return to contest elections in Pakistan next year. He tells me that according to a recent, informal

poll, conducted by a friend from Lahore, 91 per cent of respondents want him to be president and Imran Khan, the leader of Tehreek-e-Insaf (“Movement for Justice”), to be prime minister. “I strongly believe this is the feeling. Even my own supporters tell me Imran is the person who should be with us. I think we can turn the tables if we are together. If he is alone and if I am alone I don’t think we can turn the tables.”

I pass this on to Imran later. He laughs, and says: “And then did he wake up...?”

It was Musharraf who put Imran – once a supporter of his – in jail during the state of emergency in 2007 for publicly protesting after the chief justice was dismissed. Pakistani politics is a fickle and expedient game in which the players have short memories and flexible loyalties.

In conversation, Musharraf is often undiplomatic, describing the Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, as “a liar and fraud” who “has been operating against Pakistan’s interests, playing into the hands of Indians and maligning us. The bad name that Pakistan has, I would give 50 per cent of the blame to him.” He says Barack Obama is a “slow decision-maker” who lacks leadership qualities. Whereas most politicians are maddeningly taciturn, terrified that the media will magimix even the most mundane of statements, Musharraf is incautious and, for that reason, good company and hard to dislike. It is no surprise that he has been forced to deny quotes he has given in the past. (He denied telling the *Washington Post* that rape in Pakistan had become “a money-spinning concern. A lot of people say if you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped.” The interview was recorded.)

He says that the assassination of the former prime minister Benazir Bhutto in December 2007, for which he was held responsible for not providing adequate security during her election campaign, was her own fault. “They are blaming lack of security. What lack of security? You were secure, you got into a bomb-proof car. Why did you get up [out of the sunroof]? Who told you?” A Pakistani court issued an arrest warrant for him last year in connection with her assassination.

Musharraf readily admits to past blunders. He publicly apologised to Pakistan for errors made in office. The National Reconciliation Ordinance – which in 2007 granted amnesty to 8,041 politicians, political workers and bureaucrats who were accused of corruption, embezzlement, money-laundering, murder and terrorism, including Bhutto and the current president, Asif Ali Zardari, her widower – was, he concedes, “a mistake”. “I was misled. Benazir Bhutto said she would not come [home] before the elections if I dropped the cases.” He agreed to it, he says, because the cases were going nowhere. The alleged deal backfired. Bhutto returned before the elections and was assassinated, leaving Zardari, known as Mr Ten Per Cent in Pakistan because of alleged kickbacks, as heir-apparent of the Pakistan Peoples Party, which then won the 2008 election. Threatened with impeachment, Musharraf resigned.

That he “moved against the chief justice”, Iftikhar Chaudhry (he dismissed him and then put him under house arrest), is another of Musharraf’s political regrets, though this one is qualified. “My regret is not that I did a wrong thing. It was absolutely correct and legal and constitutional, but why I regret it is that it led ▶



Incautious, good company and hard to dislike: the general has spent the past three years living between west London and Dubai

► to upheaval and ended what we were doing for Pakistan, unfortunately. So my conclusion is, even when you are doing something right, you need to think.”

There is something of the simple soldier about Musharraf. His language is peppered with colonial-army-speak of “nothing doing” and “skirmishes on the border”. Having spent most of his adult life in military service, he tends to see things primarily from a military perspective. “I said to Colin Powell the military strategy [in Iraq] was flawed. I studied Israeli action in Entebbe – that is the way it should have been done. Saddam Hussein was a hated man. Massive aerial bombardment was a mistake.”

He believes that the coalition forces won a military victory in Afghanistan but failed politically. “The Taliban were totally disintegrated. The military delivered to you... We had to convert a military victory into a political victory, to instal a legitimate, acceptable government in Kabul.” He argues that an Afghan government and army dominated by that country’s ethnic minorities (“Panjshiris and Tajiks”) could never be accepted by the Pashtun-dominated population, and adds, for good measure: “As far as Pashtuns are concerned, he [President Karzai] is no Pashtun.” As for Afghanistan’s future, Musharraf says that after the planned withdrawal in 2014, “unless the Afghan national army is backed by [outside] force, they will be finished by the Taliban or they will run away” and that Karzai cannot last.

Like all Pakistanis who have lived through – and, in his case, fought in – several wars with India, he is deeply suspicious of the neighbouring country and refers to “Indian machinations”, always differentiating between “our interests” and “Indian interests”. He was three years old at the time of Partition, when his family migrated from India to Pakistan, and he was brought up on tales of bloodshed.

Musharraf entered the Pakistani army at 21 and became chief of army staff in 1998. He seized power in a bloodless *coup d’état* in 1999, deposing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was about to replace him as head of the army, at first placing Sharif under arrest and later exiling him to Saudi Arabia. There was international condemnation of the coup and Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations. Musharraf would be shunned by the west until the 11 September 2001 attacks, when Pakistan became an important ally in the war on terror and he was rewarded with a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize. He duly appointed himself president of Pakistan in June 2001 and called a general election the following year, after which his presidency was legitimised by the pro-Musharraf party PML-Q, nicknamed in Pakistan “the king’s party”, which formed a majority government in alliance with the religious parties MMA and MQM.

As a politician, Musharraf quickly learned the arts of expediency and compromise. After nine years at the helm of one of the world’s most politically turbulent countries, he became pragmatic to the point of cynicism. He took over with the express aim of cleaning up politics and immediately set up his own national accountability bureau, declaring that his mission was to hold the corrupt accountable. But he morphed from self-appointed scourge of Pakistan’s corrupt elite into their official pardoner. The National Reconciliation Ordinance that he passed in 2007 in effect guaranteed lifelong immunity from prosecution to those same corrupt politicians. The result is that Zardari, a man he detested, is in power.

On the issue of how to deal with unauthorised US drone strikes on Pakistan’s tribal areas, he offers a particular lesson in realpolitik and the constraints of power. “The confrontationalist approach, from a position of such acute weakness, is not possible.

“The world is not a just place; frankly, this world is an unjust world. It believes in might is right. Let me talk very frankly: if you are weak, anyone can come and kick you. You can’t justify that he kicked me unjustly.”

He opposes the use of drones by a foreign force. “Certainly, it’s a breach of sovereignty, because, internationally, how can you cross a border and attack in a country?” But the present regime, he says, is “double-crossing the people of Pakistan” by playing a double game of tacit

“I am proud of giving pride to the people of Pakistan”

approval and public statements of outrage, as revealed by WikiLeaks cables that detailed how Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani told the US ambassador to Pakistan, Anne Patterson, that “we’ll protest in the National Assembly [about drones] and then ignore it”. Musharraf denies that he ever gave similar permission or tacit approval to the US to strike Pakistan. “There was no permission that they can attack. There was certainly a joint co-operation on the photography part [to carry out surveillance and to gather intelligence].”

He agrees that the use of drones is counter-productive, given the resentment they cause within Pakistan, though he claims the relationship between the US and Pakistan soured years earlier. “The war that is being lost on hearts and minds in Pakistan has a historical background. It is not now. For ten years, we fought the Soviet Union together. The US changed its policy and shifted its strategic co-operation towards India. We became rogues and India is the friend.

“Then the US decides to leave. The 30,000 mujahedin from Morocco to Indonesia – who looks after them now? They need to rehabilitate them. They are armed and know nothing

but fighting. Then al-Qaeda came into being. Four million refugees came into Pakistan. Pakistan was alone and standing by itself. We fought [with] the US for ten years, helped them win the war – helped break up the Soviet Union – all that we did for you. We should have been rewarded, not ditched. That went into the people of Pakistan.”

Now, he says, Pakistanis feel further embittered by the fact that “all major political disputes around the world involve Muslims: Palestine, Kosovo, Iraq, Lebanon”, and by the west’s double standards in foreign policy. “When it comes to Muslims voting for independence – like Chechnya – they will not get it. They will be crushed. But Indonesia, East Timor: because it’s Christian, they can separate.”

If he were in power now, Musharraf says, “I would ask the US, ‘You give the drones to us and we will observe targets together, and we [Pakistan] will launch attacks.’” And if the US refused? Would he shoot down the drones, as Imran Khan has promised to do if he comes to power? He dismisses this as unrealistic. “Then it’s war and you will be beaten, and India will be very happy. Imran should understand these things.”

He employs the obligatory cricket metaphors to stress the point. “When you are on a weak wicket, then don’t talk, at least. You cannot do it. You should not say, ‘We will shoot it down.’ Because, when it comes to it, let me see if the air force does it. And if the air force does it, let’s see how they confront the joint might of the coalition forces and maybe India also. This is very short-sighted. These are not easy things. If [Imran] is PM and he takes decisions, buck stops with him. Let me see what he does. He will not... he cannot do it.”

He questions reports of civilian deaths resulting from drone strikes, in particular the incident in Bajaur on 30 October 2006 when a madrasa (religious school) was attacked, resulting in one of the highest recorded death tollies in the drone campaign – up to 81 civilians were reported to have been killed, including 69 children. “It’s all bullshit – sorry for the word – that it was a madrasa and seminary and children were studying Quran. They used this as cover.”

What about the children killed there? “I don’t remember. In the media, they said it was all children. They were absolutely wrong. There may have been some collateral damage of some children but they were not children at all, they were all militants doing training inside.” Although the Pakistani army initially claimed it was responsible for the attack, it soon became clear that Pakistan was covering for the CIA, as one of Musharraf’s senior aides later confessed to the *Sunday Times*. From October 2006 onwards, the Pakistani military refused to take the blame for any US drone attacks.

When Musharraf was in power and the Americans launched drone strikes on Pakistan without his permission, he says, “I used to mind

Bugsplats – life in the shadow of death

that a lot – if we were not on board. I would protest.” After he resigned, the drone strikes increased sharply. According to researchers at the Bureau for Investigative Journalism, before his departure in 2008, there had been 21 US strikes over four years. In the next five months alone, there were a further 31 strikes.

He explains: “I could pick up the phone and speak to President Bush and Colin Powell, and I used to put a lot of pressure on them. Why this has happened? They used to be on the back foot and they liked me, probably, and therefore they used to have to go a long way to calm me down to explain to me why this and that . . . Now, of course, it is beyond any control. That is what is lacking with these people [Zardari and Gilani]. No communication and no trust. I think they trusted me.” Enough, he believes, to have told him when they discovered the whereabouts of Osama Bin Laden, rather than launching a secret operation to take him out without the knowledge or involvement of Pakistan. This, he says, was “shameful for Pakistan and a breach of sovereignty. We should have been told”.

He is adamant that Pakistan’s government and its intelligence agency, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), were unaware that Bin Laden was hiding in Abbottabad, a small garrison town 50 kilometres from the national capital, Islamabad. “I am very sure from one, biggest reason: if he was there for five years – although I have a little bit of doubt about that – then two years was in my time. Now, I am absolutely sure that I didn’t know.”

I question how the infamously omniscient ISI could not have known Bin Laden was there. “It is possible,” he insists. “People take ISI or CIA to be some kind of gods who know everything and can see everywhere. That is not the case. The CIA in 9/11: how come there were 20 people under training for six months to carry out that attack? How come they hijacked four aircraft from different airports and how come they changed flight paths? All this is possible.”

Prime Minister David Cameron cautioned Pakistan, in a speech given in India in July 2010, against “looking both ways” on terror, by which he meant tolerating or even exporting terrorism while allied with the west in the war on terror and demanding respect as a democracy. Meanwhile, the former US vice-chairman of the joint chiefs of staff James Cartwright accused the ISI of tolerating terrorism. And, in September 2011, Cartwright’s former boss Admiral Michael Mullen claimed that the insurgent Afghan Haqqani network had “long enjoyed the support and protection of the Pakistani government and is, in many ways, a strategic arm of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence agency”.

Musharraf points to a trust deficit and breakdown of communication between Pakistan and the US. Islamabad needs to explain that “we are not helping or abetting [the Haqqani network], we are dealing with them”. It is now Pakistan’s task, he says, to explain to the rest of the world –

What do you think about when you hear the word “drone”? Barack Obama in the White House, authorising the “kill list”. US soldiers pressing buttons. Bearded Taliban militants in dusty villages being zapped out of existence. The reality of this computer-game warfare is significantly messier.

Pakistan’s tribal areas have been home to the most sustained drone campaign of any region in the world. The attacks started in 2004 and have been stepped up under Obama. The main defence of drone war is that it produces less “collateral damage” – a euphemism for civilian deaths – than air strikes. Yet investigations and anecdotal evidence show this is not the case. Collating exact figures is difficult, but the US-based Brookings Institution estimates that ten civilians die for every militant killed.

“The problem we have with Obama is this notion that if they have a beard and they are the right age then they are presumed to be terrorists,” says Clive Stafford Smith, head of the legal aid charity Reprieve. “I would estimate that the majority of people being killed are not the people who should be killed under anyone’s definition.”

Mirza Shahzad Akbar is a Pakistani lawyer representing 80 cases in Waziristan in which most of the plaintiffs have lost relatives to drone attacks. In a landmark case, he is attempting to prove first that these people can press murder charges, and second, that their cases can come under the jurisdiction of the Islamabad courts. This is important because Pakistan’s ungovernable tribal areas are federally administered and operate outside the normal boundaries of law and order.

When we speak on the phone, he lists some of the cases. Houses that were targeted while people were sleeping. Strikes on funerals. People killed while at jirgas, the traditional meetings of elders. Children asleep in targeted houses. Pharmacists. Local policemen. Schoolteachers. “These are Pakistanis employed by the state,” he says. “That is about as civilian as you can get.” And, as in any war, death is not the only

outcome. Hundreds of other victims have been maimed, blinded and disabled, left with few prospects in an area beset by poverty.

The 800,000 people of Waziristan live under the ever-present threat of death. Strikes frequently take place in the middle of the night. As standard, four or five drones circle in the air, creating a sense of imminent danger and paranoia. The buzzing sound is a relentless presence; people refer to the drones as “bees”. In a chilling echo of this, US operators refer to victims as “bugsplats”.

Local doctors report an “exponential” increase in the number of people requiring prescriptions for anti-anxiety drugs or antidepressants. “Living under constant threat of death – that’s about as stressful as it gets,” Stafford Smith says.

Akbar describes how, at a recent meeting in Peshawar with people from the tribal areas, nearly everyone was carrying tranquillisers. “Everyone is constantly thinking about drones. They would take calls from home and their children tell them how many drones they have spotted. Women are most worried. They aren’t allowed to go outside because of local traditions. They don’t know where their husbands, brothers or sons go.”

A few years ago, public opinion in Pakistan was divided, many liberals supporting drone strikes as a legitimate response to the terrorists who threaten their way of life. That was before the extent of civilian casualties became known, and parliament has passed three resolutions condemning drones since 2011. A recent Pew poll found that 97 per cent of respondents viewed the attacks negatively, and they are sure to be a critical election issue in Pakistan. Seen as yet another assault on the country’s sovereignty, drones have hardened intense anti-US feeling.

The people of the tribal areas are largely uneducated and live by traditions that Akbar describes as being “centuries behind”. This compounds their sense of disempowerment: they feel they are outsiders, and that no one cares what happens to them. ●

Samira Shackle

“Talk it, dammit! Speak it!” – that the ISI’s inability to track down Osama Bin Laden was down to ineptitude and not complicity.

Musharraf views himself as a man whom the west can talk to, whom it can trust, but who is able to hold his own. “I am not a run-of-the-mill politician,” he says. “They [the present government] allowed too much liberty of action without any checks to the Americans. This Blackwater and all that. Allowing foreign intelligence and foreign NGOs, or militants in garb of NGOs, coming into Pakistan without visa

restrictions – it was unthinkable in my time. I would never allow it. That is how they’ve been compromising on their sovereignty.”

Before our meeting ends, I ask what he is most proud of in his career. “I am proud of giving pride to the people of Pakistan. There is no doubt in my mind that they had confidence in themselves and moved proudly around the world.” And with that, he bids me a warm goodbye, gives me some Pakistani mangoes and heads off with Jim for lunch at Nobu, Park Lane. ●

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