

OPINION

For Zia, Victor Under Siege, Three Tough Choices Loom

By Hans Binnendijk

LONDON — President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq is a besieged victor. With Soviet troops now withdrawing from Afghanistan, the Pakistani leader faces three major problems — domestic elections, the Afghan transition and an Indian military build-up — that could determine Pakistan's future. He can play a trump card in each case, but doing so entails great risks.

The Soviet withdrawal represents a personal victory for General Zia and a national success for Pakistan. Pakistan braved attacks by Soviet aircraft and Afghan terrorists to serve as a conduit for Western weapons to the *mujahidin*. It also provided a home, employment and relative freedom of movement for more than three million refugees of the war. The impending victory has bolstered General Zia's spirit of invincibility and his belief that Islam has defeated a superpower.

Yet differences over the April 14 Afghanistan-Pakistan nonintervention agreement, and over the investigation of the explosion of the mujahidins' munition dump in Peshawar, contributed to General Zia's decision May 29 abruptly to fire his civilian prime minister, Mohammed Khan Junejo, and to dissolve Parliament. The constitution requires that General Zia call elections within 90 days of Parliament's dissolution.

Many observers believe that General Zia has made his greatest domestic policy blunder in 11 years, especially since the nation's Supreme Court later ruled that he could not force candidates to run as individuals without party backing (a tactic that contributed to the victory of Zia allies during the last election). By discrediting Mr. Junejo and much of the Pakistan Moslem League, General Zia started a cascade of support for the opposition Pakistan People's Party led by Benazir Bhutto.

General Zia nonetheless insisted in a recent discussion that he fully intends to hold elections as required by the constitution. The trump card he holds in doing so is his right to name a new prime minister regardless of who appears to win the election. He could, his advisers say, name a relatively

moderate member of the People's Party as prime minister, despite Mrs. Bhutto's position as party leader. But in doing so, he risks a possible vote of no confidence from the newly elected Parliament.

The stakes are also high for Pakistan as the seven mujahidin factions jockey for position before the coming battle for Kabul. Prewar Afghanistan had better relations with India than with Pakistan because of a border dispute. General Zia hopes to influence the outcome of the Afghan power struggle and to reverse Pakistani-Afghan relations by playing a second trump card: support for the fundamentalist leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

But Mr. Hekmatyar has a reputation as a violent and unsavory character who is more interested now in defeating his mujahidin rivals than in pushing out the Soviets. By choosing sides, General Zia risks repeating the Soviet mistake of embroiling himself directly in Afghan politics. He also risks alienating Western supporters.

Pakistan's third major problem is with India: its dramatic military build-up, the continued border tensions near the Siachen glacier, and India's suspicion that Pakistan is aiding Sikh extremists.

General Zia recently played down the strategic importance of the glacier and belittled the idea that Pakistan could gain from Sikh extremism. But he is critical of India's regional aspirations in general and the increasing military imbalance in particular.

General Zia's trump card for responding to India's military dominance is the development of nuclear weapons, an equalizer that he believes can provide deterrence in South Asia just as it has in Europe. But others cite the analogy of the Iran-Iraq war, where the mere existence of chemical weapons has not deterred their use as it did in Europe during World War II.

So far, General Zia has kept this card close to his vest, enjoying the virtues of nuclear ambiguity. Legislation in the United States would end aid to Pakistan if it produced a nuclear weapon. But Pakistan is believed to be within a "turn of a screw" of producing nuclear devices, which



Drawing by SZLAKMANN.

in turn affects India's strategic calculations.

Pakistan may not be able to enjoy this ambiguity for long, especially if it continues to inch toward development of a nuclear weapon. Nonproliferation advocates in the United States have been restrained by Pakistan's crucial role in the Afghan war, but that restraint may soon be gone. The issue could come to a head in the U.S. Congress early next year if the new president decides to proceed with the sale of airborne early warning aircraft to Pakistan. Such a sale would be complicated by the desire of many in the United States to strengthen relations with India. U.S.-Pakistani relations could suffer.

General Zia faces difficult choices. He must seek to maintain domestic and regional security without abandoning democracy, entering a quagmire in Afghanistan, or alienating his Western allies. He will have to play his cards carefully.

The writer, director of studies at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, recently returned from a trip to Pakistan. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.