

Progress Under Musharraf Not Enough Without Political Reforms

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After more than seven years of military rule under Pervaiz Musharraf, Pakistan shows signs of stable economic growth, yet major cracks are visible in the political and judicial reform process. Pakistan needs a long term vision beyond foreign aid dependent economic growth; a vision based on responsible and representative leadership of the Muslim world abroad, and a true democratic setup at home ensuring sustainable economic development. This is not merely an image problem but an institutional problem that is rapidly eating away the international and national legitimacy of Musharraf's regime.

To be fair, Musharraf has had a fair share of colossal international and national crises, and he deserves credit for successfully stabilizing the economy during and after these crises. The terrorist attacks against the US in 2001, and later in India in 2003, forced a sudden and deliberate change in foreign policy. Sky-rocketing prices and record high unemployment in the late nineties mandated recruitment of technocrats such as Shaukat Aziz to stabilize the economy by trade liberalization and deregulation. These policies were supported – and to a great extent still are – by a generous influx of foreign aid and remittances from the Pakistani Diasporas after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks and the massive October 8 earthquake in 2005. This aid was forthcoming despite the uncovering of the A Q Khan nuclear proliferation network. The economy on balance grew and tensions with India declined. However, many economists suggest that such an inflow of aid and remittances is ephemeral at best and dangerously misleading at worst.

With a fast growing economy a move to promote democratic reforms seemed logical. It made political and economic sense to set precedent by strengthening and reforming political and judicial institutions. But for autocrats all around the Muslim world, any such move would directly challenge the presidential decree. Thus this move never happened – the various levels of national elections in the last seven years produced members of parliament who were to serve in a body with little or no legislative power regardless of merit or intent towards public service. Policies such as affirmative action for women and educational prerequisites for parliament membership sounded good on paper, but soon they became tools of exploitation in the hands of corrupt politicians. The Pakistani government, crammed with political appointees and with no parliamentary or constitutional supervision, had the faade of a democracy but none of the de facto power of functionality.

The government's case for a centralized power was strengthened by a surprise win in the 2002 national elections by the Islamists in the two provinces of NWFP and Baluchistan, and the loss by secular parties notorious for poor governance and handicapped by leaders in exile. For Musharraf, they were all a group of crooked politicians with no intention or plan to improve the economy – the backbone of the regime's claim to power and the engine behind the war on terror. This became the primary rationale behind the regime – if

the West pushed for fair and transparent elections then it aided an Islamist revolution in Pakistan. For seven years, fear mongering became the mantra of the military regime, and could be used to justify or forced implementation of any federal policy.

Some analysts would argue the necessity, if not the altogether desirability, of autocratic rule in jump-starting a developing country's economy confronted with high poverty and low literacy. But they can only go so far as justifying dogmatic rule; if this trend continues for seven years without any real democratic reform then the system begins to collapse. Sustainable development comes from long-term planning. Where will Pakistan be by 2015 with or without US or other foreign aid? With or without Musharraf? For example, if the Supreme Court of Pakistan has mandatory term limits, and has been frequently saddled with political appointments not having parliament or senate approval it is merely at the beck and call of the president. The people of Pakistan must never kneel to this form of un-elected and unaccountable power which destroys the very foundations of a constitution in that it results from the direct weakening of judicial power.

It is truer today than ever before: the geopolitics of the Indian subcontinent dramatically changed when President Bush signed a civilian nuclear cooperation pact and praised India for everything that Pakistan did not have or had not achieved. The economy of Pakistan has picked up, but political and institutional reforms seem nonexistent, while India enjoys economic growth, strong institutions and an independent judiciary. The cracks in Musharraf's regime have been widened by recent accusations of its ineffectiveness in apprehending Al-Qaeda operatives, a surge in food prices, and sectarian violence in Sind and Baluchistan.

Where do we go from here? I was nineteen when I watched the president present his multifaceted idealistic agenda to the people of Pakistan in October of 1999. I am happy to see the country register high economic growth rates, but saddened by the lack of checks and balances on the president's power. History is not on Musharraf's side – military rule in the 1960s and 1980s showed the ineffectiveness of long-standing autocratic rule primarily supported by foreign aid. For decades generals Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq ruled the country. In Turkey and Singapore regimes that were first autocratic created the foundations for future democratic nation states. However, military rule in Pakistan has failed to create a sustainable constitutional political system albeit short-term economic growth.

Without a politically inclusive and empowered middle class and a strong constitution, civil society lacks the protection of the rule of law, and thus fails to bring about a true system of checks and balances enshrined in a constitution that will survive any assassination attempt – something Musharraf may not survive. His regime must bring a culture of constitutional liberalism for social harmony and sustainable economic growth or else the cracks will widen and he will lose the very power he hopes to retain. Musharraf must cede to the will of the people by forming a pluralistic government that respects voices of dissent. An internationally recognized democratic regime would placate the West's fear of a nuclear Islamic state and provide a model for other predominantly Muslim countries. If Musharraf wishes to stop the beginning of the end of

his regime he must renounce the temptations of autocracy and lead an effort to spread a political culture of accountability, responsiveness, liberty and rule of law. Time is running out.