

WebMemo



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Pakistan Can Achieve Stability Through Democracy

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The signs of creeping “Talibanization” in north-west Pakistan and calls for Shariah (Islamic) rule in the heart of the country’s capital have heightened the urgency for free, fair, and transparent elections later this year. President Pervez Musharraf’s best chance for dealing successfully with threats from radical Islamists lies in enforcing the rule of law against the anti-democratic vigilantes in Islamabad and militants in the tribal border areas and taking a conciliatory approach toward Pakistani civilian leaders who support a democratic, progressive vision for Pakistan. If a free and fair election is held with the full participation of the mainstream secular parties, they are likely to win, thereby striking a blow against religious extremists.

Crackdown on Islamic Radicals. The Musharraf government’s failure to confront the Taliban and other extremists who use violence to achieve their agendas is not only a problem for the coalition forces trying to stabilize Afghanistan; it is also threatening the stability of Pakistan itself. President Musharraf will have to assert his government’s authority in dealing with both the challenge from the Islamic vigilantes in the capital and the extremist elements in the areas bordering Afghanistan.

The government portrays the recent fighting between Pakistani tribal militants and Uzbek fighters in South Waziristan as vindication of its strategy to seek peace deals with the tribal leaders. It is a welcome development that locals are driving out some of the foreign militants who have sheltered along the border for so many years. But Islamabad will have to pursue a comprehensive policy that

removes Central Asian *and* Arab al-Qaida forces from the region before it can tout its policies as successful in meeting the terrorist challenge in the region. Washington will also measure the success of Pakistan’s policies to tame the tribal areas by their impact on the levels of infiltration of Taliban fighters from Pakistan into Afghanistan.

The Pakistani government’s “peace deals,” however, have reportedly emboldened extremists in the tribal areas. The government will need to reassert its authority to stem further “Talibanization,” which has begun to spread to the settled areas of the Northwest Frontier Province. In Dara Adamkhel (about 40 miles south of Peshawar), for example, Taliban militants threatened to bomb private girls’ schools unless they closed down. The militants issued similar threats against barbers who continued to shave beards.¹

The Musharraf government’s cautious handling of the standoff with radical Islamists gathered at the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) in the heart of Islamabad could also backfire. Members of the Lal Masjid and Jamia Hafsa (a women’s Islamic seminary also located in Islamabad) have burnt videos and CDs at local markets, set up parallel Islamic courts within the mosque, and called for imposition of Shariah

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(Islamic) law in Pakistan, via suicide bombings, if necessary. The Musharraf government is pursuing negotiations with the Lal Masjid leaders rather than arresting members who have illegally destroyed property and denouncing their violent agenda.

As demonstrated in Bangladesh in August 2005, following hundreds of simultaneous bombings aimed at cowing the Bangladeshis into accepting Shariah law, it does not pay to deal lightly with radical anti-state elements. To its credit, Dhaka understood the gravity of the situation and took steps to deal forcefully with violent radicals, such as arresting key leaders and making clear that violent threats would not be tolerated in a civil society. The Bangladeshi people also rejected extremists' violent, intolerant messages, which helped staunch the creeping radicalism.

Cooperate with Moderate Secularists. Working cooperatively with civilian leaders and politicians who share his vision for an enlightened, moderate Pakistan will bolster President Musharraf's efforts to assert authority over Islamic radicals. Those protesting the government's March 9 removal of the Supreme Court's Chief Justice also abhor the actions of the extremist vigilantes in Islamabad and support the government taking firm action against them. President Musharraf's handling of the judicial standoff will impact his ability to harness support from this moderate, secular section of society against the radical elements. Although the judicial protests do not yet threaten Musharraf's hold on power, they have undermined his credibility, both domestically and internationally. The manner in which Musharraf handles future street demonstrations and the media—which had been viewed as largely free and open until the mid-March police sacking of a major satellite television station—will determine the extent to which the judicial crisis mars his image.

The judicial protests demonstrate the secular parties' growing frustration with military rule and their willingness to confront Musharraf through peaceful demonstration. Coming months before scheduled parliamentary and presidential elections, the protests should encourage Musharraf to pursue greater political accommodation between the military and civilian leaders. In late 2004, Musharraf backed out of a pledge to shed his military uniform by 2005. His presidency ends on November 16, 2007, and he has so far shown no inclination to remove the uniform before he seeks re-election from the Pakistani parliament. Deciding to maintain his dual role as President and Chief of the Army would provoke mainstream political parties, undermine his credibility, and make it more difficult to confront extremists.

Conclusion. It is becoming increasingly important that Pakistan hold free, fair, and transparent elections that put in place democratic and secular rule. The more President Musharraf seeks to mollify Islamic radicals and sideline the secular parties, the more influence religious radicals gain. In a free election, however, the mainstream secular parties would almost certainly fare much better than the religious parties, thereby bringing a mandate against religious extremism and helping to guarantee Pakistan stays a course of stability and moderation.

Unless the moderate, progressive elements in Pakistan find a way to work with one another, they could find themselves increasingly hostage to the agenda of radicals who use fear to gain acquiescence from the broader population. President Musharraf is most likely to maintain stability if he engages with the peaceful, democratic elements of civil society and vigorously pursues the rule of law against the anti-democratic, violent elements.

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1. Massoud Ansari and Gethin Chamberlain, "Taliban Campaign Targets Girls' Schools," *The Telegraph*, February 5, 2007.