

Pakistan stands at a fork in history

Messy but truly democratic (India Vision)

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Pakistan stands at a fork in history. It could either decisively shift to wholesome democratisation, or lapse into military-dominated half-civilian government. Long-term social and political trends favour democratisation. But the actual outcome will depend upon how the main actors - President Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) co-chair Asif Ali Zardari, and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) chief Nawaz Sharif - play their cards.

Secondarily, the result will depend on how the United States prosecutes its war against Al Qaeda-Taleban along Pakistan's Western border. India too could help by accelerating the peace process with Pakistan.

One can be modestly, not exuberantly, optimistic that Pakistan's toxic tryst with the "Three A's" (Army, Allah and America) will come to a much-needed end, and that India-Pakistan reconciliation will become genuinely sustainable.

That's the conclusion from my Pakistan trip last week, during which I met political analysts, social scientists, former diplomats and social activists.

To start with, four months after national elections, Pakistan lacks a stable government; most of the PPP-PML(N)'s promises remain unfulfilled; and the PML(N) isn't about to return to the Cabinet which it quit in protest over the PPP's refusal to quickly reinstate judges dismissed by Musharraf.

The two parties continue their alliance, but are drifting apart. This wasn't unexpected given their disparate bases, leadership backgrounds and priorities. The central question is whether they can hold together until Musharraf makes his long-overdue exit and the army's role is weakened

enough for a robustly constitutional-democratic government to emerge.

That prospect now seems uncertain - not because Musharraf retains the support of an army eager to defend him, but because Zardari lacks the courage to confront him and is under US pressure to let him continue. Washington is convinced, against sober counsel, that Musharraf remains its best ally against the Taleban Al-Qaeda-although his record is patchy.

Zardari is probably too tainted by corruption to want to risk reopening the National Reconciliation Ordinance, which indemnified him against prosecution. Many analysts believe the NRO will be reopened if Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry is reinstated. Zardari has simply appropriated the PPP, but has no independent standing and is vulnerable to pressure.

To counter growing unpopularity, Zardari has now called on Musharraf to step down "for Pakistan's sake", or face Parliament. How firm he remains is open to question.

Sharif is adamant, perhaps obsessively so, that "Musharraf the usurper" must go at once. He has revived old controversies, e.g. Kargil, which pit him against Musharraf. His clear anti-Musharraf, pro-judiciary stand, coupled with the public's disenchantment with military rule-and not just with an individual, as was the case with Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan or Zia-ul-Haq-has brought Sharif a groundswell of backing from traditional PPP supporters, including the Left-liberal intelligentsia.

Sharif's stand corresponds to the prevalent mood, which is against hierarchy and authoritarianism, and favours openness and democratisation. The tenacious lawyers' movement both expresses this phenomenon and has infused energy into it.

This is in keeping with recent social trends: a media explosion with free, robust debate - more vigorous and political than in India -, spread of education, and the burgeoning of self-confident urban and rural middle-income strata, which have broken some shackles of the old feudal order and are looking for self-expression.

These strata instinctively distrust the army for its economic mismanagement and corruption, and demand accountability. Pakistan's electricity supply situation is even worse than India's, with load-shedding for four to eight hours a day. A major reason for this is that the military regime didn't add a single megawatt to generation in 8 years. This highlights governance issues.

These social trends are related to a generational shift-from an India-obsessed military-bureaucratic and political elite, to one which was born and grew up after Independence. The old elite's consciousness was shaped by opposition between "Hindu India" and "Muslim Pakistan", "a clash of cultures" defined by religion, and bitter memories of Partition.

The new generation which has matured over the past decade isn't India-centric. It's influenced by its discovery of the common roots of South Asian culture since the Indus Valley civilisation, and is unburdened by the uniquely violent past linked to the mass killings of 1947.

It doesn't equate Pakistan's survival with hostility towards India through a Pakistani National Security State, to which democracy is alien and military rule natural.

All this spells a much stronger pro-democratisation momentum than earlier. But Pakistan's squabbling leaders can make myopic moves. Pakistan's parties too have very little experience of, or success in, fighting dictatorships or external pressures.

These pressures are huge. The US doesn't quite have a Pakistan policy, only a Musharraf policy-of keeping him in power because he's loyal and useful in fighting anti-US jihadis.

Musharraf willingly handed over 600 extremist "suspects" to the US in return for millions of dollars, and connived at their detention in Guantánamo Bay. He also sacrificed over 1,000 Pakistani troops in the US "war on terror". It's another matter that he diverted most of the \$10 billion-plus "anti-terrorism" aid to buying long-range weaponry for the Eastern border, and cut dubious deals with pro-Taleban chiefs in the tribal areas.

Journalist Ahmed Rashid has just revealed that Musharraf allowed a secret CIA base to be established to enable anti-militant missile strikes. On Tuesday, at least 11 Pakistani troops were killed by US-led forces.

With this, relations between the US and Pakistani militaries have reached their lowest point since 9/11. The Pakistani army is being forced to fight America's war and has witnessed desertions. Its Frontier Corps is refusing to fight. Recently, 250 of its troops were captured by the Taleban, without a shot being fired. All this, hopefully, might change Washington's attitude towards Musharraf.

This is the right moment for India to make generous gestures towards Pakistan to support democratisation and demilitarisation. India can earn tremendous goodwill among Pakistanis if it unilaterally allows duty-free imports of Pakistani goods while liberalising visas.

India should offer to discuss gradual demilitarisation of the border to give practical shape to the "grand reconciliation" idea. That's the way to the future.

P.S.

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* Praful Bidwai is a veteran Indian journalist and commentator.