

Pakistan's chance

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THE POWER struggle between Pakistan's president and prime minister had sunk the country so far into political paralysis that the resignations of both can only be welcomed. Their failure to resolve their differences underlines the immaturity of Pakistan's democracy. However, the wholesale clearing of the decks on Sunday — with national and provincial assemblies all dissolved, and an interim government appointed — offers the possibility of a step forward for democracy after October's elections.

Not long ago, there would have been no doubt how to resolve such a crisis. It is encouraging that, on this occasion, the army did not take power but appears to have acted as honest broker. That it could perform the role effectively is testimony to its continuing pervasive power. But the generals have provided evidence of the sincerity of their claims to be no longer interested in political power. Politicians need to try harder to fill responsibly the role the military has vacated.

Their attempts to do this have been undermined by the role of the presidency. A president can wield power, manipulating behind the scenes and having the ultimate sanction of being able to dismiss governments, but he has no responsibility for formulation or execution of policy. Mr Ghulam Ishaq Khan used his powers to sack the governments of Ms Benazir Bhutto and Mr Nawaz Sharif, the latter because he sought to curb the presidential prerogative.

✓ However, the authority of the presidency has been considerably dented by the Supreme Court's decision in May to reinstate Mr Sharif and by Mr Khan's departure. The recent turmoil will have been of benefit if the newly elected national assembly, with the acquiescence of a new president, votes to restrict the president's power. This would give the next government the opportunity to stand or fall simply on the success of its policies.

Mr Khan's resignation represents a victory for Mr Sharif, even though he has himself had to step down. If he wins the election, he will have considerably enhanced his authority. His record is mixed. A solid leader without much spark or charisma, he has enacted much-needed economic reform which has spurred business but has failed to solve chronic problems such as the budget deficit.

Ms Bhutto, his opponent, has got what she wanted: elections 2½ years into his five-year term. Yet it will not be easy to forget that, in order to oust Mr Sharif, she chose to strike an alliance with Mr Khan, who had dismissed her government. Her previous inept performance as prime minister, and her failure to demonstrate that her calls for elections were backed by popular clamour, do not augur well for her chances.

Pakistan needs to show that it has both a political system and economic policies which provide clarity and continuity. It now has an opportunity.

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