Pakistan Under Siege

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Pakistan is 60 years old. For over 40 years of its life, it has been ruled directly or indirectly by its army. Each cycle of military rule has left the country in desperate crisis.

The rule of General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in 1999, has been no different. Beset on all sides, he now seeks, with American help, to ride out the storm and stay in power.

Down this path lies even greater disaster.
Origins of Failure

Pakistan's leaders have failed it from the beginning. At independence, its founding father, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, adopted the British colonial title and powers of governor-general. He died within a year, leaving no clear vision of the country's identity or future, no broad-based, cohesive, national political party or movement to guide it, no tradition of democracy. Pakistan fell into the hands of a civil service and army that knew only colonial habits.

There were four governor-generals and seven prime ministers in the first 10 years, rising and falling through palace intrigues, but all powerless in the end. Pakistan could not even create a constitution. Then, in 1958, came the first military coup. General Ayub Khan told the country the army had no choice. There was, he said, "total administrative, economic, political and moral chaos"brought about"by self-seekers, who in the garb of political leaders, have ravaged the country."

General Ayub Khan ruled for a decade. His two goals were strengthening the army and modernizing of the society and economy. The General

negotiated a close military alliance with the United States, which was looking for Cold War clients around the world. American dollars, weapons, advisors, and ideas poured into Pakistan. The result was the 1965 war with India, wrenching social change, and grievous inequality. By the end of his rule, it was said that 22 families controlled two-thirds of Pakistani industry and an even larger share of its banking and insurance sector.

Eventually, the people rose in revolt. The demands for representation were greatest in East Pakistan, home to the majority of Pakistan's people. Elections were held and a nationalist party from the East emerged victorious, but the army and its political allies were mostly from West Pakistan and would have none of it. The army went to war against its own people. There were appalling massacres. In 1971, with help from India, East Pakistan broke free and became Bangladesh.

Lost Generation

The army relinquished power in the West. But the new civilian leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, lacked a democratic temperament, and treated opposition as threat. He nationalized large sectors of the economy, further strengthening already unaccountable bureaucrats, doled out government jobs to his followers, established Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, and refined the practice of buying public support by appeasing the mullahs.

In 1977, the army took back control, and executed Bhutto. The new ruler, General Zia ul Haq, sought to Islamize Pakistan. He introduced religious laws, courts, and taxes, supported radical Islamist madrassas (seminaries) and political parties, and altered school textbooks to promote a conservative Islamic nationalism. Work on the bomb proceeded apace.

The United States turned a blind eye to both the dictatorship and the bomb. It poured billions of dollars into Pakistan to buy support for a war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. The Pakistan army trained and armed Islamic militants from around the world, with American money, and

sent them across the border to fight godless communism. The jihad was born.

General Zia died in a mysterious plane crash in 1988, and the Soviet Union admitted defeat and left Afghanistan. Elections were held, only to have the army become the power behind the throne. America re-discovered that Pakistan was building the bomb, and imposed sanctions. It was too late.

The new crop of leaders, including Bhutto's daughter, Benazir, descended into corruption and intrigue, each seeking the army's help to take office. There were nine prime ministers in 10 years. Some actively courted the mullahs, none tried to undo the Islamic order created by General Zia. A generation was abandoned to intolerance, violence, and radical Islam.

The army demanded the lion's share of national resources. The politicians paid up, even though the economy crumbled and one-third of Pakistanis fell below the poverty line. The army continued to dominate foreign policy. It helped create, train, arm, and lead the Taliban to power in Afghanistan. The goal was to create a client regime and secure Pakistan's western borders. The people of Afghanistan paid a terrible price.

A similar strategy was tried in Kashmir. Pakistan organized and armed Islamist fighters and sent them to battle. Kashmiris, who have struggled for decades for the right to decide their own future free from Indian rule, found themselves trapped between the violence unleashed by Indian armed forces and Pakistan-backed militants.

Amid the chaos, in 1998, India and then Pakistan tested nuclear weapons and a year later went to war. Both sides hurled nuclear threats. Pakistan's elected politicians went along, claiming credit at every opportunity.

The Musharraf Era

There were few protests when the army, led by General Pervez Musharraf, seized power in 1999. "The armed forces have no intention to stay in charge longer than is absolutely necessary to pave the way for true democracy to flourish," he promised. Instead, he rigged elections and made a deal with Islamist political parties willing to support him as president.

After the September 11 attacks, the United States dropped its opposition to General Musharraf. It needed Pakistan's support for another American war. Money poured in (over $10 billion so far), and demands for a return to democracy disappeared.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, many Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters fled across the border to Pakistan's tribal areas where they have reconstituted themselves. Under U.S. pressure, the Pakistan army has tried to go into the tribal border areas to show they are tackling the Taliban and al-Qaeda there. They have met resistance. Also, there are many in the army who do not want to fight what they see as an American war. The army has resorted to missile attacks from aircraft, helicopter gun ships, and artillery. As civilian casualties have grown, local people have turned against the army, and some have joined the militants.

The al-Qaeda and Taliban influence has started to spread from the remote border areas to larger towns and even major cities in the two border provinces. These militants have made common cause with local Islamist groups, who find recruits in Pakistan's countless madrassas and its many Islamic political parties. Militants have attacked soldiers, policemen, local officials, ordinary people, and national leaders, including Musharraf. Suicide bombings have claimed hundreds of lives across the country.

Islamist fighters have taken over whole villages. Emulating the Taliban, they repress women, close girls' schools, attack DVD and music shops, destroy TVs, and demand men grow beards and go to the mosque. The movement has spread even to the capital. For six months, Islamist students and fighters occupied a mosque in Islamabad and set up their own court. The government sat by until forced to act by national and international pressure. The bloody storming of the mosque served only to fuel the militancy and enrage public opinion.

Sectarian violence has accompanied the rise of the militant Islamists. Armed Sunni groups, some linked to major political parties, have attacked Shias and religious minorities with abandon. Hundreds have died. Even though the groups are banned, they operate with impunity, their leaders

appearing in public.

The Islamists are not the only armed resistance to the state. There is an insurgency in Pakistan's largest province, Baluchistan, fuelled by demands for greater autonomy and control over their natural resources. It is a longstanding grievance. The Pakistani army crushed the latest in a series of four insurgencies. Baluch groups have obstructed and attacked gas facilities, gas and oil pipelines, electricity transmission towers, and train tracks. They have also targeted foreign companies seeking to explore new gas fields in the province and working on other development projects there. They have also called protests and strikes.

The Democratic Challenge

The army's effort to confront Islamists and Baluch insurgents has created its own crisis. Over the past few years, the government has taken into custody hundreds of people and, after they "disappeared," denied ever having arrested them. Their families found an ally in the chief justice of Pakistan's Supreme Court. He has demanded that the government produce the missing people in court. General Musharraf responded by firing the chief justice. Musharraf's greater fear is that an activist court would block his effort to continue in power as president.

There was a national movement for the reinstatement of the chief justice. Judges resigned, lawyers went on strike, and police attacked demonstrations by lawyers outside the Supreme Court. Across the country, large crowds gathered to hear and support the chief justice. The Supreme Court declared that the chief justice must be reinstated. Musharraf had to concede defeat.

The Court is now hearing the cases of the missing people. The government has produced some and dragged its feet on others. The chief justice has threatened to jail a senior law enforcement official and summon the chiefs of Pakistan's armed forces if the government will not produce the people in court. As elections loom, and Musharraf seeks to retain power, the Court has

already begun to hear appeals on voter registration.

Some hope that restoring a semblance of democracy could turn the tide against the Islamists and reduce the nuclear danger. Musharraf, with U.S. help, is trying to cobble together a deal to stay in power. He is considering dumping his Islamist allies in exchange for support from Benazir Bhutto, who would be cleared of the corruption charges that she fled and allowed to return from exile. It will not be enough.

In the Musharraf years, the army has consolidated its power in new ways. Generals rule provinces, run government ministries, administer universities, and manage national companies. The army's business interests now span banking and insurance, cement and fertilizer, electricity and sugar, corn and corn flakes. They will not give this up without a fight.

For the army, the outside world appears threatening too. As India's economy grows and it increases military spending in leaps and bounds, Pakistan's army looks for ways to keep up. With the United States cultivating a new strategic relationship with India, the army fears losing its oldest ally. It worries how it will sustain its nuclear, missile and conventional weapons arms race with India. The army must extract yet more from Pakistan's economy. A civilian government rule will not be allowed to challenge these priorities.

Military rule and puppet politicians have brought Pakistan to its present dreadful state. Rather than keeping Musharraf in power, the world must demand that Pakistan's army yield control over government and economy once and for all. Only a freely elected and representative government that can actually make decisions can pursue economic development as if people mattered, confront the Islamists, and make peace with India.

P.S.

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