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South Asia Faces the Future

DEMOCRACY ON HOLD IN PAKISTAN

Aqil Shah

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In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the subsequent changes in regional and global geopolitical alignments, what are the prospects for a return to civilian rule and open democratic politics in Pakistan? How serious a threat do local Islamic fundamentalist groups pose to Pakistan's political stability? What is the course that a future democratic process could take to return Pakistan to elective rule?

Marking Pakistan's fifty-fourth Independence Day on 14 August 2001, army chief of staff and self-appointed president Pervez Musharraf unrolled a figurative "roadmap to democracy" that called for his military government to oversee elections for the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate in October 2002. Musharraf proudly told his audience—a gathering of mayors elected under the military's local-government plan—that "today I have fulfilled one of my major promises: to hold elections within the time frame given by the Supreme Court." In May 2000, the Court had upheld Musharraf's coup as legitimate under "the doctrine of state necessity," provided that elections were held within three years of the takeover.

Soon after, the September 11 attacks put Pakistan squarely on the front line of the U.S.-led war on terror in Afghanistan. General Musharraf quickly allied himself closely with the antiterrorist coalition that the United States was building, thereby securing international acceptance for his bloodless October 1999 putsch against the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Much to Musharraf's delight, even token international pressure for a return to civilian rule rapidly faded. Democratic leaders from the United States and Europe

descended on Islamabad to pay him homage for siding with the civilized world against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. Indeed, this newfound international recognition has bolstered Musharraf's position as Pakistan's legitimate ruler, with a chance to shape the country's political future on his own terms.

But Islamabad's sudden change of policies carries grave risks. By siding with the U.S.-led coalition, the Musharraf regime has irked pro-Taliban religious hard-liners in Pakistan, who may count on the support of perhaps as much as a tenth of Pakistan's 145 million people. The anger of these well-organized militants poses a potent threat to the regime's hold on power and the political stability of Pakistan. Moreover, the militant Islamic groups that sustain Islamabad's proxy war in Kashmir are also coming under attack from the United States, which has moved to freeze their funds and put them on the U.S. State Department's official list of "foreign terrorist organizations."

Musharraf and his advisors are optimistic that their government, facing a possible radical backlash at home and financial losses due to the war on its borders, will receive substantial economic benefits in return for supporting the U.S.-led coalition. The full extent of the bailout that the Bush administration is offering is not yet clear, but the initial signs are positive. More IMF loans worth \$2 billion are coming, a \$1 billion U.S. aid package has been announced, and massive humanitarian aid is on its way. Washington has removed sanctions that were imposed because of Pakistan's decision to build and test atomic weapons; trade-quota restrictions are being waived as well. Also lifted have been the so-called democracy sanctions that were put in place under Section 508 of the U.S. Foreign Operations Appropriations Act after the military coup. This law bars Washington from providing military or economic assistance to unelected governments.

Khaki Politics, Mad Mullahs

In Pakistan, each military intervention has created its own set of political distortions. As Leo Rose and D. Hugh Evans wrote in these pages in 1997:

The army's wide political influence distorts the democratic process. . . . Earlier periods of military intervention created new political divisions. Groups that found themselves benefited by authoritarian rule were opposed by others, often linked to the mainstream political parties, that were sidelined or repressed. During these times, the army itself became an increasingly powerful vested interest in society.¹

Musharraf's "liberal" dictatorship is no different, despite his endless claims to be restoring "real" democracy. Military rule has meant the forceful depoliticization of the public arena, complete with unlawful

jailing of political figures and bans on public rallies. In universities, research institutions, civilian intelligence agencies, public utility corporations, and the civil service, the military has gradually taken over in the name of fighting corruption and promoting accountability.

In the most obvious sense, the radical shift in Islamabad's Afghan policy threatens to throw nuclear-armed Pakistan into political turmoil, with potentially grave consequences for regional security. Religious parties, capitalizing on public resentment fueled by mass displacement of Afghans and civilian casualties, are becoming increasingly vocal against both Washington and Islamabad.

Are Islamabad's chickens coming home to roost? For more than two decades, Pakistan's religious right and its military establishment were natural allies. In the early 1980s, before his plane mysteriously exploded, the military ruler General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq made calculated appeals to Islamists in order to gain their political support. Throughout the 1990s, the *madrassahs* (religious schools) run by Zia's favored fundamentalist parties continued to supply the canon fodder for the "holy war" that the Pakistani army sponsors in Kashmir, India's northernmost and only Muslim-majority state. But Islamabad's sudden *volte-face* appears to have rent this unholy alliance asunder, visibly enraging several Islamist groups with close links to the Taliban.

While the religious parties take to the streets, a muteness born of disarray besets both of the two large mainstream parties, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML-N] and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). With moderate opposition silent, the danger remains that public resentment will play into the hands of the Islamic fundamentalists. Ahsan Iqbal, former head of the National Planning Commission and chief coordinator of the PML-N, told me in late October 2001 of his fear that "Islamic parties will gain at the expense of moderate parties" in a shift that could become entrenched as "the new reality of Pakistani politics."²² And despite Musharraf's repeated assertions that the protesters represent an extremist minority, "Pakistan could unravel under pressure from Islamic fundamentalists [who] are a growing force in the county; . . . stopping their activities would lead to an intense backlash."²³ Not unexpectedly, the regime is nervous about the aggressive pro-Taliban protests that have become common in major cities as well as the volatile Pushtun tribal belt of North West Frontier Province. Musharraf is walking a tightrope between the urgent needs of the U.S.-led alliance and the radical opposition that he faces at home.

But might there be more to this "mullah-versus-military" split than meets the eye? Whatever else it might mean, Islamist rage gives Musharraf an opportunity to tighten his grip on power. Confident of the military's ability to quell any serious threat to his regime, Musharraf seems to be playing the "mad mullah" card to impress upon Washington and its allies his indispensability to a stable nuclear-armed Pakistan,

and therefore his need for unconditional support. In early October, just hours before U.S. warplanes began bombing Afghan targets, Musharraf fired or sidelined three hard-line generals, including the chief of the Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI), in order to allay Western fears that officers sympathetic to the Taliban might be furtively impeding the regime's efforts to support the United States. And with this top-level reshuffling, we should note, Musharraf also neatly removed from the scene other ambitious generals who helped him take power just over two years ago.

Roadmap to "Guided" Democracy

Musharraf has never minced words about his willingness to lead Pakistan indefinitely, should his view of the national interest so demand. In August 2001, he literally invoked the "supreme national interest" in the course of naming himself president of Pakistan. On October 6, the very eve of the first U.S. airstrikes against targets in Afghanistan, he extended his tenure as the army's chief of staff for an unlimited period. He has also repeatedly avowed his desire to amend the now-suspended 1973 Constitution in order to create the necessary "balance of power" among the various parts of the government. Some observers read this as a hint that he would like to restore a now-repealed constitutional clause (Article 58 [2] B) that gives the president power to dismiss the prime minister and dissolve the National Assembly.

Moreover, growing international support for a "secure and stable" Pakistan may embolden Musharraf further to entrench an already deep military involvement in politics. Indeed, he may have been preparing such a move in July 2001 when he reconstituted the National Security Council (NSC). This supra-constitutional body, dominated by senior military officers, is now in effect the highest deliberative body in Pakistan. Thus the indications are that the "roadmap to democracy" which Musharraf loves to trumpet is really a chart showing an enfeebled National Assembly managed by a pliant prime minister serving under a Constitution distorted to legitimize the actions of a military regime.

On the one hand, Musharraf's personal assurances that elections will be held on time have boosted hopes that he will transfer power to a civilian government by October 2002. Also fuelling the optimism are press reports that he is thinking about asking moderate civilian politicians to assume high-profile Cabinet posts in order to help stem the rising tide of anti-government feeling. On the other hand, some informed observers continue to worry that the Afghanistan situation, if the fighting becomes protracted or causes security or humanitarian problems for Pakistan, could serve Musharraf as a handy pretext for wheeling out the old standby of "supreme national interest" and delaying the return to democracy once again.

But what could make Musharraf, now firmly ensconced atop the army

and the government and a fast friend of Washington, break the promise of elections he made last Independence Day? The answer is easy: hardheaded calculations of political advantage. Harvard's Samina Ahmed points out this home truth when she reminds us that the "return to civilian rule is contingent on the military's cost-benefit analysis of retaining power, directly or behind the scenes."⁴

The signals emanating from Washington may be key. Will the United States reimpose democracy sanctions if Musharraf reneges on his commitment to new elections? No one knows. There is little doubt that if the United States decides to look the other way, the military's manipulation of the political process could become more blatant and its terms of engagement with any future civilian government more harsh. And many in Pakistani political circles see the hasty manner in which the U.S. Congress waived these sanctions as an indication that democracy can be left to wait if Washington thinks that such a delay is in the interest of U.S. geostrategic priorities. Raza Rabbani, a top leader in exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto's PPP, couches his worry in blunter terms: "Pakistani democracy is dispensable. In the 1980s, when General Zia put democracy on hold, brutally suppressed human rights, and mutilated the Constitution, the U.S. and its allies turned a deaf ear to our demands for democratic rule; they could do the same now."⁵

The second leg of the journey sketched out on Musharraf's "roadmap to democracy" began in October 2001 with the announcement that the new voter rolls were due to be finalized by June 2002. As part of its strategic preparations for the return to civilian rule, the regime is propping up a pro-military faction of the PML-N in order to split that party and deliver a hung parliament in the next general elections. Musharraf has named a close confidante and retired lieutenant general, Khalid Maqbool Butt, to take over a key slot as governor of the Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Previously, Butt had been the chairman of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), the government's chief anticorruption agency. Analysts take Butt's move over to the governorship of vote-rich Punjab as a sign that Musharraf intends the promilitary faction of the PML to win the elections. Using a tactic favored by past military rulers of Pakistan, Musharraf is also seeking to manipulate or short-circuit the democratic process by using an army-crafted "devolution plan" to put military-friendly PML members into the mayoralties in key districts of Punjab Province.

Praetorianism Unlimited

The military's "grassroots empowerment" campaign has been predictably accompanied by the suppression of legitimate political activities in both the provinces and the nation as a whole. The regime has deployed the NAB to settle political scores and win defectors from

the ranks of the PPP and the PML-N. The goal is to win the regime more maneuvering room and a playing field tilted in its favor well in advance of the parliamentary balloting set for October 2002.

Democratic politics and civilian politicians have long been anathema to the military's rigid institutional vision of how Pakistan should be governed. The Pakistani military is acutely wary of the emergence of any independent power center that could pose a threat to its internal autonomy and its dominance of both state and society. The removal of successive civilian governments since 1989, including most recently the ouster of Nawaz Sharif in October 1999, has to be seen in this broader context of the self-serving politics of an interventionist military. "The military in Pakistan," wrote the *Economist* in October 2000, "is the problem to which it pretends to be the solution."⁶ Many Pakistani analysts agree. Soldiers are trained in the science of warfare, not the complex art of democracy. Force, conquest, and armed combat are the soldier's chief study, not flexibility, compromise, and political dialogue. And once in power, the military has a notorious tendency to get comfortable there and hang on *ad nauseam*, much to the detriment of democratic and civilian models of authority. Sold to domestic and world opinion as urgent steps taken to restore stability in the short run, military interventions undermine stability in the long run by signaling that the world of civilian political give-and-take can go forward only as long as the generals say it can.

Despite the factionalized nature of Pakistani politics, there is now a consensus across the broad middle of the political spectrum that the basic structural fault in governance stems from the military's consistent refusal to accept subordination to civilian authority. There is a strong realization, at least among some senior leaders of the two major parties, that grievous mistakes committed by politicians in power have contributed to this mess by encouraging the army to use undemocratic means and methods—whether subtle or blatant—to divide the political opposition and rule with impunity. The only silver lining to military rule in Pakistan seems to be this emerging political agreement within the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD), comprising the mainstream political parties, on the future contours of civil-military relations in Pakistan as envisaged in the 1973 Constitution. But could this be a case of too little, too late?

The ARD, torn by factional rivalries and competing political interests, remains largely ineffectual, as the regime has blocked all its efforts to mobilize the public. Thus the mainstream parties remain leaderless and marginalized despite the ARD, and are in no position to fill the widening void in Pakistani politics. This political vacuum could give the bold and vocal Islamic fundamentalist parties an opportunity to leverage public sentiment against the United States and its ally Musharraf for maximum political advantage. Many moderate Pakistanis, including their self-

appointed president, still take comfort from noting that Islamic extremists have never been a significant force in electoral politics. They also point to the deep political and personal rivalries between the leaders of these groups. Others fear that the situation at hand is slightly different. The Afghan Defence Council—a coalition of some 36 pro-Taliban Islamic parties, including the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, Pakistan's biggest and best-organized Islamic party—has mounted large public demonstrations openly calling for Musharraf's overthrow. The regime has responded by having top Islamist leaders detained on charges of sedition.

Many political observers note as well that under military rule, the country's federal units feel powerless in the face of the Punjabi-dominated army. The absence of representative mechanisms puts a premium on language, religion, and ethnicity as tools of political bargaining. In this volatile situation, "strong ethnic ties with the Afghans could further polarize the largely Pashtun [tribal zones bordering Afghanistan] . . . areas where Islamic fundamentalists enjoy strong support," argues Ahsan Iqbal of the PML-N.⁷ Other analysts fear that general elections run by a "partisan" military could give the extremists the opportunity to cry foul if the results are not to their liking. They might then exploit their street-level muscle to gain a share of official power, especially if the economy is in a war-driven meltdown. But the military could also benefit from an Islamic-extremist presence in a future parliament, for it would give the military a third force to play off against the PPP, the party the generals most dislike.

Civil-Military Relations: Back to Square One?

Although the Islamists remain a wild card—with a degree of influence that will probably depend greatly on the present and future course of events in Afghanistan—it appears at the time of this writing in early December 2001 that the main tussle for power will be between the mainstream parties and the military establishment.

While 11 years of what General Musharraf calls "sham" democracy gave civilian politicians a chance to chip away at the military's jealously guarded control over national security and other crucial policy matters, the soldiers seem to have reversed those civilian gains with the October 1999 coup. If and when democracy is restored, civilian governments will have to work within bounds set by a president who is also the active-duty army chief of staff. The legal authority of the president to oust democratically elected civilian governments is likely to be reintroduced in a restored Constitution. As Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution observes, "The military is likely to embed its role in the Constitution; this is the price of [restoring] democracy."⁸

When General Musharraf took power, most Pakistanis welcomed his coup in hopes that the military would institute long-awaited structural

reforms to put Pakistan back on track. Eleven years of what most liberal intellectuals saw as democratic misrule had worsened corruption in government, failed to ensure the rule of law, undermined key state

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institutions, politicized the civil service, and had left the economy in shambles. Playing to his domestic and international audience, Musharraf swiftly laid out an ambitious reform agenda ostensibly aimed at recovering defaulted loans from the country's industrialists and politicians, reviving the economy, controlling corruption, depoliticizing institutions, and devolving political power to the "grassroots level."

Two years later, the army hardly seems suited to the task of governing or reforming Pakistan. In textbook dicta-

torial style, General Musharraf has set about the business of ruling by centralizing power, militarizing civilian institutions, and suppressing political activities. The drive against corruption has so far mostly targeted the regime's political opponents, leaving out military officers and judges. Structural reforms, announced with much fanfare, remain either half-implemented or stalled as the regime drags its feet on policy changes that might threaten special-interest groups. And the highly touted "devolution of power plan," despite the unprecedented administrative changes introduced in its wake, has so far amounted to little more than a cleverly crafted rehash of previous military experiments with local bodies.

Ironically, sections of the "attentive public" are still counting on the military to deliver the elusive desideratum of good governance. In their misplaced optimism, they forget that Pakistan's crisis of governance stems in large part from the formidable political power and influence of an autonomous military establishment, with clear corporate interests, superimposed on civil society and the political scene. The military's entrenched hegemony over civilian affairs has dictated the "do's and don'ts" of government in Pakistan for more than 50 years. While it is true that civilian governments in post-Zia Pakistan did make matters worse, they had little room to maneuver in the face of overwhelming policy constraints imposed by heavy debt and defense burdens, the demands of political survival, and an overbearing military establishment working at odds with its civilian bosses as it pursued its own political, security, and foreign policy agendas.

In the long run, Pakistan's political stability depends on the restoration of an uninterrupted democratic process, as does any chance of real institutional reform. No single group, be it the military officer corps, the politicians, or the bureaucratic elite, can or will reform Pakistan on its

own. Sustained reforms will require public pressure exerted through representative public institutions. Only by embedding democracy in society can the capacity and incentives for reform be created. The long-term governance gains from political democracy, though uncertain and reversible, will far outweigh any short-term gains in administrative efficiency that might accrue from military-style “surgical measures.”

For now, Pakistanis must brace themselves for another long period of autocracy. Emboldened by the Bush administration’s newfound fondness for General Musharraf’s “terrific” leadership, the soldiers are likely to return Pakistan to elective rule strictly on their own terms. This was not unexpected, but the events of September 11 and the U.S.-led coalition’s unflinching support for the military regime in their aftermath have decisively tilted the civil-military equation in the military’s favor and now afford Musharraf a better opportunity to carry out his political agenda with impunity. The general-cum-president, heading the military and a powerful NSC, seems poised to guide future prime ministers through their tenures in the “supreme national interest.” Any elected prime minister who dares to stray will be shown the exit. If the mainstream political parties do not stand their ground, Pakistan’s next civilian experiment promises to be yet another praetorian farce perpetrated in the name of “real democracy”—in essence, a repeat of the post-1989 musical chairs, with the generals deciding who gets which seat.

NOTES

1. Leo E. Rose and D. Hugh Evans, “Pakistan’s Enduring Experiment,” *Journal of Democracy* 8 (January 1997): 87. See also Larry Diamond, “Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?” *Journal of Democracy* 11 (July 2000): 91–106; and Pamela Constable, “Pakistan’s Predicament,” *Journal of Democracy* 12 (January 2001): 15–29.

2. Interview with author, Islamabad, 27 October 2001.

3. Ahmed Rashid, “The War Starts Here,” *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 27 September 2001.

4. E-mail message to author, 29 October 2001.

5. Interview with author, Islamabad, 1 November 2001.

6. *Economist* (London), 14–20 October 2000.

7. Interview with author, Islamabad, 27 October 2001.

8. E-mail message to author, 1 November 2001.