

Prospects for Pakistan

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The recent elections in Pakistan produced some high profile casualties. President Musharraf's most senior allies in parliament, including some of the country's most experienced politicians, lost their seats. Their defeats reflected the President's declining popularity on account of fatigue (he has been in power nearly a decade); his battle with the senior judiciary; his failure to bring the corrupt to justice and last but by no means least, the almost universal perception in Pakistan that he is fighting an unjust and ill conceived war in the tribal belt, on behalf of a foreign power (the United States) and against his own citizens. However, the election results were not only a referendum on President Musharraf. There were other political trends at play such as the sympathy vote for the late Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People' Party and the rejection of the religious parties as punishment for their incompetent and corrupt provincial administrations in Balochistan and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) over the last five years.

But whatever the explanation of the result, the question now is what coalition will emerge. The largest party in parliament, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) faces two options. It can either join forces with Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) or try to create an alliance with a whole array of smaller parties and independents. If it chooses the PML-N as its partner (and the early indications are that both parties want to achieve an agreement), the PPP will have to press Mr Sharif's demand for the restoration of the judges sacked by Musharraf last autumn: since Musharraf could presumably not accept such an outcome, the demand for restoration is tantamount to a demand for his resignation. Asif Zardari, the new leader of the PPP, is being urged by the US to avoid creating a situation in which Musharraf is forced out – although Washington may change its position if the reinvigorated lawyers' movement (demanding restoration) continues to grow in strength.

If Musharraf does manage to hang on, another issue will emerge: can he work with politicians legitimised by a popular mandate? He is used to being the only power in the land. Although he has said that he understands he is now entering a different period, the precedents are far from encouraging. During periods of non military rule in the past, the three most powerful office holders; the President, the Prime Minister and the Chief of Army Staff have been unable to work together. It is quite possible that, within a year or two, President Musharraf would use his power to dismiss whoever is Prime Minister in the hope of finding a more pliant one. Continued political instability might eventually result in the army chief asking President Musharraf to step down (in which case he probably would).

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Mediating internal politics

Prior to the elections the US has made some – sometimes rather ill-advised – attempts to influence developments in Pakistan. One of the most notable initiatives was to persuade General Musharraf to drop all the corruption cases against Benazir Bhutto so that she could end her period of self-imposed exile, return to Pakistan and participate in the elections. The US believed that if Musharraf and Bhutto could work together it would give the regime greater legitimacy; enable the authorities to prosecute the War on Terror with more vigour and, finally, ease a transition to democracy. The policy was derailed by Benazir Bhutto's assassination. But by that time it was already unravelling. It became utterly apparent that Bhutto and Musharraf had never had enough mutual trust to work together. The whole episode illustrated the dangers of becoming too closely involved in internal Pakistani politics.

It was a lesson also learnt recently by Saudi Arabia. Shortly after General Musharraf's 1999 military coup Saudi Arabia offered sanctuary to Nawaz Sharif who had been imprisoned on hijacking charges. Under the terms of the agreement between Riyadh and Islamabad, Sharif was meant to stay in Saudi Arabia and make no political statements. Sharif managed to gradually relax those restrictions to the point that he moved to London where he was making almost daily political statements. The crisis for the Saudis came late last year when Sharif flew to Pakistan saying he wanted to participate in the elections. The Saudis, who did not want to abandon Musharraf, found themselves having to make uncharacteristically public statements pointing out that Sharif had broken the terms of the deal and should go back to Saudi Arabia. Matters then got worse for the Saudis. When Sharif's main rival Benazir Bhutto did manage to return to Pakistan, Riyadh stood accused of affecting the outcome of the election by effectively blocking Sharif's participation. Saudi patience snapped and they told Musharraf that Sharif would have to be allowed back. After such a bruising experience it is safe to assume that Saudi Arabia will be cautious about such involvement in Pakistani party politics for some time.

Growing militancy

The recent focus on the elections should not obscure the severity of the security threats facing Pakistan. While the politicians manoeuvre for position in Islamabad, Islamic militancy is becoming an ever more powerful force. During 2007 Islamists showed their strength in both the tribal areas and Swat. They also mounted an intense suicide bombing campaign throughout Pakistan. In early 2008 they broadened their campaign to the whole of the North West Frontier Province. Most of the fighting in the tribal areas has been in North and South Waziristan although it is now spreading to other tribal areas and the whole of NWFP. The outgoing Interior Minister, Aftab Sherpao, has said that there is now a risk of the whole of NWFP becoming 'talibanised'. Senior retired Pakistani Generals are now openly discussing the capacity (or lack of it) of the army to hold onto NWFP and its capital Peshawar. Most think the army will prevail but they are increasingly willing to acknowledge that they have a big battle on their hands.

First deployed under strong US pressure in 2004, there are now 80,000 Pakistani troops in Waziristan. In August 2007 the army was humiliated when Waziri militants captured over 200 soldiers and held them hostage for over two months. Despite being faced with such an unprecedented challenge to its prestige and honor, the army was unable to respond: eventually the men were released in exchange for the release of 28 militants. The incident will have long

term consequences. For the first time in the tribal areas, the army had been exposed as too weak to respond to a provocation. In the past the tribesmen feared that, should the army ever decide to act, it could deliver a crushing blow. That fear no longer exists. These developments in Waziristan only served to confirm the assessment reached in July 2007 by the US National Intelligence Estimate, which concluded that Al Qaeda had a safe haven in the tribal areas. Pakistan's military has also faced a very serious challenge in the Swat Valley just a few hours' drive from Islamabad. A pro Taliban cleric there, Maulana Fazlullah, came to prominence by using an illegal FM radio station to propagate his hard line views. The army, despite its ability to shut down national news channels at a moment's notice, failed to jam the signal. Over the course of 2007, militants, responding to the Maulana's calls, gathered in Swat where they bombed girls' schools, prevented children from getting polio vaccines (considered a western plot to sterilize young Muslims) and blew up video and CD shops. In an echo of one of the last acts of the Afghan Taliban, they destroyed a 1300 year old, 20 foot-tall statue of Buddha.

Eventually in July 2007, Musharraf deployed 2,000 soldiers to regain control of the area. When they failed to make much headway, another 2,500 reinforcements were sent in October. They were met by a suicide bomber who killed 17. Another 6 soldiers were beheaded and their remains dragged through a village. Stung by the losses, the army deployed another 10,000 troops and used helicopter gunships to attack militants who had dug into positions on the hillsides. The militants, though, continued to advance. By late November 2007 they had control of 9 of the 12 districts in Swat. By February 2008 the government was claiming victory in Swat but few doubted that the fighting had left a long term impression not only on the residents of the valley but also large numbers of people throughout NWFP. Many local residents in Swat did not support the Taliban forces, but they did not dare oppose them. The events in Swat demonstrated the potency of the radicals' message. Many of the residents had been receiving Pakistan state TV and a whole array of independent satellite channels for years. Yet one Maulana, with a tiny FM transmitter, was able to mobilize enough support to take on 15,000 Pakistani troops. Some Pakistani soldiers handed over their weapons to the militants without fighting. There have also been desertions in Waziristan.

The militants have also organised an intense suicide bombing campaign. Between the start of 2002 and the end of 2006 there were 22 suicide bombs in Pakistan – an average of just over 4 a year. Most were sectarian attacks. In 2007 there were 56 suicide attacks, most of which were not sectarian. Many of the targets were military personnel in Waziristan and Swat but others, in locations all over Pakistan, included the police; the military, General Musharraf, Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao and the former Religious Affairs Minister (and son of Zia ul Haq) Ejaz ul Haq and Benazir Bhutto. Many of the targets were associated with implementing or supporting the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad in July 2007.

There was a highly significant suicide attack in Nov 2007 when over 30 Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) workers were killed as they travelled to work on a bus. People who might previously have organised militant activity were now the targets. For decades in Pakistan the jihadis fighting in Kashmir, the Talibans fighting in Afghanistan, the extremists who carried out assassinations within Pakistan and even those responsible for sectarian violence had

protectors within the establishment. The reality in contemporary Pakistan is different. Extremist organizations can now mount suicide bomb attacks without help from anybody. They can rely on a network of mosques and madrassas to provide volunteers and can easily raise the small sums needed to mount attacks. Islamists in Afghanistan and Iraq, even in the US and UK, have proven themselves capable of mounting attacks in their own initiative – we should not be surprised if they do the same in Pakistan.

The recent elections have shown once again that most Pakistanis would oppose an Islamist takeover. But there are other disturbing scenarios. One which is gaining currency is that Pakistan could disintegrate because of nationalist tensions. This argument is normally presented in terms of Sindhi or Baloch separatists eventually becoming so angered with Punjabi domination that they amount a successful independence campaign. In reality the army will, for the foreseeable future, be able to deal with any separatist movements in Sindh or Balochistan with some ease. If there is to be a successful separatist movement in Pakistan, it would be much more likely to take the form of a Pukhtoon nationalist campaign riding on the back of the Islamist militancy. There is a nationalist element in both the Taliban resistance in Afghanistan and the Islamist/tribal forces in Waziristan. The Afghan government has never accepted the 1893 Durand Line which today constitutes the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. On both sides of the Durand Line the demand for a Pukhtoon homeland - Pukhtoonkhwa - has never gone away.

Pakistan's nuclear arsenal

The Economist magazine recently caught the mood of the Western press by describing Pakistan as: "the most dangerous country on earth". The somewhat alarmist headlines that have followed Benazir Bhutto's assassination reflect the fact that Pakistan is home not only to some of the world's most committed Islamic radicals but also to a nuclear arsenal.

There has been much public discussion of scenarios in which militants get their hands on some nuclear material. Washington has reportedly spent \$100 million training Pakistani officers to secure their nuclear weapons. The Pakistanis say they now keep their warheads in different locations to their missiles. The idea is that anyone trying to steal a bomb would have to breach two facilities although a warhead alone would be enough to make a dirty bomb.

The biggest threat to Pakistan's nuclear security probably comes from insiders with radical Islamist sympathies. It would not be the first time. Documents found in Kabul after the fall of the Talibans showed that some Pakistani nuclear scientists had met with Al Qaeda to discuss the possible development of nuclear weapons. One of them is thought to have met bin Laden, who asked for help making a nuclear bomb. Pakistani insists that it now has tough screening measures to prevent Islamists getting sensitive posts in the nuclear command and control. Much depends on the reliability of that assertion - especially since identifying radical sympathies is like trying to hit a moving target. Many of the most radical Islamists in Pakistan have "got religion" fairly late in life and could include well established, trusted employees.

Hints in the US press that there are plans to destroy Pakistan's nuclear arsenal in the event of an Islamist takeover have obviously raised hackles in Islamabad. A case could be made for encouraging China to take a greater role in the issue of nuclear safety in Pakistan. Many

Pakistani officers and officials would feel more comfortable working with Beijing compared to Washington. Furthermore, Chinese involvement might help persuade some Pakistanis that nuclear safety is an issue of genuine and legitimate concern to the international community. In the meantime the US administration should stress to Pakistan's military leadership that, whatever else happens, Washington will continue to help train Pakistani officers in nuclear safety.

The Kashmir dispute

Kashmir is another area of policy that could benefit from outside – particularly US – involvement in Kashmir. General Musharraf has made radical changes to Pakistan's Kashmir policy. At the time of his coup, the army and the ISI were backing militants who mounted attacks on the Indian forces there. Under heavy international pressure General Musharraf has since taken real steps to radically change that policy. On a diplomatic level he has strongly hinted that he is prepared to drop the long standing Pakistani demand for a UN plebiscite of the Kashmiri people. Perhaps more strikingly, he has also paid some Kashmiri militants to demobilize and to settle down by getting married. Since Pakistan has never admitted supporting the militants it has been in no position to publicise this new policy. While the larger groups such as Lashkar e Toiba and Jaish e Mohammed are big enough, and have sufficient funds, to continue the struggle in Kashmir for some years, Musharraf's policy has been clear. Indeed, the most serious assassination attempts on him have not come from al Qaeda or the Taliban but from disillusioned Kashmiri militants.

Pakistan has made some very significant changes in its Kashmir policy – changes which have been in line with Western and Indian demands. Yet (and despite the huge importance of the Kashmir dispute) Pakistan has received nothing in return. Having refused to make any compromises when its soldiers were under attack, Delhi sees little reason to do so now the military pressure is easing. Washington has failed to even try to persuade Delhi that it would be in everyone's interest to go for a Kashmir settlement as soon as possible. Arguably the opportunity has already passed. As Army Chief, General Musharraf was in a position to implement his Kashmir policy despite very strong objections within the army. He will find it much more difficult to do so now that he is a civilian.

Future prospects for Pakistan: Costs and benefits

Since 9/11 the US has spent staggering sums in Pakistan – possibly as much as \$20 billion dollars. Seeking some return on that money, the US has repeatedly asked General Musharraf to “do more” in Waziristan. While the General has deployed tens of thousands of troops there, he has also tried intermittent negotiations. These have achieved little but it is important to understand the army's motivation for entering such talks. Some senior officials in Pakistan believe there can be no straightforward military solution in the tribal areas. They believe the only way to defeat the religious militants is to persuade or pay those tribal elders who retain authority to fight the more radical religious elements in their midst. For some years now there has been a struggle within the tribal areas (echoing what happened in Afghanistan when the Taliban rose

to power there) between traditional tribal elders and, often younger, militant elements. Radical Islam in the tribal areas is, in one sense, a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow an entrenched and stifling tribal power structure. There is some evidence that having seen benefits of paying Iraqi tribal leaders to oppose al Qaeda in the Sunni triangle, the US is increasingly willing to adopt a similar approach in the tribal areas.

The US is also devoting increasing sums (as much as \$750m) to encourage social and economic development in the tribal areas. There is a contradiction underlying this policy. Increased development will tend to undermine the authority of the tribal leaders on who Washington and Islamabad are increasingly reliant.

The policy dilemmas in the tribal areas are genuinely difficult. Clumsy military action (and there has been plenty of it) is counterproductive. Winning over local tribal leaders offers the only realistic chance of taking on the Islamist in the short term. Yet bolstering them will, in the longer term, tend to increase the popular frustrations that give the Islamists a support base.

Any policy in the tribal areas is going to involve a combination of force and negotiation. There will be no quick solution: policies should be framed with a long term scale in mind. Success will require consistency. The US might be able to help most by agreeing a strategy with Islamabad and then letting the Pakistanis implement it. The current situation, in which there are variable waves of US pressure to do more, results in occasional actions, such as air strikes, which severely undermine the hearts and minds campaign. Any successful policy will involve mediators dealing with the tribal leaders and the Islamists. Traditionally these mediators have been drawn from the very impressive cadre of Pakistani civil servants who devote their careers to the tribal areas. They should be trusted to get on with the job. On some occasions military action has been taken without local negotiators knowing about it. This has severely undermined their credibility in the eyes of their interlocutors. Ideally the political officers would have overall control of the process and would be able to call upon military power to be deployed as and when they needed it. This would require both the American and Pakistani militaries to take more of a back seat.