



How Stable is Pakistan?

Jonathan Paris

Perspectives Paper No. 37, February 4, 2008

<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives37.html>

Executive Summary: Is Pakistan slowly falling apart at the seams? The assassination of Benazir Bhutto has put Pakistan front and center as an unstable state which may fail or fragment. The questionable ability of President Musharraf to maintain his power, the unpredictability of the election outcome and process, and the untested judgment of the new Army Chief of Staff, Ashfaq Kayani, makes Pakistan's future exceedingly difficult to predict. The nuclear dimension, in addition to anecdotal evidence that global jihadi volunteers are shifting from Iraq to the Northwest border sanctuaries of Pakistan, add a disconcerting dimension. A key question is the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons. The US is struggling between support for the freedom agenda and maintaining the post-9/11 alliance with President Musharraf and the Pakistani Army against the increasingly menacing Taliban. Faced with few other options, the US is likely to continue to support the Army and to hope that Musharraf can somehow engineer a soft landing. The best one can hope for is that Pakistan will muddle through as it has done in past crises, with continuing oscillations between military and civilian rule.

Pakistan is experiencing a rocky transition period with three competing circles of power: the army, whose chief wants to separate the army from politics; the tarnished President Musharraf; and two civilian leaders with their own complicated pasts – former Pakistan prime minister, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto's husband and PPP Co-Chairman, Asif Zardari.

The situation in Pakistan is murky, and it is hazardous to predict the outcome of the expected February 18 election. As president-elect for a 5-year term, Musharraf is not standing for reelection. It appears that Sharif and a PPP candidate with Zardari behind the scenes will contend for the position of prime minister. It is unclear how the rival candidates will interact with each other, or with President Musharraf.

What does appear certain is the enduring nature of the crisis in Pakistan. The roots of the crisis are not merely Musharraf's firing of the chief justice last March followed by the removal of the opposition's justices in the fall and soon after the tragic assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007. Rather, Pakistan's crisis is rooted in its shaky political and regional constituencies that coexist uneasily under the nanny-like guidance of the army bureaucracy.

The current international mood is pessimistic. One sees the possibility of a weakening center that might lead to a failed state featuring the growth of tribal war lords. Are we about to see the "Waziristanization" of Pakistan, where militants linked to the pro-al Qaeda Taliban gain control over the border region and then turn eastward toward the more populated areas? Will the encircled Northwest Frontier city of Peshawar become Pakistan's first major pro-Taliban Islamist city? Perhaps the risk is not so much the Pashtun pro-Taliban tribesmen taking over the rest of Pakistan but the fragmentation of the country into a Somalia-like state.

According to this pessimistic scenario, the Army will slowly begin to lose its grip. Given the stagnant popular support for Islamabad, the Army may have to put so much energy into holding the main cities and fighting the extremists in the Northwest Frontier border areas that, absent a central government galvanized by a renewed mandate from the people, the on-going incremental secession of Baluchistan and Sind from Punjabi-ruled Pakistan may become irreversible. This explains why some advocate full and quick democratic elections as a last-ditch effort or hail Mary pass to mobilize public support and save a failing state.

Another scenario envisions a soft landing where the crisis gradually eases. Elections take place. A coalition government led by a civilian prime minister emerges and enters into a power sharing arrangement with President Musharraf, probably divided along domestic policy versus national security responsibilities. The Army strengthens control over Peshawar and regains control in the villages and towns in the Northwest Frontier border region near Afghanistan. Musharraf is tolerated. Businessmen keep the economy afloat. Political parties bring in new blood so they become less dynastic family fiefdoms and more institutional. Islamist parties remain stuck in single or low double digit percentage support in the polls. Terrorism and suicide bombings occur but do not spike upward and, most importantly, do not succeed in killing more leaders.

There are numerous scenarios in between fragmentation and stability. One could imagine a Turkey AKP Party/Erdogan scenario in which Islamists come to power in a coalition government led by the devout conservative Muslim former Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, who has a soft spot toward Islamists, having cultivated extremist Islamic figures when he was prime minister in the late 90's and having just returned from a long exile in Saudi Arabia.

How Secure are the Nukes?

If Pakistan is slowly falling apart at the seams, Musharraf cannot regain even a limited mandate, and the Army is unwilling to remove him because General Kayani wants to keep the Army out of politics and restore its prestige and professionalism – then just how secure are the nuclear weapons? It is worth remembering that even under a relatively stable Pakistan ruled by civilians, A.Q. Khan managed to sell significant nuclear and missile technology to the Iranians, Libyans, North Koreans and others. Imagine what might be sold with a far weaker central government.

How many middle- to senior-level military and security persons might be tempted by greed and sympathy with anti-Western views to sell the technology or components of

a weapon from Pakistan's nuclear stockpile comprising 50 to 100 bombs? It only takes a few "bad apples" to inflict enormous damage on non-proliferation. How sure can we be that the weapons and secrets are safe, notwithstanding the visits of Centcom Commander, Admiral Fallon and other senior US officials to Islamabad and public assurances by Musharraf and Army leaders? The danger of illicit proliferation for Pakistan's immediate future is a real concern for the West. It would not be surprising for the US to condition support for President Musharraf on more information about the safeguarding of the nukes.

View from the US

Last fall, senior US officials talked about two plans. **Plan A** included a power sharing arrangement between Musharraf and Bhutto. **Plan B** envisioned the collapse (or non-start) of such a sharing arrangement with the popularly elected Bhutto using a mandate to wrest power away from the unpopular Musharraf in a tense standoff.

Two months ago, the West was torn between supporting either the martial law/heavy hand of Musharraf or the galvanizing presence of Bhutto as the best way to hold off the Taliban resurgence along the Afghan border. Bhutto's return to Pakistan enjoyed support in London and Washington; she addressed both the IISS in London and the Council on Foreign Relations in New York in the summer of 2007 to gain the support of foreign policy elites. However, due to her exile, she had not been to Pakistan in years, and it remained to be seen what the full impact of her return would mean for the country. We will never know for sure.

The international outpouring of mourning over the death of Benazir Bhutto was due in part to her status as an outspoken female and secular Muslim leader with a certain grace that is rare among contemporary political leaders. We will never know what might have happened had she been able to mobilize her followers in a populist frenzy leading up to and beyond the elections. She may have won a plurality of the vote, enough to become prime minister, but it is not clear that rival parties would have accepted defeat given the personal animosities. While it is possible that the elections might have unleashed a chain of destabilizing events that would have undermined the authority not only of Musharraf but also of the Army, one might still have hoped that a populist victory of a pro-Western secular leader would have strengthened governance in the country.

The Benign Authoritarian Model

The go-slow-on-democracy school argues that while Muslim countries like Turkey, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are in the process of moving from authoritarian models to freer societies, the role of the military is critical in providing stability. In Pakistan, the role of the Army dates back to British colonial rule that emphasized central bureaucracy over local popular input. The bureaucrats ran the show. In so doing, they learned how to operate fairly and efficiently over the entire subcontinent. Following the partition of India, many of these same bureaucrats took over Pakistan. The bureaucracy was largely subsumed by the Army in the unstable period following independence, when there were dozens of prime ministers and constant intervention by the military.

A countervailing pressure has been the populist voice from outside the capital city of Islamabad. At times, the bureaucracy was pressured to share power with popularly-elected local authorities. These populists were less concerned with fairness and more concerned with helping out their constituents. The Bhuttos from Sind helped people in the Karachi area. Corruption was rampant under both Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif because they lacked bureaucratic experience and operated like local politicians.

The problem with the army-as-more-efficient model is that it does not explain the increasing corruption within the Army, as it expanded into businesses under Musharraf. Nonetheless, Musharraf's non-democratic rule has brought to Pakistan some benefits, especially a flourishing economy, aided by over \$10 billion in US aid since 9/11. Other achievements include the emergence of a robust and free media, progress in human rights, and more human rights for women, as exemplified by the "honor rape" case where Musharraf sought to overturn religious tribal law.

The attractiveness of Plan A was that the US Administration did not have to choose between the authoritarian bureaucracy model and Bhutto's populist model. In the last weeks of Bhutto's campaign, however, the outcome was beginning to look more like Plan B, and that would have presented a dilemma for the US and the West. Now, the choice is less stark, with no populist contender, leaving the real choice in the coming months between the continued leadership of Musharraf (with the Army in the background) or an increasingly assertive Army Chief of Staff, Ashfaq Kayani.

The US-Pakistan Relationship

The Musharraf government has been more adept at playing the US relationship than at maintaining its own support among the Pakistani public. At least until recently, Musharraf has known precisely how to keep US aid flowing and US support constant by playing up the terrorist card while at the same time acting ambiguously against pro-Taliban tribes in the territories near the Afghanistan border. Since 9/11, the US has been singularly focused on extremists operating in Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Precisely because the US needed Pakistan's military help in combating the pro-Taliban Pashtuns in the Northwestern frontier, Musharraf became America's indispensable ally. Nevertheless, after the imposition of the emergency law in November 2007, the US applied pressure on Musharraf to step down as military leader, to set a date for elections and to lift the emergency order, all of which he has done.

Since 9/11, US aid has been designed not to strengthen Pakistan's internal stability but to achieve counter-terrorism objectives specific to Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan. US engagement with Pakistan is highly centralized and military-to-military, with little assistance reaching the majority of Pakistanis. The lesson of 2007 for the Americans is to depersonalize the relationship between Bush and Musharraf and expand the US relationship with Pakistan. By developing long-term joint comprehensive security and development strategy with Pakistan, the US might be less vulnerable in the future to sudden cataclysmic events such as what has occurred in the last few months.

The dilemma for US policy in Pakistan, similar to the broader Middle East, is how hard to push for democratization. Pushing too hard runs the risk of electing

incompetent politicians or radical Islamists to power. In the long term a democratic Pakistan is the goal, but the challenge lies in attaining that goal without bringing about a worse result than the current army-led polity.

The US is likely to stick with President Musharraf and, perhaps more significantly, work closely with the US-trained Army Chief of Staff, General Ashfaq Kayani. The best case scenario is to view Musharraf as a transitional figure to a more effective *and* popular political and governance system in the future.

Many Open Questions

Will Pakistan's inability to manage its myriad problems cause it to slide inexorably into a failed-state status? Will Pakistan implode or disintegrate like Somalia or Yugoslavia in the 1990's? Will an extremist Islamist-led coalition be able to exert preponderant influence over a future government either through or bypassing the Army? Pakistani Islamist parties have never been able to poll greater than the low teens in the popular vote. Will that remain the same or will it change under a Nawaz Sharif government or if Pakistan's political instability worsens? What would be the impact on Pakistani radicalization as a result of any US military incursion into the Northwest Territories to flush out Taliban havens?

Ten years ago, the Palestinian pollster Khalil Shikaki said that Hamas never received more than 15 percent support from the Palestinians living in the territories. However, two years ago, Hamas won an election after the secular PLO-Fatah party lost its leader, Yasir Arafat and fell into decline, division and corruption. Could the same happen to the secular *status quo* leaders of Pakistan including the three current power centers – the Army, President Musharraf, and the civilian contenders for prime minister?

The threat of Islamist-inspired mayhem in a nuclear Pakistan is becoming especially acute as jihadis from Europe, North Africa and the Middle East that were flocking to Iraq are starting to flow to expanding sanctuaries in the Northwest Territories. This raises new and disturbing questions about this area of the world.

The best one can hope for is that Pakistan will muddle through as it has done in past crises, with continuing oscillations between military and civilian rule.

Jonathan Paris is a London-based political analyst and Adjunct Fellow at the Hudson Institute. His most recent publication is "Explaining the Causes of Radical Islam in Europe," a chapter in Radical Islam and International Security: Challenges and Responses (Routledge 2007).