

En Route or Not?

Haider Ali Hussein Mullick

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As if the October 18 suicide attack on Benazir Bhutto's political rally was not enough; October 25 brought on another attack which killed 24 soldiers in Swat district. As Pakistan struggles with arguably the most tumultuous phase of its political transformation since the 1970s, it is important to find a balance between conventional wisdom and the realities of today.

While the US-endorsed political accord between Benazir Bhutto and Pervez Musharraf seems to be working, those who do not support the accord desire a genuine change. These dissidents have found their leaders in the relatively free media and seemingly independent Supreme Court; and a small but powerful minority of dissidents are enamored of the terrorists in FATA (federally administered tribal areas) and insurgents in Balochistan. All these political forces have to reconcile with a Pakistan that is very different from the 1970s.

First, the public perception of Bhutto is poles apart from her father's clean-slate, fresh-face socialist look. Her two stints in office were marred with charges of corruption — similar to those of Nawaz Sharif. Most of all, Bhutto didn't write her magnum opus on 'democracy as a panacea for extremism' in jail, but instead went on a self-imposed exile and has come back only after cutting a deal with a dictator.

Second, Musharraf is not Ayub Khan or Zia-ul Haq; he has tried to bring about 'enlightened moderation' and has increased the military's role in Pakistan's economy, politics and intelligence apparatus more than any other military dictator did in the past. To make matters worse some people have found the remedy for their socioeconomic ills in militant Islam, which provides a simplistically coherent and soothing doctrine of hope — mostly after death.

That said, the people expect the best from Bhutto, but they are short on patience. She better have "my first 100 days plan" ready or else more social disorder will follow.

One direction the country can adopt is that of accepting the de facto reality — Pakistan has four heads of state: the President, the Vice Chief of Staff, the Prime Minister, and the United States; second, Pakistanis can no longer govern themselves in this complicated and highly volatile world of Al Qaeda, nuclear weapons, and regional perplexities — Afghanistan's 'war on terror', India and Pakistan's tension over Kashmir, and Iran's nuclear programme; third, despite elections — if and when they happen — not much is going to change.

The other path Pakistan can take is towards true constitutional democracy. Although Pakistanis have yet to produce a viable contender to Bhutto or Sharif, they are enjoying the 'media genie' freed from the bottle of state control. Before the Pakistani Chief Justice fiasco became the first major and sensational free press story, the media mostly focused on the social liberalisation of the society. Talk shows asked provocative but pertinent questions about Islam and modernity, gender issues, and various aspects of political economy. The news stories being churned out were well-researched and instantaneous, and Pakistanis enjoyed their mix of Bill O'Reillys and Bill Mahers. Thanks to deregulation, foreign and domestic investments in media corporations, increased viewer-ship, a drop in cable prices and access to technology, Pakistani media has thrived.

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The political situation could also not have been better; there was plenty of bad news to cover and Pakistan was in the dead centre of it all — post 9/11 extra-judicial proceedings, Army's expanding role in the country's economy, and the decreasing public support for Army's intervention in FATA.

But the attempted 'sacking' of the independently minded Chief Justice of Pakistan was the big fish. After that, even a US-backed and technocrat-run military regime could 'not put the genie back in the bottle.' Thus began a whole series of events fuelling media activism — the Lal Masjid debacle, the president's election, Nawaz Sharif's short return, etc.

When the government — frequently mentioning free media as its hallmark achievement — reacted by forcibly shutting down TV stations or passing restrictive laws, the media called it out and compelled the president to apologise on live television. If Pakistani free media continues its watchdog role against unfettered ambitions of the government or the courts then it can be said that Pakistan has, in effect, created another political force for change. The second major force that could provide a check on the unholy alliance between discredited politicians and military strongmen is the newly acquired independence of the Pakistani Supreme Court.

When Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry was reinstated by the Supreme Court, he posed a direct challenge to presidential decree. That set in motion a ripple effect that seems to have sustained for the time being. We can't be too optimistic because the court's rulings are only useful to the effect of enforcement. For example, when the court asked the chief of Pakistani intelligence to produce 'missing people' — suspected terrorists picked up, probably tortured, and deprived of due process — he agreed to cooperate, but when the court said the former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had an inalienable right to return to his country, Musharraf's actions basically read 'don't push it.' Nevertheless, there is hope that the court will maintain its independence with a mix of vigilance, judicial activism, and help from a free media.

If these two — free and responsible media and an independent Supreme Court — can combine forces to provide legitimate checks on the executive, legislature and the army, then Mohammad Ali Jinnah's dream of constitutional democracy might have a chance; otherwise, Pakistanis will be singing the same song.

Haider Ali Hussein Mullick researches American foreign policy towards South Asia in Washington DC. He can be reached at hmullick@brookings.edu.