

Policy Report

January 2008

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Note

This text is an updated and expanded version of a lecture first presented on 30 January 2008 at a seminar hosted by the Global Policy Institute of the London Metropolitan University.

How Pakistan Works

The title for this essay comes from the fact that contrary to the general Western perception, Pakistan does actually work as a country, not as well as many, but better than some; and that it is in no immediate danger of collapse, except as a result of misguided and reckless US policies. Pakistan is in many ways surprisingly tough as a state and political society. The loss of Bangladesh in 1971 does not set a precedent for present-day Pakistan. The Pakistan of 1947-71, two regions with very different histories and cultures, separated by a thousand miles and a hostile India, could not possibly have lasted – no state so constructed could have lasted long. The provinces of West Pakistan however form much more of a unity.

The strength of Pakistan as a state has, paradoxically, been demonstrated by the course of its troubles

over the past year. These have seen the administration of President Pervez Musharraf effectively crippled amidst widespread public protests, and elections leading to the victory of the main opposition parties. All this has taken place amidst escalating violence by Islamist extremists including the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, attacks on senior generals and state officials, and insurgencies in some of the Pashtun areas of the country. The United States has launched several missile attacks into Pakistani territory along the border with Afghanistan in an effort to kill leaders of the Taliban and Al Qaeda who are sheltering there while orchestrating attacks on US and allied forces in Afghanistan.

All of this suggests an apocalyptic scenario, which is indeed how it has been portrayed in much of

the Western media, with scenarios being advanced of Islamist revolution and Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. In fact none of this was on the cards. Islamist violence is of course deeply worrying, but the Islamist parties suffered a crushing defeat in the elections. Their public support is not remotely sufficient for them to take over the country, and Pakistan is therefore far indeed from the condition of Algeria in the early 1990s, let alone Iran in the late 1970s.

Aside from the Islamist problem, developments in Pakistan were not nearly as violent or disturbed as both the media coverage and the excitable commentaries of Pakistani journalists and intellectuals would have led one to believe. Even Benazir Bhutto's murder did not, as might have been feared, lead to a repeat of the mass killings between her Sindhi co-ethnics and the Mohajirs of Karachi which occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In general, the political process was peaceful not just by the standards of past political transitions in Pakistan, but those of South Asia as a whole. The reasons for this have to do with profound elements of stability in Pakistani political society – elements of which the other face, unfortunately, is political, social and economic stagnation. So while Pakistan in the short to medium term is more stable than it appears (barring an attack from the United States) the country's long-term future may be dark indeed. I shall return to this theme later in this essay.

The likely course of political developments over the next year or so illustrates both the surface instability and the deeper stability of the Pakistani system. Musharraf's own stay in

office now looks numbered in months at most. It is almost impossible to see how he can co-exist with a government all of whose elements have vowed publicly to bring him down. The first act of the new Prime Minister, Yusuf Raza Gillani, has been to reinstate the Supreme Court judges sacked by Musharraf. There can be little doubt that these will use their renewed powers to undermine the President's authority and perhaps impeach him.

But *how* Musharraf goes is more important than *whether* he goes – because how he goes will say a great deal about the underlying nature of Pakistan's political system, and indeed about the fact that his departure will not be nearly as important as it will doubtless be presented to be in the Pakistani and Western media. Barring his assassination – which cannot be ruled out, given the hatred of him on the part of the Islamist radicals – I am pretty sure that in the end, it will be the Army high command itself that will politely but firmly ask him to resign for the good of the Army and the country, just as they did with a previous military ruler, General Ayub Khan, in 1968. And there can be little doubt that faced with this request from his own generals, Musharraf will indeed step down.

The Army will do this, however, not just to end Pakistan's growing political impasse, but also to secure its own institutional interests; and key to those interests is the ability to go on playing a critical, and intermittently dominant role in Pakistani politics. Talk of 'returning the Army to barracks', and turning Pakistan into a purely civilian political order is just that – talk. The Army has played a central role in politics since the early

1950s, and is not about to give up that role just because a particular military ruler steps down – any more than the generals gave it up when Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan stepped down, or Zia-ul-Haq was assassinated.

The most important reason for the army's domination of the Pakistani state is simply that it is the most effective institution that Pakistan possesses (which is admittedly not saying a great deal). The army has certainly used military government to transfer enormous properties into its own hands. However, these properties are run on the whole for the benefit of the armed forces as a whole, and are not simply a kleptocracy of generals – unlike in Nigeria, for example.

The chief reason for the role of the Pakistani army in the Pakistani state is that – unfortunately – it is Pakistan's only effective modern institution. Its cohesion and effectiveness can be traced to the successful melding of British military structures, the fighting traditions of the Punjabis and Pashtuns, and the particular respect of the Muslims of the Subcontinent for warriors. The Army is also the biggest middle-class employer in Pakistan, and this contributes to the soldiers' contempt for what they see as corrupt and tyrannical 'feudal' landowners and urban bosses. The army's internal culture, and great (though now endangered) internal cohesion is demonstrated amongst other things by the wildly different social origins and personal culture of Pakistan's different military rulers and chiefs of staff. Within an educated Pakistani context, it would be hard to find four men more different than Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia ul Haq and Pervez Musharraf;

yet all were profoundly shaped by the army, and utterly loyal to it.

The military, however, also owes its political role in large part to the civilian politicians themselves – not only because of their corruption, incompetence, and inability to develop modern political parties, but also because whenever in opposition, most appeal to the Army to overthrow the civilian government so that they can return to power.

Removing Musharraf will allow the Army to take a step back from direct involvement in government, while continuing to manipulate the politicians, and manage much of the state, from behind the scenes. Stepping back in this way will allow the generals to avoid the intense unpopularity that Musharraf has attracted as a result of his perceived role as 'Busharraf', the obedient executor of America's orders in the 'War on Terror' (even as the US media has damned him for disloyalty and irresponsibility in that same struggle).

Above all, persuading Musharraf to step down will greatly increase the Army's freedom of manoeuvre when it comes to playing the politicians off against each other and choosing who is to lead the government. The Army has always had great power in this regard because, due to the fragmented nature of Pakistani political society, no-one party can ever hope to gain an absolute majority of votes or seats. Even the wave of public sympathy for the Pakistan People's party after Benazir Bhutto's assassination only produced a popular vote for the PPP of 30.6 per cent. All civilian governments therefore are coalitions, a fact which allows the generals to play the different coalition members off against each other.

At present, the military is gravely hampered in this regard by the hostility of all the parties to Musharraf. The Islamists of course blame him for doing the United States's bidding; and much of the PPP is hostile to the military in principle. This is not, however, true of the second most important figure in the new coalition government, Nawaz Sharif, whose fraction of the Muslim League won 19 per cent of the vote. Sharif was himself originally a creation of Zia ul Haq's military regime, and his hostility is not to the military as such, but to Musharraf personally, the man who overthrew Sharif's government in a coup in 1999.

With Musharraf removed from the scene, it will be far easier for the military to play Sharif off against the PPP, and if they see it as in their or Pakistan's interests, to help bring down the coalition government, reconcile Sharif with Musharraf's former supporters from Sharif's party, manage new elections in such a way as to favour this new bloc, and put together a new civilian coalition government led by Sharif – all with the appearance of 'democracy'.

Sadly, it seems likely that before a year has passed, the new coalition government will probably have given every opportunity for the military to take such a step with the approval of much of the Pakistani public. That is, unless it is unlike every other civilian government that has ever ruled Pakistan – and why should it be?

The basic problem for Pakistani governments, both civilian and military, is that the entire political system runs on patronage – and in a very poor country, there is just not enough patronage to go around. Every party, and every individual politician,

therefore comes to power having promised jobs and favours to their supporters – many of which he or she cannot then fulfill. After a while, the disappointed supporters inevitably drift off to join the opposition or to lead a revolt within the ruling coalition; and when enough of them have drifted, the government falls. Much of Pakistan's corruption can be traced to this endless striving after jobs and money. The need to create coalitions increases the tendency to corruption still further. This is why when prime minister Yusuf Raza Gillani was Speaker of parliament in the 1990s he was credibly accused of having placed no fewer than 500 of his relatives and constituents on the paid parliamentary staff – though it must be said that this was regarded as going a bit far even by Pakistani political standards.

In his new job, Gillani has already complained that he is having to create numerous new ministries and jobs in order to put the coalition together; and it is not just a matter of those jobs. Each of the beneficiaries in turn will create new jobs, and hand out contracts and favours to his or her supporters. So bureaucracy, corruption and incompetence will all rise, destroying the image of the government in the eyes of the population; and yet still there will not be remotely enough jobs or favours to satisfy all the members of the coalition. Add to this the fact that Nawaz Sharif and the PPP have always been rivals in the past, and pressure from the United States on Pakistan to take actions that would be bitterly unpopular with much of the population, and for which the politicians will blame each other, and even a year in office may be too optimistic a scenario for this new government.

All this may seem a depressing picture, and in many ways it is; but a depressing picture is still a lot better than the catastrophic scenarios so often painted for Pakistan. And to be both fair and realistic about Pakistan, one needs to understand that country in the context not of the modern developed world, but of the Indian Subcontinent where it is actually situated. When compared to Britain or France, Pakistan inevitably fails. When compared to India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka, things do not look so terrible. If Pakistan were an Indian state, then in terms of development and order it would find itself somewhere in the middle, considerably below Karnataka but considerably above Bihar. In fact, a good many key features of Pakistan are common to the Subcontinent as a whole, from dynastic politics through the savagery of the police and the corruption of officialdom to the everyday violence and latent anarchy of parts of the countryside.

It is however extremely important for us to understand *how* Pakistan works, in order to develop policies that may do something to help develop that country, and to avoid ones which risk catastrophically destabilising it. The West – and China, Russia and India too – needs to develop an approach to Pakistan which recognises the supreme importance of this country but is based on a real understanding of it, and not on fantasy, whether of the paranoid or optimistic variety.

To do this, we need to transcend the clichés about that country which dominate the Western media – ‘dictatorship’ versus ‘democracy’,

‘fundamentalism’ versus ‘moderation’, ‘free and fair elections’, ‘corruption’ and so on. All too often, such words in a Pakistani context have quite different real meanings from those attached to them by Western writers and their readerships. Robert Conquest’s remark about a young British Communist killed fighting in Spain applies also to many present Western commentators on Pakistan: ‘Not even high intelligence and a sensitive spirit are of any help once the facts of a situation are deduced from a political theory, rather than vice versa.’

One has to grasp how a genuine, even passionate belief in law and democracy in Pakistan co-exists with a belief that these institutions are like the ropes around a boxing ring. They may help to limit the area of conflict, but they do not in themselves govern what goes on inside the ring. Or in the words of one member of a great local landowning and political family:

This is a difficult country. If neighboring landowners see that you are weakening, there are always a lot of people to take your place, and they will hit your interests in various ways, like bringing lawsuits to seize your land or your water. If you can’t protect yourself, your followers and tenants will ask how you can protect them. A semblance of strength must be maintained, or you’re finished. The trick is to show your armed strength without getting involved in endless blood-feuds... Such rivalries between families and clans are also conducted in the law courts, but the ultimate decision always lies with physical force.

A few hundred miles to the north, a Punjabi landowner and member of parliament, matter-of-factly described to me how he had ordered his men to ambush and kill the son of a neighbouring landlord and political rival, after his own nephew had been killed in an election dispute: 'I am not a violent man by nature; but in this country, you have to be prepared to fight back if attacked. If you lose respect, you are nothing.' These are descriptions straight out of the 15th-century English Paston letters, and the world of late medieval 'bastard feudalism'.

As in that world, and as stated above, what dominates Pakistani politics and government above all is the intersection of *lineage* and *patronage*: not just jobs and contracts, but legal, administrative and when necessary physical protection from enemies and rivals – and perhaps most of all, from the predatory police. As a police chief in the interior of Sind told me candidly: 'I try to stop my boys raping women and torturing people to death. Beyond that, you have to be realistic. Anyway, we need to raise more money from the people just to do our job half-way properly.'

How much of politics works was splendidly evoked by a young man in a modern Karachi office when I asked him how he was going to vote:

I voted PPP in the last elections because it was the will of my uncle, the head of our family, though actually I think the Muslim League has done a better job in government. In previous elections, sometimes he said to vote PPP, sometimes Muslim League, depending on what they promise him, whether they have

fulfilled promises in the past, and which of his friends or relatives is now important in that party. He owns a flour mill. He helps us find jobs, gives us the transport to take us to the polling booths, so it is natural that we give him our vote in return. He is respected because of his wealth and because his mother and aunt are the two eldest ladies in our family. Everyone listens to them on family matters. They arrange marriages and settle quarrels. They are very much respected so uncle is too. But he decides in political matters. The women can't do that because they don't go out of the house. They can't even remember which candidate is which. If you ask them the next day they have forgotten which is which. That is why we have symbols for parties. They can't read or write, so we tell them about politics. But I must obey my mother in all personal things. If she had said I can't take up this job, then I can't.

It is patronage more than anything else which determines the political actions and allegiances of most local actors, especially in the countryside, and which holds together (and sometimes splits apart) the varied clans that are the building blocs of Pakistani politics. Even the repeated revolts in Baluchistan can be described chiefly in terms of tribal struggles for a greater share of Baluchistan's resources and central government patronage, rather than as modern nationalist movements.

By contrast, mass parties in the Western sense play only a very limited role, and one that may be reduced still further by the death of Benazir Bhutto and the pos-

sible consequent weakening of her dynastic party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). One reason why Pakistani parties have not developed into modern mass parties, but remain dependent on local bosses, their clients and gunmen, is that the parties cannot afford to pay party workers between elections.

The life of the foundation blocks of Pakistani politics, the petty nobility in the countryside and the local bosses in the towns, is defined by their daily juggling of patronage to actual and possible clients, their continual petitioning of officials for favours and protection. These powerful, intertwined classes give Pakistan an underlying stability which belies the surface volatility and violence of its politics – but also help to frustrate reform and progress.

Elements of democracy do exist in Pakistan, but in the modern Western media and academia the word has become loaded with so many abstract and general positive connotations and associations that it has become difficult to disentangle what it may actually involve in a particular place. Western domination of international political discourse in turn means that local people themselves may have the greatest difficulty in describing their own system. In Pakistan and many other countries this creates a copulation of illusions, whereby the West projects its ideological assumptions onto Pakistan, and Pakistani intellectuals and journalists reflect them back to the West.

The Islamist political groups are trying to replace the clan and patronage politics of the 'feudal' landowners and urban bosses with

their own version of modern mass politics, but so far with only limited success. One key reason for their failure to date is the archaic nature of much of Pakistani society; for – quite contrary to most Western perceptions – Islamist mobilisation thrives not on backwardness, but on partially achieved modernity. Thus most Pakistani Muslims reject Islamist appeals not because they are 'moderates', in the largely meaningless Western phrase, but because they are traditionalists, attached to local cults and practices which the Islamists wish

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to abolish; and in the countryside, under the sway of landowning families which hardly favour land reform in the name of Islamic revolution.

Rather than a struggle between Islam and modernity, or between extremism and moderation, as usually described in the West, what we are seeing is the challenging of local traditions by two forms of modernity: the secular, Western-influenced modernity practiced by the wealthy classes of the main cities, and projected through parts of the mass media; and the reformist, modernizing religious ideology being preached by the Islamists.

The Islamists are themselves divided into numerous different groups, only some of which support terrorism, and many of which are mutually antagonistic. In 2007, the alliance of Islamist parties (MMA), which had scored a striking success in the elections of 2002, collapsed. Its biggest component, the Jamaat Islami, left the alliance and boycotted the February 2008 elections, and the alliance itself suffered a crushing defeat even in the Pashtun regions of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), northern Baluchistan and the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) which are its heartland.

Opposition to Islamist radicalism within Pakistan does not, however, by any means necessarily indicate opposition to the Taleban's struggle against the United States and NATO within Afghanistan – a struggle that draws much of its strength from the Pashtuns of Pakistan. A central question – perhaps indeed *the* central question for Afghanistan and the West's effort there is whether the Pashtuns of Pakistan can be led into supporting a much tougher attack on Taleban support in their own regions. The Afghan war and the rise of Islamist extremism in Pakistan are thus two sides of the same issue, linked by the Pashtun ethnicity which is divided between these two countries by the Durand Line, a frontier that the Afghan state and most Pashtuns have never recognised.

Like other peoples traditionally divided along tribal lines – the Somalis and Chechens spring to mind – the Pashtuns have combined an extremely strong sense of ethno-religious identity with a very poor capacity for modern

mass nationalist organisation and state-building. Repeatedly since the mid-19th Century, Pashtun unrest has taken the form of jihads against infidel rulers or their local clients, in the name of Islam and usually led by religious figures.

So while the Taleban contains new elements, their struggle is also part of a long and powerful tradition. We should remember the British experience in this regard. Waziristan, where the British fought a bitter campaign against a tribal jihad in the 1930s, is today the heartland of Taleban support and Islamist extremism among the Pashtuns, and has been the object of several Pakistani military campaigns and US missile strikes. It is not encouraging in this context to remember that despite the deployment of tens of thousands of troops over several years, the British never did catch the leader of the jihad, the Fakir of Ipi, who died in his bed, in his home village, twenty years later.

Most importantly and dangerously for Pakistan, Pashtuns, while only some 12 per cent of Pakistan's population, are thought to make up more than 20 per cent of the Army. Despite the Army's discipline and cohesion, there have already been several incidents of small Pashtun-majority units refusing to fight against fellow Pashtuns in the tribal areas, and even surrendering en masse.

This brings me to what I see as the only plausible short-to-medium term scenario for Pakistan's disintegration as a state: namely, an American attack on Pakistan's tribal areas intended to destroy Taleban forces there, and to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders. Not a continuation of the missile attacks that have

already taken place, and which can be attributed, however implausibly, to the Pakistan military, nor limited cross-border raids, but a major, open and sustained ground offensive.

There can be little doubt that – as I was warned by Pakistani friends close to the military – a US occupation of the tribal areas would provoke widespread mutinies in the Pakistani army, with not just individuals but whole units going to fight against US forces. At that point, the possibility of the disintegration of the army, and with it the state, would come a giant leap closer. This would lead to chaos and civil war, with different ethnic groups fighting for supremacy. In the Pashtun areas, Islamist revolution might well be the result.

Such a development would mark a severe defeat for the West, and a great victory for Al Qaeda and its allies. For Britain, it would be a particular danger, given its Pakistani-origin Muslim population, parts of which are already radicalised. It is therefore in Britain's vital interests to do everything possible to prevent a future US administration from taking such a step, however badly the war in Afghanistan may be going. Afghanistan is a secondary issue for the West, and for the 'war on terrorism' in general. Pakistan is a primary interest. Even if the West has to quit Afghanistan, the resulting civil war there can be contained. That could not be remotely true of Pakistan, with its huge population (six times that of Afghanistan or Iraq), large armed forces, nuclear weapons, and extensive diaspora in the West.

Such a US attack on Pakistan is not on the cards at present, and indeed probably will never occur, since US

military analysts are well aware of the disastrous consequences, and since as long as the United States is pinned down in Iraq, it will in any case not have the troops for any such operation. Unfortunately however, it also cannot be permanently excluded as a threat. Indeed, if, God forbid, Al Qaeda were to carry out another large-scale and successful terrorist attack on the US homeland, a US intervention in Pakistan against Al Qaeda would become a virtual certainty. What is less clear is how the US will react to a deteriorating future situation in Afghanistan, if NATO allies begin to quit, the Hamid Karzai administration crumbles, and the US public loses patience.

A great deal will depend of course on what Pakistan has itself done in the meantime to crack down on Taleban support, and to pursue the leadership of Al Qaeda. The US has been urging an alliance between the Pakistani military and the Pakistan People's Party with just that goal in mind, and on the surface there seems every basis for it. After all, not just Benazir Bhutto and other politicians but a senior officer, Lt General Mushtaq Baig, have been killed by Islamist terrorists in recent months, and more than 1,000 Pakistani soldiers and policemen have already been killed fighting Islamist insurgencies. If this cannot bring the politicians and the Army together in a genuine community of interest, it is difficult to see what can.

I hope very much that this will in fact be the case. However, such a genuine alliance, and a resulting strong offensive against Islamist militants in the tribal areas, certainly cannot be taken for granted. As already indi-

cated, even with Musharraf gone the intense distrust between the PPP and the Army will go on being fuelled by the military's political manoeuvring and also most probably by intense battles over patronage, as the PPP tries to claw back some of the jobs and properties that the military arrogated to itself under Musharraf's administration, in order to reward their own supporters.

Equally important is the underlying ambiguity in the basic attitudes of the Pakistani population, as reflected in numerous opinion polls. On the one hand, most strongly oppose Islamist militant violence within Pakistan. On the other, an equally overwhelming majority oppose the United States's 'war on terrorism' and Pakistan acting as the United States's tool in that war. As a PPP activist told me last summer in Peshawar: 'One reason we need a legitimate, democratically-elected government in Pakistan is so that we can tell the Americans to go to hell.'

This creates a strong temptation for any Pakistani government to do precisely what the US and the Afghan governments fear: to make a deal with the Islamist militants in the Pashtun areas whereby they will promise to stop attacks within Pakistan, in return for being given a free hand to continue crossing into Afghanistan. Of course, this deal would not be advertised as such by the Pakistani government or military. But Nawaz Sharif has already proposed reviving Musharraf's earlier strategy of trying to co-opt and reconcile the Pakistani Taliban supporters rather than attacking them, and it is not difficult to see how some such deal could form a covert part of such a plan.

With US and British soldiers fighting and dying in Afghanistan, the suspicion of such a deal would cause outrage in both Washington and London. However, before allowing such outrage to translate into much heavier pressure on Pakistan – let alone military action in Pakistan – we need to keep a number of things firmly in mind. The first, as already stated, is that Pakistan, not Afghanistan, is the truly vital country in this region when it comes to the 'war on terrorism'. The second is that having made a shambles of Afghanistan and Iraq, we cannot even dream of running Pakistan. Only Pakistanis can govern Pakistan – and that means that we will have to work with whatever government Pakistan throws up, however uncomfortable for us this may be.

The last thing that we need to recognise is the most difficult of all. It is that Western powers are sojourners in the Muslim world. The peoples and states of the region have to live there permanently. Some of them, like Iran, have been around in one form or another for thousands of years. Even Pakistan existed, and influenced Afghanistan, for half a century before 9/11; and unless we ourselves bring about Pakistan's destruction, it will go on influencing Afghanistan long after we have packed up and gone home. Americans, who despite their recent setbacks are still a relatively young and optimistic empire, have immense difficulty in understanding this. The British should not. After all, they packed up and left this region in the past, and it managed to survive without them.



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