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The Fracturing of Pakistan

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Benazir Bhutto's tragic death in late December, 2007 reopened long festering fissures in Pakistani society. Over the last several years, Pakistan has been represented as a place where increasingly belligerent Islamist radicals are pitched against an entrenched military ruler who seeks to make the country into a moderate Muslim state. Yet the rioting and looting in places like Karachi, the commercial heart of the country, and the adjoining Sindh province demonstrate other deep fractures in Pakistani social life. The city and the province were littered with burnt-out cars, trucks, and trailers. Private universities, schools, factories, government buildings, banks, petrol pumps, and "posh" food outlets, were all attacked.

The targets were clearly symbols of institutions "where the poor cannot afford to study; businesses where they cannot get jobs; government offices where they have to pay bribes and where they are insulted and abused."¹ The extent of damage to private and public property clearly shows that, in addition to an outpouring of anger and grief, this reaction was also indicative of frustration at rising poverty levels. This is not surprising; the percentage of Pakistan's population falling at or below the poverty line increased from 17% in 1991 to close to 38% in 2002.² Since then, unemployment levels have also increased and there is an increasingly widespread sense of deprivation that has set in among the populace after eight years of military rule.

In recent years, public and political questioning of its military rule has raised important questions about the Pakistani state's legitimacy. One key point is the state's identification with certain ethnic groups, most notably the Punjabis. Sixty years after independence, and more than thirty years after the creation of Bangladesh, the state has not successfully integrated its many cultures and diverse linguistic groups. The spate of suicide bombings in the last two years, the (alleged) influence of the Taliban and other radical groups in areas bordering Afghanistan, and the ongoing insurgency in Baluchistan continue to remind us of other cracks in Pakistan's social fabric. Under General Musharaf, the military attempted to portray itself as a stable political institution protecting Pakistan from radical Islamists and inept civilian representatives. Yet, although the General always spoke of providing "security" to the country, his tenure was marked by numerous "army operations," as these were euphemistically termed, in Baluchistan and Sarhad (North West Frontier Province).

While there may be little doubt about the ideological orientation of the Islamist radicals in the region, there are also elements of Pashtun (the dominant ethnic group in Sarhad) nationalism and self-assertion intermingled with the religious idiom. How Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, the area bordering Afghanistan with a majority Pashtun population, went from being a hub of nationalist and leftist politics to being identified with radical Islamic movements remains an unwritten part of Pakistani history. When it is written, the narrative of this transformation must, of course, include a major section on the roles played by Pakistan's security services and state structures in addition to those of the US and other international players during and after the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

In addition, the state has also pushed against Baluch and Sindhi political aspirations targeting ethnic nationalists and various groups who resist the building of army cantonments and high tech ports on their lands, or have stood against the export of natural resources without compensation to local communities. During such engagements, the military strategies have included aerial carpet bombing, the use of heavy artillery or incursions with tanks; needless to say, such tactics do not distinguish between terrorists and innocent civilians. The inappropriateness of such manoeuvres has never been lost on the local people who have increasingly resented and resisted the army's presence in their midst. This was quite evident in the public support for the recently dismissed Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudry.

Pakistan's democratic and civilian groups face various problems: Issues of national integrity, reduction of violence, the creation of a governing consensus among different provinces and ethnic groups; all of these will have to be tackled by the new parliament. But just as important as the restoration of democracy and the end of military involvement in politics are problems of poverty and economic deprivation.

The judiciary

The Chief Justice, previously hand-picked by the General, was summarily dismissed by General Musharaf in March 2007 for agreeing to accept habeas corpus petitions from families of disappeared persons who many suspect have been handed over to foreign intelligence agencies as part of General Musharaf's "services" in the "War on Terror." As the Chief Justice publicly

resisted his dismissal, the public support he received went, perhaps, beyond his own expectations. In one case, due to the crowds gathered alongside the road, his convoy took 28 hours to travel from Islamabad to Lahore for a journey that normally lasts four to five hours. The lawyers' movement built around the Chief Justice was clearly a resistance to the wider implications of General Musharaf's regime.

Chaudry's case seemingly united many factions within Pakistani society. However, over time the movement became increasingly the domain of middle class activists. Whereas protest had previously tended to focus on unemployment and poverty, after Chaudry's dismissal, the perimeters of effective protest have shifted to include visible markers of democracy, such as the freedom of the judiciary and the media. It is clear that the two sets of concerns are not mutually exclusive. Yet for many perhaps it was the Chief Justice's defiance to the military rule that provided inspiration, and not a general call for upholding the rights of the judiciary. Indeed, the judiciary in Pakistan, in its abstract form, has historically—linked as court cases are to high lawyer fees, bribery to various officers of the courts, and intimidation by more powerful parties—seldom provided free and fair justice to the common person.

Through his government's handling of the Chaudry matter, General Musharaf faced severe pressure regarding the legitimacy of his rule. The most sophisticated political group in Pakistan, the military, eventually managed the crisis and temporarily pacified matters by reinstating the Chief Justice in July 2007. At the same time, under intense pressure from the US to demonstrate its anti-Islamist credentials (and perhaps also to divert attention from rising anti-Musharaf sentiment), the state also used excessive force against the radicals in the Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) in Islamabad. As students and teachers barricaded themselves in the Lal Masjid complex, the army laid siege and eventually raided the compound. In the process, scores of men, women, and children were killed or wounded.

The political parties

During this period, there can be little doubt that mainstream political parties did not provide effective support for the lawyers' movement. Indeed, at the peak of the movement's popularity, Benazir Bhutto entered into a deal with Musharaf that allowed her to return to Pakistan without the threat of pending corruption cases against her. Musharaf delivered on this promise by passing the infamous NRO (National Reconciliation Ordinance), effectively wiping out all corruption charges against politicians made prior to 1999. With its mass base, Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party could have bridged the gap between the lawyers' movement and the larger public. Yet, by entering into this deal, Bhutto effectively betrayed the lawyer's movement by leaving no viable political route for its demands of judicial freedom and civil liberties to be met. With one of the key opposition parties now thus hamstrung, the lawyer's movement could hope to make no further significant changes at the political level.

When in October Bhutto finally returned to Pakistan after eight years in exile, her welcome procession in Karachi was rocked by a bomb explosion that killed close to 150 people and injured many others. Soon after this, the government escalated its military operations in the Swat valley, a part of the Sarhad Province that was hitherto peaceful. In this case, the government's operations were directed towards a group of supporters of proselytizing leader Maulvi Fazlullah (previously in league with the state's own security agencies). However, yet

again these operations involved the aerial bombing of villages and road blockades—an approach which led to food and medical shortages. There is ongoing speculation that the incidences at Lal Masjid and in Swat valley were conveniently timed by the regime. For, not only were they useful in diverting public attention from various pressing economic and social crises, such instances also allowed Musharaf to present himself as the voice of secularism and religious freedom to a Western audience.³

Military rule

Fearing a high court ruling that his presidency was now unconstitutional, on 3 November 2007 Musharaf imposed emergency rule. To tackle what he perceived as the worsening security situation, Musharaf dismissed the superior judiciary and held the constitution in abeyance. The state enforced new regulatory rules on the media and imprisoned thousands of people. Hand picked Supreme Court judges ruled in favor of the General and he was elected president for the next five years by the Election Commission of Pakistan.

Continued local and international disenchantment led Musharaf to renounce his army role and become a “civilian” president.⁴ Moreover, a date for elections in January (postponed to 18 February following Bhutto’s death) was announced. Riding on the platform of a burgeoning pro-democracy movement of lawyers, students, and civil society actors, a coalition of political parties, including the Islamist party Jama’at-e-Islami, announced that they would boycott the elections unless the judiciary was restored and emergency rule lifted by 28 November 2007. Participation in the polls by political parties was seen as an acceptance of the political process as laid out under the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO) promulgated by Musharraf. It would implicitly endorse all the constitutionally illegal acts committed by the regime and, thus, would be contrary to the demands of civil society groups demonstrating daily in Pakistan. Indeed, a boycott by major parties of the electoral process would theoretically have delegitimized the entire arrangement.

Yet, the two major parties, the People’s Party of Benazir Bhutto and the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif, agreed to participate in the process and, thus, damaged the protest movement that had been counting on their support. Both leaders may have felt that, had they not participated in the elections, the already present corruption cases could be re-instituted against them. The military was aware of these weaknesses and also understood the traditional rivalry between the two leaders. By allowing Sharif back into the country, it created a further challenge to Bhutto’s electoral ambitions.

It was while she was campaigning for elections in Rawalpindi, the base for the army’s high command, that Bhutto was killed. Whether the killers were Islamists, as the government claims, remains to be seen. One thing, however, is certain: there is now widespread suspicion regarding the government’s complicity in this event. Moreover, the assassination has also worsened ethnic tensions in a country that has never been free of such worries. Many in her home province of Sind felt that, once again, a Sindhi politician of national stature has been deprived of a share in the country’s power structures. For many of her supporters, Bhutto’s death was reminiscent of that of her father, the ex-Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was hung by another military dictator who was seen as representing Punjabi interests, as does the present regime.

Despite its obvious ethnic dimension, Benazir Bhutto’s assassination had the strange quality of being expected and yet, until it happened, quite unimaginable. It has, however, further exposed both the illegitimate nature of Musharaf’s regime, and the fundamental disenchantment of the Pakistani people with the state. The failure of this state to provide a modicum of hope for social mobility and economic stability to the majority of its citizens, along with the vanishing sense of personal security in rural and urban areas, has shattered the aura of invincibility once held by Musharaf. The fracturing of the state is not only recognizable by the insurgency in Baluchistan or by the Islamist radicals in Sarhad and Swat, but also by the potential of some of these groups to set up civic and judicial services outside the formal state structures. The illiberal character of some of these systems notwithstanding, there is no doubting their popular appeal when contrasted with the increasingly violent state.

In the final analysis it is not about personalities like Musharaf, rather it is the institutional entrenchment of the Pakistani military that is

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PHOTO BY MIAN KURSHEED / © REUTERS, 2007

**Election
billboard,
Rawalpindi**

at stake. As a political entity the military has been the key conduit of US interests in Pakistan. Currently, there is a growing awareness, within the military and its US supporters, of the military’s current lack of credibility among the Pakistani people. Musharaf’s decision to renounce his uniform—to become a civilian president—may be understood, therefore, as an attempt by the military to untangle itself from the everyday processes of governance, though it continues to control the levers of power in Pakistan. Worryingly, the Pakistani military has only given up power to leave the country in turmoil: in 1971, Pakistan was divided into two parts after a brutal civil war; and in 1988, after the sudden death of Zia-ul-Haq, it suffered the after effects of the Afghan war—namely, increased Islamic militancy, ethnic strife, and the proliferation of drugs and arms. The social and political costs of the last eight years of military rule are manifest in the very violence that led up to the elections on 18 February.

The challenges faced by Pakistan’s democratic and civilian groups are now multi-fold. As the election results show, when given a chance, the Pakistani people chose to vote against the regime’s supporters. The issue of national integrity, the reduction of violence, and the creation of a governing consensus among different provinces and ethnic groups may be foremost in the minds of the new parliament. Yet, in Pakistan, the mere restoration of democratic forms of governance is not enough. Rather, a much deeper sensitivity to the problems of poverty and economic deprivation is needed for democratic interventions to be meaningful. Democratic struggle in the twenty first century should not only be against tyranny, but against misery and injustice for it to provide a future of hope.⁵

Notes

1. See Arif Hasan, *Dawn* (Karachi), 3 January 2008.
2. World Bank, *Poverty in Pakistan: Vulnerabilities, Social Gaps and Rural Dynamics*, October 2002.
3. This Western audience is pivotal for a domestically beleaguered Musharaf. In a recent interview Musharaf seems increasingly paranoid: “The media have let me down...The NGOs are against me. I don’t know why. I think I have been the strongest proponent of human rights...” According to Musharaf, the only people who are not against him are the Western leaders which he describes as “absolutely supportive” and as expressing “total solidarity.” Jemima Khan, “An Extraordinary Encounter with Musharaf,” *Independent*, 2 February 2008.
4. His replacement, General Kiyani, has been thoroughly vetted and primed by the USA to continue the kind of access General Musharaf had promised.
5. See Arjun Appadurai, “Hope and Democracy,” *Public Culture* 19, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 29–34.

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