

Pakistan: Transition to What?

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As the year 2007 started, Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf seemed secure, his trademark confidence in place, enjoying widespread if grudging popularity. The country faced presidential and parliamentary elections. Many hoped these might start a gradual transition to democracy, but no one expected major short-term change. By year's end, Musharraf, now deeply unpopular, had retired from the army, and former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, with whom he had concluded a deal that was to be the instrument of that transition, lay dead, assassinated under murky circumstances. Once more, Pakistan's future hung in the balance, with heavy consequences for the region and the world.

As Pakistan prepares for parliamentary elections on 18 February, its neighbours and its Western friends will be watching their impact on Afghanistan, especially security along the Afghan border and Pakistan's relations with the Karzai government and with the Taliban. Another issue, however, will determine Pakistan's future, and hence the sustainability of its anti-terrorism goals: whether the Pakistani state is able to hold its own against the double menace of violent extremism and institutional atrophy. In Washington and London, policy has revolved around President Musharraf for the past six years, based on the judgement that he was more capable than anyone else of implementing a meaningful anti-terrorism policy. The events of the past year, however, suggest that his ability to deliver is largely gone.

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Policymakers now need to find the best of an unimpressive set of policy alternatives.

Musharraf's standing eroded dramatically over the past year. His big political power play, the initial decision in March 2007 to sack a chief justice who had challenged the government in some sensitive cases, went badly wrong. Inept handling of public protests and of the crackdown on the extremist-led Red Mosque in Islamabad left him looking callous and ineffective. A string of suicide bombings largely directed against army targets reinforced the impression that the state itself was under attack. The army's prestige took a beating, aggravated by its heavy losses in the tribal areas. Musharraf's popularity took a nose-dive, and the legitimacy of his rule was widely questioned.

In September, Musharraf regained the initiative without improving his legitimacy. He re-exiled to Saudi Arabia the politician he most hated, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, in apparent defiance of an earlier Supreme Court ruling. A month later, Musharraf was re-elected by the outgoing parliament and provincial assemblies, an election that would not become fully legal for some time and which remained deeply controversial, but which extended his term by five years. And he reached what seemed like a favourable agreement with the other former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto. Her return to Pakistan on 18 October was greeted with a bombing that left over 100 dead.

On 3 November, Musharraf's turn toward more authoritarian government ratcheted up again. Acting as army chief rather than as president, he declared an emergency, suspending civil rights and clamping severe restrictions on the press and especially on the electronic media. His proclamation establishing the emergency made clear his principal motivation: to get rid of 'obstructionist' judges, assuring that his own election would avoid legal challenge and that the parliamentary polls would return a friendly legislature.

The emergency drew widespread condemnation from inside and outside Pakistan. By the time it was lifted on 15 December, however, Musharraf seemed on track to win what many Pakistanis believed would be a rigged parliamentary election. Nawaz Sharif had returned to Pakistan after heavy Saudi pressure on the government, and both Pakistan's major national parties

– those not linked to a religious ideology – had decided to participate in the polls. But the opposition was still divided. Sharif and Benazir Bhutto were still working at cross-purposes, and the major religious party, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), was well on its way to splitting between pro- and anti-government factions. Musharraf had retired from the army, but his government had put in place a set of legal measures, taken under emergency authority, extending indefinitely many of the restrictions on public assembly and the media imposed by the emergency.

Bhutto's assassination represented a devastating turn for the worse. Even after the carnage of her welcome-home rally, it was a shock to the system. Whatever her flaws, Bhutto had run a government twice in the past, and she stood forthrightly against domestic extremists. Bizarre inconsistencies in the government's story about how she died convinced many in Pakistan and abroad that the government was at least indirectly complicit. Party power passed to her controversial husband and her 19-year-old son. This bolstered party unity, but it also left outsiders uneasy about the quality of national leadership the party could provide. Nawaz Sharif, once a bitter enemy of Bhutto's and still Musharraf's most determined opponent, quickly made common cause with Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP).

The postponement of elections by some six weeks, to 18 February, might have provided an opportunity to create a national consensus behind improved election procedures. However, there was no indication that the government was using the time to remedy the all-too-evident political and technical flaws in the election arrangements. Musharraf's motivation to ensure victory by fair means or foul was all too clear.

As *Survival* goes to press, we do not know the result of the election, or whether renewed protests have led the government to move toward another emergency. All the scenarios in which Musharraf remains president, however, will involve internally divided government, massive arrests or some other form of continued instability. That raises the question whether a government led by Musharraf, given all that has happened in the past year, will be able to focus on controlling the Afghan border and restoring the government's authority in the face of the threat from domestic extremists.

Events in Pakistan during the emergency period in November–December 2007 are not encouraging on that score. President Musharraf did launch an operation to retake the towns in the Swat Valley from militant control, starting in mid November. As of mid January, fighting was still going on, and it was not clear whether the government has taken political and economic initiatives sufficient to sustain this operation. During the same period, suicide attacks against army installations continued at the rate of two or three per week.

The government, meanwhile, has kept many of its opponents from the major national parties under house arrest, although these would be its natural allies in confronting the extremist challenge. After the Bhutto assassination, the government arguably had an opportunity to forge a larger national consensus with the national parties against the violent extremists that were eroding the authority of the Pakistani state. But it took none of the steps that might have brought Pakistanis together around this type of political agenda. This makes it hard to believe that a post-election government

with Musharraf at the centre would be effective in the anti-terrorism policies the United States and other Western governments care about.

Those governments have placed too much reliance on one man – Musharraf – as the guiding star of their Pakistan policy. Even before the latest events, it was a mistake to personalise policy. It made Western governments unintended contributors to the sad decline of Pakistan’s democratic practices and civilian institutions. But in light of the drop in Musharraf’s political credibility since March 2007, this personality-based policy has lost any remaining

utility. The Musharraf we worked with from 2001 to early 2007 was an ally, imperfect perhaps, but capable of delivering at least part of the necessary response to the challenge of Afghan insurgents and domestic extremists. Today’s Musharraf, by contrast, is concerned mainly about the threat to his power from representatives of Pakistan’s traditional national parties. He is looking over his shoulder at his successors in command of the army; and he

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The government had an opportunity to forge a larger national consensus

is only secondarily focusing on the terrorists that Washington considers to be the main enemy. He has become part of the problem, and the elections over which he is scheduled to preside will not solve it.

In today's circumstances, there is no magic formula, but there is a policy that could produce a better result. Pakistan needs a strong push toward national unity on the most basic issues it faces, coupled with an election that all participants will recognise as free and fair. To accomplish this, it needs to have its major political leaders, from the national parties as well as at least some of the religious ones, agree on a roadmap to early and credible elections. Its provisions should include an election commission and an interim government acceptable to all major parties, restoration of full media freedom, and most importantly the restoration of an independent judiciary. The judiciary is the only institution that can provide a brake on abuses of executive power by a future government, no matter who leads that government. It also represents a first step toward rebuilding Pakistan's civilian institutions. The person in Pakistan with the best chance to engineer this kind of understanding is the new army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani. Such an arrangement would have to include the exit from power of Musharraf.

Seeing the army once again cast as the arbiter of governmental change in Pakistan is distressing, because the army's overblown role in the country's politics has been one of the fundamental problems inhibiting the creation of the stronger civilian institutions the country desperately needs. But without a change at the top, one that only the army could bring about, there is virtually no chance of leadership passing into new hands or of a broadly accepted election. Moreover, any of the plausible contenders for power would see an understanding with the army as an indispensable element in taking and exercising power. The question is not whether there will be such an understanding but when and how it is forged.

Those who have built their policy around Musharraf will argue that the other potential leaders are problematic or untested. Certainly, they all have flaws. However, Western governments have worked with Nawaz Sharif in the past, and could do so again. The PPP's candidate for prime minister, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, is a political organiser with little experience in

a governmental capacity, but he is acutely aware of the threat to Pakistan from domestic extremists and would be eager to have help from both the army and the United States in stabilising any government he might head. Either of them would have one big advantage over Musharraf: they currently enjoy much higher public standing, and winning an election would give them legitimacy.

At this point in Pakistan's history, governments in Washington and elsewhere should not try to pick the personality who will lead Pakistan. In becoming 'Washington's choice', whatever personality they chose would inevitably be tarnished. And a person we find attractive today will inevitably have to adjust to new circumstances, as Musharraf has done, and may become a much less viable partner.

Pakistan needs a government that will undertake the long and difficult task of building up Pakistan's institutions, countering its domestic extremists, and managing the tangled relationships with Pakistan's neighbours. The first requirement for such a government is legitimacy. Both for Pakistan's future and for Western policy interests, this is the time to put legitimacy first.

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