

UNDERMINING DEMOCRACY

21st Century Authoritarians

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PAKISTAN

SEMI-AUTHORITARIAN, SEMI-FAILED STATE

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The dream of a friendly regime in Kabul that would provide Pakistan with strategic depth and deny India leverage on its western flank is alive and well. The unintended consequence of this policy of preserving the Afghan Taliban as a strategic asset has been blowback in the shape of the Pakistani Taliban, who do not appear to be under the control of their erstwhile mentors in the Pakistani military establishment.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has been in a permanent state of crisis since it was carved out of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. Of the range of factors responsible for this state of affairs, the most important is the failure to establish a democratic system of governance. For more than half of Pakistan's 62-year existence, the military has dominated politics and national life, stifling the development of credible democratic institutions. Even during the interregnums that have punctuated direct military rule, when civilian governments have been in power, the military has cast a long shadow over politics and the national agenda.

Yet this overweening military presence has always faced resistance from the democratic forces in society, and the political agenda still revolves around representative government. The struggle between the military's desire to dictate the country's course and the people's aspirations for self-rule is by no means resolved, despite the elections of February 18, 2008—one of the few relatively clean polls in the country's history—which brought the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to power following the assassination of its leader, Benazir Bhutto.

Benazir's widower, Asif Ali Zardari, emerged as Pakistan's most powerful politician in the wake of her death. Today he not only dominates decision-making within the PPP (and arguably wields overwhelming influence in the ruling coalition), he has also been elected to succeed General Pervez Musharraf as president.

The PPP-led government faced formidable challenges upon assuming office. Of these, four in particular stood out as critical: the restoration of the judiciary, which had been emasculated by Musharraf during the state of emergency imposed on November 3, 2007; the

removal of Musharraf from the presidency; the reinvigoration of the foundering national economy; and the management of the war against jihadi extremism. Any or all of these had the potential to destabilize the new government, and its efforts to cope with them to date have produced mixed results at best. Musharraf has gone, but he remains safe from prosecution, no doubt as part of the deal that led to his peaceful resignation. The deposed judges of the senior judiciary have been reinstated, but only reluctantly and at the 11th hour, when the popular mobilization associated with the lawyers' protest movement threatened the government's grip on power. Zardari was also nudged into action on the judges by the military, and by both Britain and the United States. Meanwhile, the government's other two challenges have not been addressed.

The fate of the PPP-led government, and of the nascent democratic order, will ultimately be decided by their ability to halt the country's economic meltdown and the insurgency that has exacerbated it. If these twin problems are tackled, Pakistan may yet wriggle free of its broader morass of difficulties. If they go unchecked, however, the country could come to resemble the failed state that many analysts have predicted. Given Pakistan's strategic importance, its possession of nuclear weapons, and its role as a base for both domestic and transnational militant groups, the stakes of the crisis are immense and growing.

DOMESTIC CONDITIONS

The roots of Pakistan's democracy deficit can be traced to the very foundation of the state. After the long struggle by a united India for independence from British colonialism, the lingering Hindu-Muslim divide was finally and bloodily resolved by Partition. The great two-way migration of humanity that ensued was accompanied by devastating communal massacres and bloodshed. Some one million people were killed in all. This formed the basis for the bitter, enduring enmity between the new states of Pakistan and India.

For nine years after Pakistan's creation, the Constituent Assembly was unable to agree on a constitution. The biggest stumbling block was the refusal of the powerful political, bureaucratic, and military elite of the province of Punjab to accept the principle of one man, one vote. Since the eastern wing of the country, separated from the western portion by a thousand miles of hostile Indian territory, held a majority of the population, the Punjabi oligarchy feared that acceptance of this fundamental democratic principle would permanently shift power to the Bengalis of East Pakistan. That concern was at the heart of the crisis of 1971, during which East Pakistan, with the help of Indian military intervention, broke away to form what is now Bangladesh.

The Pakistan that remained in the west also suffered from deep flaws in its federal structure. Despite the 1973 constitution's lip service to the principle of provincial

autonomy, the three smaller provinces of Sindh, Balochistan, and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) continue to voice serious complaints about the dominance of Punjab in state institutions. The province's power stems not just from the weight of its population, which accounted for 56 percent of the total in the last census in 1998, but also from the disproportionate recruitment of military, bureaucratic, and police personnel from Punjab. The operation of these largely Punjabi-staffed state institutions in the smaller provinces has engendered cries of "internal colonialism" and separatist sentiments. Balochistan is now in the throes of the fifth round of military suppression and local resistance since the country's independence. Subnationalist ambitions in Sindh and NWFP have declined over the years. In Sindh this is due to the increased weight of its chief political parties, the largely rural-based PPP and the more urban Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM). Such sentiment in NWFP has been eclipsed by the decades of wars in neighboring Afghanistan. Nevertheless, resentments at perceived deprivation of political, economic, and cultural rights simmer just below the surface in all three of the smaller provinces. Failure to resolve this long-standing conundrum could threaten the country's democratic development and ultimately the viability of the Pakistani state.

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The rivalry with India and the instability of Pakistan's internal structure have been exploited to justify the military's outsized role in the country. Even during the brief periods of civilian government, the military has more often than not called the shots. Unfortunately, it is woefully ill-equipped to address Pakistan's fundamental problems. The last military regime, led by General Musharraf, left a country divided, economically bereft, and threatened by the emergence of jihadi extremist groups aligned with the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Indeed, the military's irresponsible sacrifices and mismanagement with respect to the Taliban, all in the blinkered pursuit of a hidebound national security principle, may provide the clearest illustration of the dangers of military rule.

In 2004, for the first time in Pakistan's history, the military blundered into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), a rugged border region between Pakistan and Afghanistan. It is inhabited by fiercely independent tribes that have traditionally been permitted to rule themselves with a minimum of central government oversight. The army entered the FATA to

curtail the mounting activities of extremist groups, but its campaigns have been consistently undermined by a contradictory desire within the military and intelligence establishments to create “strategic depth” in the standoff with India. They hoped to accomplish this by exporting Islamist militancy and sponsoring a pliant Islamist regime in Afghanistan that could prevent Indian encirclement and provide Pakistan’s security planners with a hefty geographical backstop.

That approach has become increasingly untenable since September 11, 2001, and the subsequent overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. The FATA had served as the main staging post for guerrillas fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, and for the Taliban as they sought to control the country in the years after the Soviet withdrawal. The region took on this role again after 2001, as the ousted Taliban and their allies in Al-Qaeda battled U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan. The situation was complicated further by the emergence of a native Pakistani Taliban movement, now united under the banner of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). This group apparently owes its allegiance to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who is widely believed to be based near Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province. The Pakistani Taliban’s formation is directly tied to the metamorphosis of local tribal facilitators of the Afghan fighters into warlords in their own right. Their long-standing role as hosts of the Afghan forces has been reinforced by the enormous funds and powerful weapons they have received from their Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda guests.

Although Musharraf agreed to join U.S.-led antiterrorism efforts after September 11, providing bases and logistical support to the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, he and his military advisers apparently clung to the old strategic vision. The calculation appears to have been that Pakistan could continue to extract financial and military aid from the United States in return for cracking down on Al-Qaeda (95 percent of the militants sent to Guantanamo Bay were suspected members of Al-Qaeda), while preserving the Afghan Taliban as strategic assets, in anticipation of the day when the United States would tire of the Afghan war. At that point the Pakistani military establishment could return to “business as usual” in Afghanistan through the largely intact Afghan Taliban. Thus the dream of strategic depth provided by a friendly regime in Kabul that would deny India leverage on Pakistan’s western flank remains alive and well. The unintended consequence of this policy has been blowback in the shape of the Pakistani Taliban, who do not appear, suspicions to the contrary notwithstanding, to be under the control of their erstwhile mentors in the Pakistani military establishment.

The government’s performance in these matters has pleased no one, with some objecting to the alliance with the United States and others decrying the state’s seeming retreat before the advancing Taliban insurgency. However, the military’s long dominance of the country’s

domestic affairs has left an atrophied civilian establishment that has been hard pressed to provide fresh leadership.

The political class in Pakistan is still dominated by the owners of large landed estates, who are far from consistent democrats. Their participation in the electoral process is essentially aimed at preserving their traditional power of patronage over a largely poor and illiterate rural populace. All efforts at land reform based on agricultural efficiency and social justice have fallen foul of this “feudal” class, who have been able to manipulate the system to their advantage and ensure their continued dominance of political, economic, and social life in the countryside.

The industrial and business sector in Pakistan owes its emergence and prosperity to state largesse. Such a “hothouse” entrepreneurial class lacks the political vision and economic independence to support democracy, the optimal political infrastructure for the growth of private commerce. There is no evidence that any significant part of this class has ever resisted military intervention or dominance of the political agenda. They are clearly wedded to an authoritarian dispensation, so long as their links to the state are intact and their short-term profits are secure.

The class of mullahs has its own agenda: to ensure that there is no deviation from what has incrementally become the leitmotif of Pakistan: an Islamic state that is theoretically founded on the principles enunciated in the Koran and the Sunnah. Starting from General Zia ul-Haq’s period in power (1977–88), the decade of the 1980s saw a mushroom growth of madrassas (religious schools or seminaries) funded largely by Saudi donations. When Pakistan was founded in 1947, there were only 189 madrassas in the country, divided between various competing schools of Islamic jurisprudence. By 2002, however, there were between 10,000 and 13,000 unregistered madrassas with 1.7 to 1.9 million students. In 2008, one estimate put the number of madrassas at over 40,000. This bumper crop of religious schools with a particular ideological bent produced generations of jihadi extremists among the millions of Afghan refugees on Pakistani soil (from whom the Taliban eventually emerged), but also among Pakistani youth who undertook such training. Today’s suicide bombers, and arguably the flow of fresh recruits who replace them, owe their origins to these seminaries. In addition to traditional Islamic teaching, the madrassa curriculums in question tend to inculcate a rejection of anything to do with “the West,” and a narrow interpretation of their school of jurisprudence that tends to strengthen (violent) religious sectarianism.

Given these illiberal forces within the ruling classes, the holding of elections and the lip service to democracy in Pakistan’s political discourse appear insufficient to nudge the country toward a state built on genuine democratic principles. A transformation of that kind would require an unprecedented popular mobilization to shake off the benighted defenders of the status quo.

The military has apparently recognized the need to improve its manipulation of popular opinion in a bid to forestall such a development. Under Musharraf, it sought to actively “manage” the political process and allowed an explosive growth in print and electronic media, having noted the failure of Pakistan’s state-run television to make the country’s case during the Kargil War of 1999, particularly when faced with competition from the Indian and international media. This experiment in political and media management ended in ignominy after Musharraf made the mistake of trying to eviscerate the judiciary, a naked departure from the democratic discourse that antagonized a significant segment of the professional class and galvanized existing opposition groups. The elected government that succeeded Musharraf sought to bolster Parliament as the supreme source of power and legitimacy, but it is far from certain that Pakistan will be able to break free of the antidemocratic inertia that permeates large parts of the polity and even the media.

The vibrant private media outlets that have emerged in recent years continue to suffer from a dearth of experienced and knowledgeable practitioners, partly due to the failing state-run education system. These outlets’ rough professional edges, inadequate knowledge, and lack of familiarity with the ethics of best media practice have been all too clearly on display. The infant media sector may grow into a responsible entity over time, and pressure from readers and viewers could contribute to such a healthy development. Already there are signs of weariness and even despair at some of the media’s irresponsible excesses. But the accountability of the new outlets must be left to their audiences and, hopefully, ethical self-regulation mechanisms. While ideal in any country, this arrangement is doubly important in Pakistan, which has an unfortunate history of state intervention to curb media freedoms. Without an unfettered and responsible media sector, democratic development will be seriously hobbled.

Even as it confronts these historical, structural, and social obstacles, Pakistan will also be shaped by its interactions—both positive and negative—with the world beyond its borders. Its strategic position, unique security challenges, and elusive democratic potential will no doubt attract close international attention for some time to come.

INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCE

Pakistan is a country of enormous geopolitical importance. The second largest Muslim country in the world by population, it has always confronted two insecure borders: in the west with Afghanistan, which does not recognize the Durand line marking their mutual frontier, and in the east with India, which controls much of the disputed region of Kashmir. India is seen by Pakistan’s military as the preeminent threat, although this is not necessarily the

case among average Pakistanis, who generally seek normal relations and greater economic engagement with India. Pakistan's army has also sought to influence governments and events in Afghanistan since the 1980s, and the many years of warfare in that country have stymied Pakistan's efforts to create trade routes to Central Asia. Meanwhile, Pakistan has become increasingly dependent on the Middle East for jobs, remittances, and government loans.

An eventual restoration of the Afghan Taliban regime, or a renewed Afghan civil war following a foreign troop pullout, would embolden the triumphant Pakistani Taliban to effectively overrun the state. There would clearly be little room for democracy in such an environment.

A section of the liberal intelligentsia in Pakistan believes that Pakistani society has demonstrated over time its basic inability to move the country onto a democratic path. These frustrated reformists therefore pin their hopes on international pressure, enhanced by Pakistan's economic and strategic dependence on powerful friends like the United States, to push the state and society along a course of incremental change.

The problem with such hopes is that no state or society in history has been transformed along democratic lines through foreign influence alone, no matter how benign. Recent failures in Afghanistan and Iraq only serve to reinforce this lesson. Without the political will and vision of a significant section of the citizenry and political class to carry out far-reaching reforms, no credible democratic order is likely to see the light of day in Pakistan in the foreseeable future. The current elected civilian government largely represents the traditional political class, which has predictably returned to its habits of rent-seeking, patronage, and a singular lack of serious debate. The October 2008 in-camera security briefing to a joint session of Parliament provided jarring evidence of the legislators' lack of deep consideration of what is arguably the greatest threat to the state in Pakistan's short and violent history.

These weaknesses and antidemocratic tendencies within the political establishment leave the door open to military influence, the real obstacle to democratic progress. Although the new army chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, has ostensibly distanced the army from politics, Pakistan's own history and similar cases in the developing world suggest that such retreats tend to be tactical rather than strategic. The essentially unreformed military retains the wherewithal to reenter the political fray as the nation's self-anointed savior once its public image recovers from the damaging association with Musharraf.

While foreign powers cannot control Pakistan's democratic development by standing in for the moribund political class and staring down the military, they do not have the option of allowing the country to succumb to an economic meltdown and a jihadi insurgency, not the least because a nuclear arsenal is at risk. Even under current conditions, there are suspicions that confessed nuclear proliferator A. Q. Khan—recently freed from house arrest by the courts—and his international technology-trading network could resume their clandestine activities.

U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan have consequently watched with great interest as Pakistan struggles to cope with the Taliban insurgency. Until recently they had strong misgivings about attempts by the Pakistani authorities to reach negotiated political settlements with the Pakistani Taliban. However, given the growing sense that the existing military strategy in Afghanistan has failed, the United States and NATO are warming to the idea of negotiations with “moderate” elements of the Afghan Taliban. Such talks could conceivably lead to a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul, followed by a hasty withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces. Pakistanis, perhaps with the exception of the military, cannot view this possibility with sanguinity. An eventual restoration of the Afghan Taliban regime, or a renewed Afghan civil war following a foreign troop pullout, would embolden the triumphant Pakistani Taliban to effectively overrun the state. There would clearly be little room for democracy in such an environment.

If Pakistan's international friends and supporters are to prevent these sorts of outcomes, they must play their role in encouraging the evolution of democratic institutions. The country's elected representatives arguably need help to comprehend the advantages of pulling their weight in the transition to a genuinely democratic order. Only a fully engaged civilian leadership, supported and corrected by a well-informed electorate, can wrest control of Pakistan's domestic governance and policymaking away from the military and its antidemocratic fellow-travelers.

FINDINGS

- Pakistan presents a complex set of challenges at the national and international levels, including the economic meltdown facing the country and the menace of jihadi extremism. These two problems have now become inextricably linked, as the growing insurgency is directly affecting the health of the economy.
- The emergence of vibrant private media, along with a nascent civil society, is one of the most important positive developments in Pakistan in recent years. Nevertheless, the media sector faces considerable obstacles related to the cultivation of a more mature

class of media professionals, and the mounting economic crisis will place added pressure on the industry. Moreover, illiberal voices, including extremists in the Swat region, are threatening to smother open discussion and thwart the progress of democratic development.

- The contradictory aims of the military and intelligence establishment with respect to the Taliban and related groups appear to be dragging the country toward disaster. This dogged adherence to a failed security policy, unchecked by elected civilian leaders, may be the clearest illustration of the dangers of military rule.
- The military's long dominance of the country's domestic affairs has left an atrophied civilian establishment that has been hard pressed to provide fresh leadership. Military rule has not been the solution to Pakistan's challenges. Efforts to deepen and improve the quality of Pakistan's democracy are therefore all the more urgent.