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Pakistan: Credible Elections More Important than Personalities

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Political stability in Pakistan and the country's effective prosecution of the war on terrorism depend on the integrity and credibility of upcoming parliamentary elections. Building up democratic institutions offers, over the long haul, the best chance to combat Islamic extremism in Pakistan and the region. At the same time, anti-Americanism is rampant, and any direct U.S. meddling in the election could backfire. Helping ensure a free and fair process, rather than any specific outcome, should be the core of the U.S. approach.

A New Era, with New Opportunities. A new era is beginning in Pakistan. President Pervez Musharraf has stepped down as Army Chief, handing the reigns to General Ashfaq Kiyani, who is known for his professionalism and commitment to fighting terrorism. The military's reputation was tarnished first by Musharraf's attempt to dismiss the country's Supreme Court Chief Justice in March and then by his imposition of emergency rule on November 3. Musharraf's decision to leave his military post offers an opportunity for the Army to distance itself from politics and focus solely on fighting extremists in northwest Pakistan. The return to Pakistan of Benazir Bhutto, leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), in October and Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League/Nawaz (PML/N), in November has energized the nation.

The Bush Administration should use the opportunity presented by Musharraf's political accommodations to move beyond a policy focused on personalities. Washington has not been served well

in Pakistan by its overly close association with President Musharraf. Although Musharraf has been a strong ally in the fight against terrorism since 9/11, it is likely that any Pakistani leader would have made the same critical decision to break ties to the Taliban and support the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. An objective assessment of Musharraf's leadership and the alternatives to his rule must also account for the "peace deals" he struck with tribal leaders in the Afghanistan border area, which in effect allowed al-Qaeda and associated extremists to establish safe havens there.

It is the long-term, broad relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan that has served as the backdrop to Pakistan's cooperation in the war on terrorism. This cooperation is based on historical ties and buttressed by large amounts of economic and military assistance, which means it will almost certainly continue, even if Musharraf is not in charge.

Bhutto and Sharif. Benazir Bhutto's corruption and Nawaz Sharif's association with the religious parties during their previous stints leading the country have been widely reported. References to Bhutto's husband as "Mr. Ten Percent" date back to 1990, when he was arrested on charges of embez-

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zlement and using undue influence to obtain illegal bank loans during her first run as prime minister. In 2003, Bhutto and her husband were convicted in Switzerland of money laundering and for receiving bribes from Swiss firms during her second tenure.

During his premiership in 1998, Nawaz Sharif attempted to replace the constitutional legal system with Shariah (Islamic law), a move that would have brought Pakistan closer to a political system like that in Saudi Arabia or Iran by placing the constitution and courts under a counsel run by clerics. Secular politicians like Aitzaz Ahsan, the president of Pakistan's Supreme Court Bar Association who is now under house arrest for his role in defending dismissed Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, spoke out forcefully against Sharif's 1998 gambit, arguing that the new system would jeopardize the rights of women and minorities.

Although many average Pakistanis express a desire for political choices beyond the two former prime ministers—whom they believe squandered opportunities during their tenures—Bhutto and Sharif still enjoy support from their party bases. As President Musharraf, during a November 30 interview with ABC television, observed: "Their party followers are with them.... [I]t is the people of Pakistan who should decide whether they want to work for them.... There's a feudal culture here."

Given the divided nature of the current Pakistani political scene and high levels of anti-Americanism, Washington should not take a position favoring one party or leader over another. In terms of U.S. interests in war on terrorism issues, Nawaz Sharif's flirtations with establishing Shariah law certainly make him more of a wild card than Benazir Bhutto, who has stated on numerous occasions that she would prioritize efforts to defeat Taliban and al-Qaeda forces that she says are threatening stability in Pakistan. On the other hand, it is unclear whether other senior leaders in Sharif's PML/N party would be any more supportive of policies that favor the religious parties than Musharraf's own supporters in the Pakistan Muslim League/Qaid-i-Azam (PML/Q), a breakaway party from the same PML/N that supported Nawaz Sharif in the late 1990s.

On the issue of relations with India, the picture also is mixed. Many Indians are skeptical of

Bhutto and whether she would remain committed to peace efforts with New Delhi, given her past record of seeking to highlight Kashmir at international fora and avoiding any substantive bilateral discussions on the conflict when she was prime minister in the mid-1990s. For his part, Nawaz Sharif pursued a historic peace process with former Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee in 1999 that was undermined by a military operation led by then-Chief of Army Staff Musharraf. Friction between the two leaders over the Kargil operation and Sharif's decision to call back Pakistani troops from the border eventually led to Sharif's ouster by Musharraf in October 1999.

Bhutto and Sharif have both decided that their parties will participate in the January 8 elections, which bodes well for Pakistan's political transition. The two leaders have expressed concern, however, about the credibility of the process and raised questions about the neutrality of the election commission. Last week they jointly accused President Musharraf of conspiring to fix the election, claiming that 20,000 pro-Musharraf ballots were sent to "ghost" polling stations across the country. The U.S. has provided funding to the Election Commission of Pakistan and should work closely with the Commission to ensure that allegations of vote-rigging are dealt with in a transparent fashion.

Democracy and Extremism. Some security analysts are asking why Washington is pressing President Musharraf to transition his country to civilian-led democratic rule at a time when Islamic extremists are seeking to create chaos by exploding bombs throughout Pakistan and security forces are battling Taliban-backed militants in the northwest part of the country. The answer is based on an assessment that democracy, which includes but is not limited to regular elections, offers the best chance to overcome the forces of extremism and empower those who support a path of political moderation and economic development.

Elections alone will not solve all of Pakistan's problems. Pakistan suffers from decayed democratic institutions and a feudal mindset that can only be addressed through consistent commitment to education and civil society development. It will take years of good policy to turn the situation around.

Resist the Temptation to Cut Aid. If a free and fair election is held in January, it will be important for the U.S. government to work effectively with whomever is elected, even as it maintains close ties to the Pakistan military. Washington should keep all lines of communication open with a variety of civilian and military leaders.

Most importantly, the U.S. should avoid precipitous, punitive measures, such as cutting military or economic assistance. Washington should be mindful of the impact of the 1990 aid cut-off in Pakistan and how that still causes many Pakistanis to believe that the U.S. is a fickle partner. U.S. aid to Pakistan supports human development activities as well as the Pakistan army's fight against extremists that threaten global stability. Cutting U.S. assistance would embolden al-Qaeda terrorists and jeopardize future relations with Pakistan.

Conclusion. The U.S. must handle the current political transition in Pakistan in a way that pre-

serves its long-term relationship with this pivotal nuclear-armed Muslim country of 165 million. To be credible, the elections must be held in an environment where the 1973 constitution has been reinstated, politicians are free to campaign, the media is free to report, and all activists, lawyers, and party workers are freed from detention.

An election will not immediately halt terrorist attacks in Pakistan nor will it stop the extremists in their push to gain influence and territory in north-west parts of the country. A strong showing by the mainstream secular parties would, however, demonstrate that the vast majority of Pakistanis do not support the extremist Islamic agenda, which could, in turn, strengthen the public mandate of any future prime minister acting to combat extremism and terrorism in Pakistan. The electoral process is a key part of this effort.

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