

Los Angeles Times

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From the Los Angeles Times

## Musharraf foe hopes youths rise up

A rumble of dissent is heard at Pakistan's colleges. Imran Khan, who plans a protest rally, wants to seize on that discontent.

By Henry Chu

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LAHORE, Pakistan — Imran Khan -- cricket legend, philanthropist, fugitive -- is sprawled on the sofa, looking relaxed and confident for a man on the run. Animation seizes his athletic frame when he addresses a favorite topic: the youth of Pakistan.

"The young have one thing, which is passion and idealism. They look at things in black and white, good and bad," he said. "They're not cynical at that stage. They haven't taken their beatings in life. They're not concerned about their mortgages."

But those beatings could happen sooner rather than later if Khan's plans come to pass.

In hiding from the police, whom he escaped by jumping over a wall at his home, Khan is aiming to stage a rally here this week that he hopes will draw hordes of young people to protest the state of emergency declared Nov. 3 by President Pervez Musharraf. Thousands of outspoken critics of Musharraf were locked up in the security sweep that failed to catch Khan.

Stirrings of unrest already have begun bubbling up at colleges and universities across the country, from Islamabad to Peshawar to Karachi. Now trying to organize online petitions and on-campus protests, a generation of Pakistanis more used to Pepsi than to politics is showing tentative signs of awakening and could open a new battlefield for Musharraf's military regime.

Last week, hundreds of students at the prestigious Lahore University of Management Sciences, or LUMS, thronged a demonstration against emergency rule. They jeered at Musharraf and waved placards in support of independent judges he has sacked.

For senior Zahra Sabri, the rally gave vent to the despairing anger some of her peers feel at the lack of opportunity and the morass of corruption and repression in which their country seems to be mired.

"This time the students really came out -- they're really fed up. All their lives, they haven't seen any good times in Pakistan," said Sabri, 23. "We were born in the early '80s, and since then, I don't think we've had one moment of hopefulness."

But the demonstrators last week were blocked from taking their protest into the streets by police, who were lined up outside the university gate, batons at the ready -- a scene repeated at other schools around Lahore, Pakistan's second-largest city. At a local science and engineering university, three students were reportedly arrested after scuffling with authorities.

What haunts the government is the memory of the starring role students have played in toppling leaders at key moments over the last 40 years.

In 1968, students were at the forefront of resistance against the despotic, corrupt regime of President Ayub Khan, one in the long line of generals to rule this country. Despite a repressive security apparatus at his disposal, Khan was forced to step down a year later.

Young people also turned out en masse against Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the father of Benazir Bhutto, Musharraf's biggest rival and herself a former premier. The elder Bhutto was ousted from power by the army in 1977, then hanged in 1979.

With those examples in mind, later Pakistani governments launched a campaign to de-politicize college campuses, banning political activity and embarguing student unions.

At the same time, many parents of today's students are disillusioned veterans of the old movements, soured on politics and intent on steering their children clear of activism.

The result, critics lament, is a student body that largely spends its time comparing designer clothes and electronic gadgets when not in the library studying.

"We aren't given a chance to know what's happening politically or out in the wider society," said Adil Shahzad, a 25-year-old graduate student at the University of the Punjab. "Because of this apathy, we don't even help somebody dying in the road. This is the kind of indifference that's being instilled in us."

Many observers were therefore surprised, and in some cases exhilarated, by the inchoate political rumblings beginning to take form on various campuses, particularly LUMS. Students at the private institution hail from some of Pakistan's most illustrious and well-to-do families.

"The students of these elite institutions were least expected to speak up," an editorial in the Dawn newspaper said Sunday. "Now that they have done so, catching the analysts and media on the wrong foot, they show how widespread the anger against Musharraf is."

It is an anger that Khan, the cricketer-turned-politician, is eager to harness. "This is a whole force that's untapped," he said.

Khan, 54, has been on the run since the night the state of emergency was declared, when the police came knocking. He has slept in a different bed every night. During an interview with foreign journalists at a safe house, the curtains were drawn to keep out prying eyes.

He is revered as one of his sport's all-time greats and admired for his charitable work, especially a hospital he set up for poor cancer patients. He drummed up the money for that by motivating young people to go out and become fundraisers for him, as "mini-Imrans," he said.

Now Khan hopes they'll answer his appeal to join him in the streets at the rally he is planning, in spite of the threat of arrest for both them and him.

"I want to get the students out," he said. "If you have to [make] sacrifices, this is the time. What you cannot do is sit on the fence anymore."

But practicalities intrude. At LUMS, final exams are scheduled this week. New to such dilemmas, some students are also agonizing over whether it's worth acting on principle if it means jeopardizing their future.

Sabri, the LUMS senior, is on the verge of graduating and has won a Fulbright scholarship to the United States. "Our parents say, 'You have this chance that people would die for. . . . Why are you messing it up now? If you go to jail, if you have a record, would the United States give you a visa?' " she said.

Many of her peers continue to remain aloof from politics. But Sabri thinks they can be coaxed out of their shells by two different scenarios: If there's an alternative to the uninspiring choice of national leaders out there now, or to the corrupted spoils system that politics has become; or, on the other hand, if there are no alternatives at all to a bleak, depressing future.

"If they see an avenue open, something to get excited about, they'll come out then," Sabri said. "Or they'll come out when they're so desperate that there's no other option."

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