

Pakistan's Frightening Crystal Ball

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The Conventional Wisdom concerning the current crisis in Pakistan is that Bad Mr. Dictator Musharraf is repressing his country and holding back the march to freedom, and it is time for him to go.

I could not help but think of immediately pre-Revolutionary France, those interesting squabbles between the *bourgeoisie* and Louis's monarchy, how interesting those may seem academically, how important they were to the history of the development of Western government, but at the same time, I think of how little the rank and file cared about such issues. I think of how, once the *bourgeoisie* lost control of the Revolution to the radical Jacobins (the people who brought you the Reign of Terror and daily doses of the *guillotine*) and other extremist groups, the disagreements and issues before this more extreme period seem quaint and pleasant by comparison.

I feel I am seeing this early "quaint" phase in Pakistan today, and fear greatly where we all may be in a few years or even months. Aside from Afghanistan, India and the United States have more to be worried about than anybody else.

While easy to denounce the actions of Musharraf, he is hardly in an enviable position. If some higher power or being offered you the chance to rule any country on earth, for most Pakistan would be at or near the bottom of this list; aside from its myriad problems it hardly even fits the definition of a nation.

With roughly one out of every four people living below the poverty line, most people in Pakistan are not terribly interested in middle-class urban lawyers protesting about the suspension of the constitution. In fact, "true" democracy in Pakistan could be quite problematic. A recent survey conducted during August in Pakistan by a non-profit research group called Terror Free Tomorrow presents some startling, even terrifying, numbers:

- 33% favor al-Qaeda;
- Pakistanis are evenly split on the Taliban, with 38% both for and against
- various local extremist/jihadiast groups enjoyed a 37-49% favorable rating (with the 49% favorable rating going to jihadist groups operating in Kashmir), with only 24-29% unfavorable
- 41% view as a top priority for their government "implementing strict *sharia* law," i.e., laws based directly on the Koran, the sayings of Mohammed, and centuries of tradition and precedent in Islam, and the same law that is ordering a gang-rape victim in Saudi Arabia (a big ally of Pakistan which nevertheless would like to

see a more conservative, religious government in Pakistan) to be whipped and jailed

- 50% view as a top priority for their government “resolving Kashmir;” only “Free Elections, Free Press, and Independent Judiciary, with 53%, scored higher as a priority
- Only 18% said a top priority for their government should be to fight al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and other jihadist/extremist groups, the lowest of six possible choices.
- General/President Pervez Musharraf polled a 38/53% favorable/unfavorable
- Osama bin Laden, in contrast, polled a 46/26% favorable/unfavorable
- George W. Bush had a 9/70% favorable/unfavorable rating
- The United States had a 19/72% favorable/unfavorable rating

If free and fair elections were held today in Pakistan, the result could turn Pakistan, armed with nuclear weapons, into a something of a Taliban-style country, or at least a religiously conservative regime with a strong extremist-streak. Aiding the Taliban and other extremist groups in Kashmir might very well be part of the agenda for a democratically represented Pakistan, then, which would be serious problems for both India and Afghanistan, and, of course, America. The issue of with whom such a Pakistan might share its nuclear know-how is also troubling, especially when you consider what happened there with A.Q. Khan, the so-called “father” of Pakistan’s nuclear program, while relative “moderates” (Bhutto/Sharif) were in charge (in case you forgot, this involved the migration of nuclear technology to the deplorable regime of North Korea).

None of these problems come with an easy answer, and it may very well be that few options are anywhere near pleasant.

While darling of the Western media Benazir Bhutto had a 63/29% favorable/unfavorable in the aforementioned survey, this was before her attempt to cut a deal with Musharraf, but also before the attempt to kill her during her homecoming rally. She remains a problematic figure, somewhat aristocratic and still clouded by serious allegations of corruption. As Christopher Hitchens coined the phrase recently, the “nuclear Walmart” of A.Q. Khan was in business under her watch and she knowingly sold weapons to North Korea as well. As if things were not complicated enough, Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister ousted by Musharraf’s 1999 coup, has just returned to the country from Saudi Arabia after eight years of exile. The same poll had Sharif with a 57/35% favorable/unfavorable rating, and he is seen as a less secular, more religious (though moderately-so, since he distanced himself from extremists) alternative to Bhutto. Still, Sharif supported the Taliban when in power and it was he who gave the order to detonate nuclear weapons after India tested theirs; he also brought Pakistan close to a major war with India and nearly imposed *sharia* law but was defeated in the upper house of the parliament. Moderate is a relative term, indeed.

His return last weekend underscores the dramatic political shifts in Pakistan in recent weeks; he attempted a comeback in September but didn’t last more than four hours in Pakistan until Musharraf had him deported back to Saudi Arabia; now he received a police escort to Lahore and Pakistani security forces merely watched as his supporters

burst into cheers after his plane touched down. Yet another sign of Musharraf's weakness was demonstrated by a trip of his abroad—his only since the emergency rule began—to Saudi Arabia, in which he asked the Saudis not to let Sharif go and in which they smiled at and simply ignored Musharraf. In fact, the Saudis, ever eager to export conservative (to put it mildly) Islam, were eager to return Sharif to Pakistan as a counter to the secular and feminine Benazir Bhutto.

Musharraf stepped down from his role as a general to be sworn in wholly as a civilian late in November. Even after this move, Sharif made it clear he wanted to boycott the upcoming elections unless Musharraf undoes his purging of the Supreme Court. The general has set elections for Jan. 8th and has said emergency rule will end on Dec. 16th, “bending but not bowing” to his critics. Both Sharif and Bhutto have been very critical of Musharraf but Bhutto clearly signaled her intent to participate in the elections while Sharif was indicating he was favoring a boycott. While Sharif made it clear that he would cut no deals with the man who ousted him in contrast to rumors that Bhutto would, it is likely he Bhutto and he will be competing for some of the same opposition groups and votes. Still, he hedged his bets as they both made sure to file the appropriate paperwork to appear on the ballot (Sharif returned from exile just in time for that, actually). But in another twist, last week competitors of Sharif's challenged his election eligibility successfully, based on a Supreme Court decision ruling him still ineligible for public office shortly after Musharraf first deposed him. Sharif has vowed to contest the ruling, a sign that despite his threats of a boycott and efforts to bring Bhutto to this boycott, he wants to keep his options open. After a meeting a few days ago when it became clear Bhutto would not join him in his insistence on reinstatement of the ousted Supreme Court Justices as a condition of participating in the elections, Sharif announced he would not boycott the elections and planned to participate. Sharing a mutual dislike of each other, Sharif did not want to see Bhutto gain too much power at his expense.

Pakistan is far more radicalized and militant a place than when either Bhutto or Sharif last served as Prime Minister in the 1990's; would *she* be able to command the loyalty of the army? Would *her* rise to power push extremists to even bolder action, as they would undoubtedly be enraged at the idea of a woman at the helm of Pakistan? How would Sharif fare, as someone who was overthrown by the Pakistani military and who also distanced himself from extremists who may do quite well in a fair election? Would he try to reach out to them now? The rise of these parties would impede a rise to the Prime Minister's office for the secular female Ms. Bhutto, but they may also be wary of Sharif without efforts to win them over. Looking at moderate Republicans in the United States try to court the religious base of the Republican Party, it is scary to think of what concessions Bhutto or Sharif would have to make in order to win over the extreme Pakistani parties. Since both leaders have said they will take part in the elections, the question now is what will the other, more extreme parties do?

It seems Musharraf, Sharif, and Bhutto would all be inclined to find ways to limit the participation of the more extreme Islamists, but any move of this sort risks alienating the Islamists and inviting a boycott; in fact, Islamist parties have already repeatedly spoken of such action. This would only stoke an already growing series of insurgencies and

terrorist attacks and hurt the legitimacy of the election. There seems to be a no-win situation for the secularists here: invite full participation of the Islamists and they may very well take over the government; limit their participation in any way and more violence is likely.

As far as India is concerned, it has its own problems with Islamic radical groups, and an Islamist government in Pakistan would not help. Such a Pakistan would probably adopt a harder line on Kashmir, an issue, as stated before, that is considered of primary concern to many Pakistanis. Support for Islamist groups within India is likely to increase, and this comes at a time in Indian politics when there is a growing backlash (sometimes violent) against Muslims and a rise in Hindu nationalism; these Hindu nationalists feel India's secular constitution favors the Muslim minority too much. One thing is fairly certain: if violence increases in Pakistan, which it is now, it is likely to spill over into Kashmir and India. In India's case, it will be hard for India to tell if the violence is home-grown, imported from Pakistan or some combination of both. The knee-jerk reaction in India is usually to blame Pakistan for such violence anyway, so whether violence increases or the Islamists come to be a major force in the Pakistani government, India will have more problems regardless. In fact, even as terrorist suicide bombers killed fifteen Pakistani military servicemen in the city of Pakistan's military headquarters about two weeks ago (and Islamic militants made some territorial gains just hours from the capital), the day before India had three courthouses bombed, likely by Muslim extremists, and earlier had to bring in the army to quell riots in Calcutta that were instigated by conservative Muslims protesting a feminist writer, though some were also protesting recent violent attacks on Muslims that I alluded to earlier. Clearly, India's own stability is tied to that of Pakistan (On a side note, those militants who had just taken territory only a few hours from Pakistan's capital—their deepest penetration yet away from their bases—were driven out by 20,000 Pakistani troops over the weekend; perhaps Musharraf's reviled "State of Emergency" deserves the credit? Hard to say either way, and anyway, the day after, a suicide bomber struck a government checkpoint).

And how does all this affect America? America is already fighting Pakistanis as they make up some of the foreign fighters streaming into Iraq to take on the U.S. military. An Islamist government is likely to turn more of a blind eye to such activity than Pakistan already does. More violence in Pakistan and Islamist government is going to mean bad things for America's project in Afghanistan. The destabilization of Pakistan will only spill over into Afghanistan, just as the destabilization of southern Afghanistan will only spill (and has been spilling) over into Pakistan. The violence in each feeds violence in the other in what now seems to be a self-sustaining cycle. The result has been finger pointing and accusations on both sides, and relations between the two countries are poor to say the least. America's Afghan experiment in democracy is certainly threatened by events both recent and likely-to-come in Pakistan.

Then there is the issue of America's relationship with Mr. Musharraf. America is trying very hard to promote democracy in the Middle East, but preferred to ignore the results of the election in Palestine. American's credibility is already dangerously low with the Muslim world (and the world in general); the U.S. embrace of Mr. Musharraf's

dictatorship in Pakistan especially reinforces the image (and reality) of American hypocrisy. Musharraf may have stumbled and perhaps fatally, but make no mistake about it: America needs to realize that if he falls, it is a blow to the United States and will be seen as such by not just our allies, but also our enemies. In fact, his exit will certainly embolden America's enemies.

For few invested as much into Gen. Musharraf as the United States and especially President George W. Bush, and his downfall would ultimately be a failure for this administration and what Democratic presidential candidate and Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joe Biden (D), DE, coined the "Musharraf Policy;" he says we need a "Pakistan Policy" instead. Musharraf, a guest of Congress and the White House on multiple trips, is who Osama bin Laden identifies as his "near enemy," that is, leaders of Muslim countries with secular, Western-oriented aims. The "far enemy," those who support the "near enemies" against him, include America and the West. The scary thing is that bin Laden has been planning this for years; the true aim of 9/11 was not to kill Americans; we are just not that important to him. The real aim was to change the tenor of world politics to do three things: 1.) goad the West, especially America, into a protracted guerilla war in a Muslims country which would spark unrest in America and isolate her abroad, and help to galvanize Muslim extremists from all over the world to rally to his cause; 2.) drive Western influence out of the Middle East and Muslim lands, 3.) make it harder for people like Musharraf to rule, with an eye to toppling them and then put an Islamic state in their places. While this is part of removing Western influence since the West backs so many repressive Arab and Muslim regimes, this third part is really the main struggle for al-Qaeda.

The Economist correctly noted recently that "AS MILITARY dictators go, Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf has always seemed rather a decent sort." It also said, in the same piece, that it was time for him to go. This too may be true, but we need to now be more careful than ever that we manage some sort of transition to a Pakistan that both we and Pakistanis can live with. Not only is there no guarantee that they would be better than our general even if "democratic," but Bhutto and Sharif have ample history of poor judgment and non-democratic tendencies, and either, or any new figure, may very well prove to be worse. If we do a poor job and/or events spiral out of our control and control in general, we may just find that we miss a certain General Musharraf and the way he barely managed a chaotic, truly no-win situation.