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## The General and the Housewife

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ISLAMABAD, Pakistan

Gen. Pervez Musharraf is facing angry street demonstrations around the country in the most serious crisis of his presidency — and that’s partly because he picked a fight with a middle-class housewife who is proving tougher and shrewder than he is.

This drama is playing out in extraordinary scenes on Pakistani streets: crowds of roly-poly lawyers in dark suits braving clouds of tear gas to demand that Mr. Musharraf resign — or even be tried for treason. It’s impossible to know whether the protests will lead to a democratic revolution that topples Mr. Musharraf, to a military crackdown, or to a political deal that causes the protests to fizzle.

And behind it all is the saga of the general and the housewife.

“The nation is ready to rise up; there is a revolution behind me,” says Amina Masood Janjua, a mother of three who has emerged as a nemesis of General Musharraf. Mrs. Janjua says she was a “very timid person,” uninvolved in politics and content to be “queen of my house.” But then two years ago, her husband disappeared, presumably kidnapped by government security agents.

The government has regularly “disappeared” people it doesn’t like, apparently keeping them in secret detention centers to be tortured and interrogated for months or years. Human rights groups count at least 400 such disappearances since 2002, when Mr. Musharraf began using the war on terror as cover to eliminate troublesome nationalists, religious activists and human rights organizers.

Mrs. Janjua's husband, Masood Janjua, may have been picked up because of ties to a Muslim organization, but there is no indication he had broken any law. Mrs. Janjua says her family received a phone call from Mr. Musharraf's military secretary last year promising that her husband would be freed soon. But nothing happened, and officially the government knows nothing of his whereabouts.

Terrified that her husband was being tortured, Mrs. Janjua began organizing other family members of the disappeared. They held a public demonstration — but the police attacked the group and beat and publicly stripped Mrs. Janjua's 17-year-old son. As the police dragged him off, Mrs. Janjua's 11-year-old daughter screamed: "You've taken my father; don't take my brother!" He was freed that evening. The aim of the assault presumably was to warn Mrs. Janjua to be quiet — just as relatives of other missing people have been warned that their loved ones will be harmed if they protest or speak to the press.

One of the missing is Safdar Sarki, a Pakistani-American doctor and American citizen seized a year ago while campaigning for the rights of people in Sindh Province.

"I was crying today; I was thinking of him," his wife, Rukhsana, said by phone from California. Her voice breaking, she promised that if Pakistan would just release her husband, she would make him stop fighting for human rights. She added: "My sons are asking every day, 'Where is Papa? Where is Papa? ...'"

Likewise: Where is the U.S.? The Bush administration has stuck more solidly with Mr. Musharraf ("a solid friend" is the current State Department formulation) than with its principles. President Bush needs to make clear that the U.S. sides with Pakistan's democratic future, not its autocratic past.

That future is being shaped by Mrs. Janjua, who sued the government over the disappearances. To everyone's astonishment, the Pakistani Supreme Court took up the case and ordered the government to account for those who are missing.

Perhaps partly as a result — and also to prevent the Supreme Court from complicating his election-fixing plans — Mr. Musharraf this month suspended the chief justice of the Supreme Court. That's what has set off nationwide outrage and protests.

Ordinary Pakistanis seem increasingly fed up with the president's lies and thuggery. Mr. Musharraf's contributions to Pakistan are enormous — he rescued Pakistan's economy, fostered 7 percent growth rates, promoted education and nurtured an expanding middle class. But those same accomplishments are now raising aspirations for genuine democracy rather than the sham he offers.

The risk is that a replacement would be worse: Pakistan has been one of the world's worst-ruled nations over the last 50 years, and Mr. Musharraf is better than his predecessors. But if the Pakistani public demands better government, that is ultimately a bullish sign for Pakistan and a useful warning to other autocrats.

And maybe the movement will bring Mrs. Janjua and Mrs. Sarki their husbands home again.