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Musharraf Cometh?

Last Wednesday, former Pakistani President and military leader Pervez Musharraf announced he intends to return home as head of a new political party called the All Pakistan Muslim League. Sources close to Musharraf say he is reportedly eyeing the presidency and prime ministership. Amid ongoing political unrest and economic uncertainty under the leadership of President Asif Ali Zardari, U.S. leaders may hope that Musharraf can bring some semblance of stability to the country given recent developments, but his return could be something of a mixed blessing.

On Friday, Imran Farooq, a founding leader of MQM (Muttahida Quami Movement), the fourth-largest political party in Pakistan, was stabbed to death in London. Since 2009, more than 200 MQM workers and supporters have been the victims of targeted killings. Because MQM dominates the Muhajir urban centers of Sindh, including Karachi--Pakistan's largest city of more than 16 million--each targeted killing unleashes waves of violence that further contributes to the city's deteriorating law and order situation. Indeed, when news of Farooq's death reached Karachi, rioters torched vehicles and scores of people were killed and injured.

These targeted killings reflect a multi-dimensional problem. Part of it is tit-for-tat gang warfare between Muhajir-dominant MQM and Pashtun-dominant ANP (Awami National Party). [Note: When I was in Karachi a couple years back, I was warned to steer clear of certain areas that were MQM "turf."] It is important to note, however, that MQM has made it a point not to conflate violence with Pashtuns; in fact, ANP continues to make it a point of joining the two together in order to condemn MQM for highlighting the increasing number of Taliban seeking refuge in Pashtun areas of Karachi. Another part of this ongoing violence is competition over new development in the city, the ANP's resistance to the government's redress of illegal land encroachment, and the collusion of political parties with criminal networks and religious extremists. MQM has been quite vocal about what they called the increased "Talibanisation" of Karachi, a concern that foreign diplomats have continually ignored.

The tragedy is that Musharraf was driven from power to bring democratic governance back to Pakistan. But despite his back-room dealings that brought an incompetent Zardari to power, and a crackdown on the judiciary that led to the former military leader's ignominious resignation, Pakistanis stuck in desperate straights might welcome Musharraf back with open arms. Perhaps if he returns to the political game, the West will pay more attention to events unfolding in Pakistan.

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