

I.B. TAURIS

ZAHID HUSSAIN

FRONTLINE PAKISTAN

THE STRUGGLE
WITH MILITANT
ISLAM

'an important and informed inside look'

SEYMOUR HERSH

FRONTLINE PAKISTAN

*For my mother, Tabira Khatoon,
who gave me the courage to face life head-on,
and Razia Bhatti,
who taught me how to write*

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**THE STRUGGLE
WITH MILITANT ISLAM**

**ZAHID
HUSSAIN**

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PREFACE

In February 2002, a mere two years after the President of the USA very publicly refused to endorse the new military government of Pakistan, Pakistan's leader, General Pervez Musharraf, stood up on a platform in Washington with US Secretary of State for Defense Donald Rumsfeld. In between the friendly badinage, Rumsfeld looked Musharraf in the eye and said warmly: 'Mr. President, we – our country – and indeed the world – [have] a big stake in your country and your part of the world, and we wish you well in your important work.'

The dramatic turn of events in the aftermath of 9/11 pushed Pakistan into a new spotlight. From being an international outcast for its long-standing support of the Taliban and militant cross-border insurgents in Kashmir, Pakistan became the key strategic partner of America's war on terror. The same military leaders who had facilitated jihadist networks to fight their proxy wars in Afghanistan and Kashmir, and who may well have turned a blind eye to the illegal sale of nuclear materials, are now being touted as the US's regional standard bearers.

General Musharraf, the man responsible for this astonishing volte-face, has had to walk a fine line between a military reluctant to break entirely with its radical clients and his status as America's key strategic partner in the region. Since he took the fateful decision to throw in his lot with the Americans, Musharraf has been a marked man. Islamic militants once trained by Pakistan's formidable spymasters, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) have turned their guns onto the military leader they saw as having betrayed the jihad.

In fact, as this book explores, Musharraf's decision to forge a partnership with America meant taking Pakistan to war with itself. The outcome of this struggle will affect not only the fate of Pakistan, but the ideological climate of the Middle East, and the security of the world. It is a war which is rarely examined in any depth, as too many observers both in and outside Pakistan seem content to take the symbolic theatre of Pakistani politics at face value. The narrative which both Musharraf and his American allies are so anxious to promulgate – that the Pakistani government is 'cracking down' on 'jihadist elements' – belies the disturbing reality that jihadists have as much if not more power over Pakistani society than Musharraf himself. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan proceed ever more savagely, and as more and more western cities, including London, experience jihadist terror, Musharraf's idiosyncratic 'war on terror' takes on momentous significance.

Covering the fast-unravelling events have been the most testing of times for me as a journalist. Reporting is never easy in any conflict zone, but it was much harder in the politically complex climate of the region after 9/11, when strategic relationships were turned on their head, and the gap between official rhetoric and reality on the ground was so large.

On 8 November 2001, just four weeks into the US-led coalition forces air strikes in Afghanistan, I sneaked inside the Afghan border as part of a humanitarian organization, disguised as a doctor. The embattled Taliban regime had banned foreign journalists and even the slightest suspicion could have landed me in serious trouble. The risk was huge, but so was the scoop. I remember receiving frantic calls on my way to the Torkhum border, from *The Times* deputy editor Preston and foreign editor Bronwen Maddox, who were worried about my safety. Though not fully convinced by my decision, they nevertheless assured me of complete support.

The day-long stay in the war zone was, indeed, the most dangerous venture in my entire journalistic career. The trip was also the most revealing. Whilst the Pakistani government was pledging its support for the US war on the Taliban, I witnessed thousands of Pakistanis pouring into the south-eastern city of Jalalabad in response to Osama bin Laden's call to arms. In their flowing *shalwar* and *kameez*, they stood out instantly. The youngest and most fervent had already been dispatched to the front. The older men who had lived their lives in Pakistan's lawless frontier waited for their marching orders. The Taliban were routed a week later, but the war on terror was far from over. One year later, I met Taliban fighters on Pakistan's north-western borders

waiting for the call from their leaders to join the resistance against the occupying troops.

After 9/11, I closely followed the hunt for al-Qaeda leaders and travelled many times to Pakistan's lawless Waziristan tribal region to report on the military operation against the militants. One of the world's most difficult terrains, it has become the new base for international terrorism and a possible lair for bin Laden and Zawahiri. Thousands of Pakistani troops have been locked in an impossible war in this high mountainous region against the fiercely independent tribesmen refusing to hand over their foreign 'guests'.

Direct interaction with the jihadist groups has provided me with a unique insight into their operations and their links with the Pakistani military. I have encountered hundreds of Islamic fighters over the years, many of them in their teens, eager to achieve martyrdom. I met the radical Islamic leaders, who believe that jihad was the only way to end the oppression of Muslims across the world and establish the dominance of Islam. They were the product of Islamic madrassas as well as secular educational institutions.

As luck had it, on several occasions I happened to be in the right place at the right time, which gave me a rare insight into some of the most important events. I was present at Kandahar airport on 31 December 2000 when Masood Azhar, one of Pakistan's most feared militant leaders, and Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, the British-born militant, were exchanged to secure the release of passengers of an Indian Airlines plane hijacked by Kashmiri militants. A week later, I happened to see Azhar resurfacing in Karachi and delivering a vitriolic speech from the pulpit of a mosque. The nexus between the militants and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence was only too obvious.

Interviews with General Musharraf (who I have interviewed several times since he took over power, including an exhaustive session in January 2002 for a *Newsweek* cover story) and other senior Pakistani military and civilian leaders have provided me with a valuable insight into the new face of the Pakistan-US alliance.

It was because of all these experiences that I wanted to write a book which showed the reality of Pakistan's 'war on terror'. *Frontline Pakistan* is the result. I hope that it fills in some of the gaps left by the official version of events.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part looks at how Musharraf came to throw in his lot with the Americans after 9/11, and why this was such a momentous decision. The second part uncovers

the forces ranged against him: the jihadists and their allies. The third part looks at the battle between them – how it is being fought and who is winning.

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I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my colleagues at *Newsline*, especially editor Rehana Hakim and Samina Ibrahim for their support and editorial advice. They have always been a source of strength for me. I am extremely proud of being part of the courageous team who bring out this fiercely independent magazine. *Newsline* has also been the main venue for most of my investigative reports over the last 17 years.

I am extremely grateful to Kathy Gannon and Françoise Chipaux, who convinced me to write this book. They encouraged me at every stage. Special gratitude to Steve Levine of the *Wall Street Journal*, a great friend who painstakingly went through the first draft and gave valuable suggestions.

It is now over 20 years since I started writing for *The Times*, and I owe my editors, especially foreign editor Bronwen Maddox, thanks for enormous support and encouragement. It is largely thanks to *The Times* that I have been able to travel through the region, including Afghanistan.

My thanks as well to *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal* for providing space for my stories on Pakistan and Afghanistan. Ron Moreau, *Newsweek's* South Asia Bureau chief, has always been a source of support.

I have greatly benefited from the intellectual input from Maleeha Lodhi and Ahmed Rashid, two of my best friends in and out of journalism. Samina Ahmed too has been source of intellectual inspiration.

There are many others who helped me accomplish this book in different ways. Zaman Kazmi as usual has been available for all kinds of help.

Many thanks to Abigail Fielding Smith, my editor at I.B.Tauris, who from the outset believed in this project.

Finally, thanks to my friend Zaba Sattar, without whose support this project would not have been possible. She was the first one to see the initial draft and her comments have helped to shape this book.

PROLOGUE

PAKISTAN AGAINST ITSELF

From the tinted glass window of his speeding Mercedes Benz, President Musharraf could see a van racing towards his motorcade from the opposite side of the road, crushing to death a policeman who tried to block its way. It was a national holiday on 25 December 2003, and the road was deserted. Within seconds the van blew up with a huge explosion after hitting a security car at the tail end of the convoy. It was dark all around. The driver involuntarily pressed the brakes. 'Accelerate. Don't stop,' the President shouted at him. The car had moved just 150 yards when another vehicle rammed into the car just behind him detonating 60 pounds of high explosives. The President's car was trapped between the two explosions. Three of the tyres on the armour-plated presidential Mercedes were burst by the impact. Blood and body parts covered the vehicle. The driver pressed the accelerator and drove home on a single tyre.¹ The assailant almost got him. 'It was very close,' the President later recalled. He was saved, perhaps, because a third bomber could not reach the assigned place in time.

It was the second attempt on Musharraf's life in less than two weeks. Both attempts had taken place in Rawalpindi, the seat of the Pakistani military headquarters. The fact that explosives were placed under a bridge along the route of Musharraf's motorcade, and that the

terrorists' vehicles were able to access his convoy in a zone where, supposedly, not the slightest movement could escape detection, was baffling. The assailants chose the same spot for both attacks. The route was used nearly every day by General Musharraf as he travelled from his residence to his presidential offices in Islamabad. Security was always tight when he travelled, with roads closed to allow his long motorcade to pass rapidly. It was even more vigilant on that day as Pakistan's tiny Christian community celebrated Christmas. In both the attempts it was clear that the perpetrators had the assistance of experts and were given tracking and other devices not usually available to local terrorists. Having travelled to Islamabad hours before for a dinner he had hosted, Musharraf attributed his survival to 'Allah's blessings, his mother's prayers and the nation's goodwill'.²

There was little doubt, however, about who was behind the attack. Professionally planned, it bore all the hallmarks of international terrorists, for whom General Musharraf had been a marked man. By official admission, it was the fourth attempt on General Musharraf's life since 13 September 2001, when he decided to throw Pakistan's lot in with the US war on terror. By unofficial accounts this might even have been the fifth or sixth such attempt. The General had been the *bête noire* of many people and groups out there, but especially the Islamist extremists.

Musharraf had put his own survival at stake by deciding to curb Islamic militancy after 9/11. Security around him had been tightened. His movements were kept secret and his travel route often changed because of growing fears of his meeting the fate of Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian President who was assassinated by an Islamic militant after he made peace with Israel. The President became one of the most stringently protected men in the world. All traffic was stopped on his travel routes at least half an hour before he passed. The entire route was cleared by bomb disposal squads. But when it came to suicide bombing coordinated by insiders, one could not do much.

The assassination attempts right in the centre of Army Headquarters could not have been possible without inside contacts. The country's intelligence agencies could not possibly be unaware of the identity of the groups and their ringleaders. Musharraf had tried to rein in his intelligence organizations, but with mixed results. Some of the 'ideologized' operatives were sidelined, but many more remained in important places from where they could continue to help the militants. It eventually emerged that it was soon after the US attack on

Afghanistan in October 2001 that some 20 Islamic militants, many of them Afghan and Kashmir war veterans, had gathered at a house in Islamabad to discuss a plan to assassinate Musharraf for allying with the United States. The meeting was apparently organized by Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and Amjad Hussain Farooqi, the two protagonists of the December 1999 hijacking of an Indian Airlines plane. Among the participants were two Pakistani army soldiers belonging to the elite special force.³

It was hard to believe that the man they sought to kill had once been the doyenne of the jihadists and their allies in the military intelligence service. I first met General Musharraf at his official residence: a sprawling white colonial mansion in the middle of Rawalpindi cantonment, ten days after the coup which brought him to power in October 1999. His piquant sense of humour, frankness and affable personality came as a marked contrast to General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, the last military strongman who ruled the crisis-ridden country from 1977 to 1988. Unlike the austere General Zia, Musharraf was known for a certain flamboyance in dress and a penchant for music and dancing. He was an officer of the old school with a secular bent. General Musharraf provoked strong reactions from radical Islamists when he appeared in public holding his two poodles. He came across as a moderate and pragmatic man as he talked about the problems and challenges faced by his new government. Known as a consummate soldier's soldier, he clearly enjoyed being at the helm of political power of the world's most ungovernable nation. 'It is a tough job, but the feeling of being in charge when having the confidence makes it enjoyable,' he asserted.⁴

His confidence had certainly been boosted by the public euphoria that greeted his coup and the milder than expected international reaction. General Musharraf, who described himself as a 'reluctant coup maker', made it very clear that there was no question of the country soon returning to democracy.

Musharraf's background bears all the hallmarks of the maverick yet intensely driven politician he was to become. The second of three sons, Musharraf was born into a middle-class family of Delhi that migrated to Pakistan after the partition in August 1947. The family was settled in Karachi where his father was a foreign ministry employee. His mother was a rarity for her era, an educated Muslim working woman, who had a long career with the International Labour Organization. Musharraf received his army commission in 1964.⁵ He almost got thrown out for indiscipline a few months later. He subsequently faced court martial

as a second lieutenant for another disciplinary infringement. The proceedings were stopped because of the war with India in 1965. A gallantry award saved him from the court martial. He received another gallantry award in 1971. Despite his performance, his indiscipline almost brought his career to an end again as a lieutenant colonel. 'My rise to the post of army chief is a miracle,' Musharraf admitted.⁶

General Musharraf was serving as a corps commander at Mangla⁷ when he was invited by the then Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, to take over the army command. Sharif had already been ousted from power by his army chief once, and was determined not to let it happen again. The obvious candidate for the head of the army would have been Lt.-General Ali Quli Khan, a powerful Pashtun who belonged to one of Pakistan's most influential political families. But precisely because of this strong power base Sharif was reluctant to choose him. The Sandhurst-trained General had also won Sharif's disfavour because of his closeness to General Waheed Kakar, the army chief who had forced Sharif to quit during his first term in office in 1993. Musharraf, a relative outsider and Mohajir (a minority ethnic group) rather than Pashtun, suited Sharif's purposes much better. Or so he thought. It did not take much time for Musharraf to show that he was nobody's man.

As Chief of Army Staff, Musharraf presided over an undercover military operation with far-reaching consequences, which was kept secret from the Prime Minister. When Indian troops took their annual winter season retreat from the icy Kargil peaks of Indian-occupied Kashmir in May 1999, the Pakistani military took up their abandoned positions. This caused a terrifying escalation in India-Pakistan tensions, and Sharif, taken by surprise, had to make humiliating concessions insisted upon by President Clinton to avoid a full-scale war. This left him very weak domestically.

In a desperate attempt to reduce the tension between the civil leadership in Islamabad and the military leadership in Rawalpindi, Sharif gave General Musharraf the additional charge of Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee and assured the General that he did not have any intention to fire him. It was almost certainly a ploy to put Musharraf off guard. Musharraf did not take the bait and instead provocatively sacked a senior corps commander for meeting the Prime Minister without his permission.

Despite the rising tensions, it seemed to General Musharraf that the situation was under control when he accepted a long-standing invitation from the chief of the Sri Lankan army in October 1999. The

month before, the army top brass had decided on a contingency plan to move in if the Prime Minister decided to fire their chief. Musharraf appointed his loyalist Brigadier Salahuddin Satti as the commander of the pivotal 111 Brigade, which was responsible for the security of Islamabad. In the event of a military takeover, the brigade was the first to move. Military Intelligence kept a close watch on Sharif's movements. Musharraf had complete faith in his commanders. 'You don't have to worry. Everything is under control,' he was reassured by General Aziz, Chief of General Staff as he left for Sri Lanka.⁸

On the return flight, Musharraf busied himself jotting down notes on how the army could contribute to the country's governance. As the plane entered Pakistani airspace, the link with the control tower at Karachi airport crackled to life with an inexplicable message that the flight be diverted to some other airport outside Pakistan. At 6.50 pm, Brigadier Taj told Musharraf that the pilot wanted to talk to him. In the cockpit, Captain Sarwat informed him of the radio message. 'That is when I knew that something had gone wrong and presumed it was concerning me,' Musharraf later recalled.⁹ It was perhaps the most testing time for the war-hardened soldier during his thirty-five-year army career.

The Prime Minister himself was flying back to Islamabad from Punjab at around 2 pm, about the time that General Musharraf was boarding his flight in Colombo. He was said to be visibly preoccupied during the flight. Retired Lt.-General Iftikhar Ali Khan, Defense Secretary, was at the airport to receive the Prime Minister. On the way to PM House, Sharif informed him that he had decided to fire Musharraf. A dumbfounded Ali asked if he should not wait for Musharraf to return. 'No, I have decided to appoint General Ziauddin as the new chief,' the Prime Minister replied.¹⁰ Being a former senior army officer, General Iftikhar Ali Khan could foresee the repercussions. But Sharif had decided to take a calculated gamble. Only a year earlier, he had forced another army chief, General Jehangir Karamat, to resign, and he felt confident enough to do it a second time. He wanted the new army chief to take over while Musharraf was still airborne. At 5 pm he issued the orders for the appointment of General Ziauddin. The fateful decision set the army's contingency plan rolling.

Lt.-General Mahmood Ahmed, the corps commander at Rawalpindi, and Lt.-General Mohammed Aziz, Chief of General Staff, were playing tennis when they heard about Sharif's decision. The two generals rushed to the General Headquarters to mobilize their forces for the counter

coup. The situation was delicately balanced. Loyalties were not clearly defined. Entrenched in the PM House, General Ziauddin was issuing orders and making new appointments. He was desperately trying to garner the support of the commanders. He sacked both General Aziz and General Mahmood. But it was too late. Brigadier Satti's 111 Brigade had already moved to seal the PM House. There was utter confusion in the country as the state-controlled Pakistan Television went off the air. Within an hour it became increasingly apparent that Sharif was losing the battle. But he was not prepared to give up. He was constantly in touch with civil aviation officials in Karachi, urging them not to let the PK 805 land. The endgame depended on the fate of General Musharraf. If he was kept out of the country, most of the commanders might accept the change, he believed.

At Karachi airport there was confusion among the army officers, who were there to receive the chief. Several times the flags from the staff car were removed and then replaced. The civil aviation authorities switched off the landing lights and blocked the runway with fire trucks. It was only at about 7.20 pm that the army from the nearby Malir cantonment moved in and seized control of the airport and the air control tower. Musharraf was totally clueless as to what was going on below, as the plane, with just thirty minutes of fuel left, was diverted to Nawabshah, a small airport some 200 miles from Karachi. It was then that Major-General Malik Iftikhar, the commanding officer, came on the line and requested Musharraf to turn back to Karachi. 'Sir, the situation is all right. We have taken over,' the officer said.¹¹ Musharraf was still not sure about the situation as the plane landed. He insisted on speaking to General Usmani, the local commander, before disembarking from the plane. The endgame came smoothly. The military takeover was complete as night fell.

By March 2000, Sharif was in jail. Sharif's jail term was, however, cut short when Musharraf, under pressure from the Saudi government commuted his sentence and sent him in exile to Jeddah. It was still pitch dark on 10 December 2000 when the former Prime Minister was taken from his prison cell in the sixteenth-century military fort of Attock, some 40 miles from the capital, and whisked away in a Saudi embassy black Mercedes.¹² A government announcement at midnight said that, under the terms agreed with General Musharraf, Sharif's life sentence stood commuted, but he would have to forfeit \$8.3 million in property and stay out of politics for the next 21 years. In a nationwide TV address a few days later, General Musharraf justified his decision,

saying that he wanted to end the politics of hatred. But in the same breath he warned that the exiled family would not be allowed to return to the country for ten years.

Although Sharif's release from jail came about as a result of the efforts of the Saudi royal family, the move had strong American backing. The Clinton administration had been hugely indebted to Sharif for his cooperation, particularly in the efforts to capture Osama bin Laden. A few months before the coup, he had promised to deliver the Saudi fugitive to the USA and crack down on Islamic militants. The USA had paid \$25 million to the Sharif government to help the ISI to raise a commando force to capture bin Laden. The Pakistani leader had earlier won American support for his move to normalize relations with India and pull out Pakistani troops from Kargil. It did not come as surprise when Washington quickly hailed the amnesty.¹³

Ironically, the man who usurped America's most pliant ally in the region on a wave of nationalist feeling, would within a few years of taking command, stake his power – and his life – on support for the USA's foreign policy.

The 12 October coup was yet another episode of the Pakistani soap opera of alternation between authoritarian rule by an elected government and authoritarian rule by a self-appointed leader from the army. Most Pakistanis were disillusioned with the ineptitude of successive civilian leaders, and welcomed the military takeover, though warily. General Musharraf had stepped into a situation that had not been faced by past military rulers: a nation armed with nuclear weapons falling apart as a result of worsening ethnic and sectarian violence. Years of financial mismanagement and rampant corruption had pushed the country to the brink of bankruptcy.

It was, however, a military takeover with a difference. Musharraf appeared like a 'benevolent dictator', allowing both a free press and political freedom. He did not impose martial law or use coercive means to silence the political opposition. He called himself Chief Executive. An admirer of the father of the modern secular state of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, he presented himself as a reformist, promising to take Pakistan on a liberal course. The General appeared more in the mould of the first Pakistani military ruler, Field Marshal Ayub Khan,¹⁴ than the most recent, General Zia.

He received widespread approbation when, in his first major policy speech, he announced his seven-point agenda, which included the eradication of Islamic extremism and sectarianism. He pledged to undo

General Zia's radical legacy by transforming Pakistan into a moderate Muslim state. The liberal profile of his cabinet, comprising western educated professionals, had raised hopes for better governance and a clean administration. The liberal image was also necessary to win the support of the international community, wary of the spread of Islamic extremism in the region. But his policies were full of paradoxes.

The inconsistencies of Musharraf's position were revealed in his first major policy battle with the Islamists. Musharraf found himself pitted against the hardline Islamic groups when in April 2000 he moved to change the notorious Blasphemy Law, enforced as part of the Islamization process in 1981 by General Zia's military rule. Under the law anyone could be imprisoned merely on the basis of an accusation of defiling the image of the Prophet Mohammed or desecrating the Qur'an. The law that carried the death sentence had long become the handiest instrument for mullahs to persecute rivals, particularly members of the Christian community and the liberals.¹⁵

Musharraf had promised to bring about some procedural changes in the filing of blasphemy cases. Under the proposed amendment, cases could be registered only after an investigation by the local administrations. Just the prospect of minor procedural change inflamed religious activists who used the proposed amendment to launch an attack on the Musharraf government. Thousands of Islamic activists poured onto the streets of Karachi and other cities, vowing to defend Islamic laws. Pakistan's financial and commercial capital looked like a city under siege with the Islamists on the rampage, bringing normal life to a halt for several days in the second week of May 2000.

It was the first major test for Musharraf as he tried to move the country away from General Zia's orthodox Islamic legacy. But he beat a hasty retreat under the pressure and withdrew the amendment. The backtracking on the blasphemy issue was a serious blow to his credibility. 'One step forward and one step back' was to become a characteristic of Musharraf's approach while dealing with the issue of Islamic extremism. The military government's defensive attitude further emboldened the religious extremists who upped the ante by demanding enforcement of what they described as a complete Islamic system.

The most alarming aspect of the situation in the first years of Musharraf's rule was the growing assertiveness of jihadist organizations in Pakistan's domestic politics. Their increasing influence was quite evident during the violence on the blasphemy issue. Hundreds of their gun-wielding activists joined the protesters. These groups, which

had been fighting in Kashmir and Afghanistan, were deeply entwined with the Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, and for that reason the military was not willing to take them on. The military government's dividedness on domestic issues and its support for Islamic militancy in Kashmir contributed to a state of confusion and inertia.

The blasphemy issue also exposed divisions within the military leadership. Some members of the junta, who were often described as 'jihadist generals', were openly sympathetic to hardline Islamic groups. They were opposed to any move to change Islamic laws. The two decades of war in Afghanistan and conflict in Kashmir had produced men at arms who considered themselves soldiers of Islam. The confused and conflicting policies indicated that there existed multiple power centres in the country.

The uncertain political situation was conducive to the rise of extremist and conservative Islamic elements. The jihadist groups that the military government supported and the sectarian outfits that it claimed it wanted to wipe out overlapped. The jihadists behaved like paramilitaries, swaggering about with automatic weapons in public. Religious schools – madrasas – proliferated by the thousands.

The military coup had brought to power the military officers who had authored the ill-fated Kargil operation in May 1999. Once in power, Musharraf himself pursued a more aggressive policy on Kashmir and stepped up support for the Kashmiri militants. Despite his professed secularist agenda, General Musharraf equated support for their cause with support for the mujahidin (holy warriors) against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The resultant tension between India and Pakistan was further heightened at the end of 1999, with the hijacking of an Indian Airlines jet en route from Kathmandu, Nepal, to New Delhi. The suspected involvement of the ISI in the hijacking had almost led to Washington declaring Pakistan a terrorist state.

There was a perceptible toughening in the tenor of senior American officials who visited Islamabad in January 2000, as they asked Pakistani military leaders to curb Islamic militant organizations perpetrating terrorism. The message was starkly clear: that Pakistan faced the imminent threat of being put on the list of nations sponsoring terrorism unless it heeded the American demand of banning the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM),¹⁶ which Washington believed was responsible for the Indian Airlines hijacking.¹⁷

It was not the first time that the USA had conveyed its serious concern over Pakistan and Afghanistan becoming a hub for Islamic extremist

groups involved in terrorist activities worldwide. The pressure had intensified, particularly after the hijacking and the arrest of several Islamic militants in the USA, Jordan and other countries with alleged links in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In early 2000, Karl Inderfurth, the US Assistant Secretary of State, told Pakistani leaders that the US administration was particularly concerned about the links between the ISI and HuM, the militant Kashmir liberation group. Although US officials stopped short of reading the riot act, the warning was clear. The military government was told that Pakistan's failure to curb Islamic militants might lead to stern action by the USA, including stoppage of all financial lending from the World Bank and the IMF.¹⁸

Musharraf rejected US allegations that the Islamic organizations fighting in Kashmir were terrorists, or working under the patronage of the ISI. He insisted that a differentiation should be made between terrorists and freedom fighters. The differences between Islamabad and Washington further increased, after Karl Inderfurth repeated the US demand for the banning of HuM at a press conference in Islamabad.

Musharraf managed to deflect these demands without overtly rejecting them. He was at this stage concerned above all else with consolidating his power base domestically. This was made abundantly clear in July 2001 when he shed his ambiguous title of Chief Executive and assumed the Presidency. Casting off his military uniform, he donned a black sherwani as he took the oath of his new office amidst much pomp and show at Islamabad's grand, white marble presidential palace. The atmosphere in the Darbar hall was visibly sullen. The cabinet ministers and senior government officials present at the ceremony had only learned of Musharraf's imminent oath-taking through the morning newspapers. Ambassadors from the USA and European countries were conspicuous by their absence.¹⁹ It was almost a second coup. Musharraf had appointed himself the country's President replacing Rafiq Tarrar, the last vestige of the ousted elected government. The fate of the Parliament, which had remained under suspension for almost two years, was also sealed through an administrative order dissolving it.

The decision to assume the role of President was kept secret even from the corps commanders and the cabinet until the day before his swearing-in. Only three generals, the ISI chief, Lt.-General Mahmood Ahmed, Chief of General Staff, Lt.-General Mohammed Yousuf and his Chief of Army Staff, Lt.-General Ghulam Ahmed, were in the loop. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Abdul Sattar, was visibly embarrassed

when he heard about the development back home as he came out of a meeting with US Secretary of State, Colin Powell, in Washington.²⁰

Musharraf's assumption of the presidency provoked strong condemnation from the United States and other western countries, who believed the move would lead Pakistan further away from democracy. The development came just as the Bush administration was sending signals indicating its desire to improve relations with Pakistan and lift some of the sanctions placed on it following the nuclear tests. 'That process may be stalled at least for the time being,' commented a senior official. The Commonwealth, which had suspended Pakistan's membership after the coup, also warned of a tougher stance.

But as things turned out, the crisis unleashed by the events of 11 September provided Musharraf with an opportunity to end Pakistan's and his own isolation. The 'you're either with us or you're against us' mentality of the Bush administration gave him little choice but to take it. He did so with gusto. By joining the US 'war on terror', Pakistan once again took centre-stage in the international limelight, much as it had after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Formerly ostracized as a military dictator, Musharraf became a valued friend to the West. He promised to steer Pakistan away from its long and troubled drift towards Islamic fundamentalism and extremism.

Policy was one thing, reality quite another. The forces ranged against Musharraf were not only non-state actors, but also their allies in the powerful military establishment. Musharraf, the ultimate operator, had, as he discovered on that day in December 2003, very limited space in which to manoeuvre.