The future of democracy

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WITH Pakistan entering the fifth year of the new millennium, the three overarching issues that preoccupied heads of state in the past are still with us.

The first relates to the appropriate economic strategy for the years immediately ahead. The second is the clash between the requirements of political stability and the growing demand for greater openness. And the third broad issue is how the country will relate to its neighbours and to outside powers, particularly the United States of America.

Pakistan's economic strategy was decided in the early stages of the country's history when Ayub Khan was presented two options by Dr Hjahmar Schacht, Hitler's former minister of finance, who acted as consultant. There was the socialist approach with its single-minded concentration of human and material resources upon industrialization, employing centralized command tactics and rigid political controls that showed major quantitative advances. This was the big push strategy which produced significant initial gains, albeit unevenly, and represented a viable method of catching up with societies which had taken a more leisurely course.

The problem with this system was that small cracks had already started to appear in the industrial firmament in the Soviet Union and its satellites. At certain points in the production and distribution process diminishing returns had set in. The innate structure and low evolutionary potential insinuated themselves into the weak initiatives, low productivity, waste of resources and manpower and inferior quality that were the hallmarks of the autarkic system. These observations had already been made by the Pakistani economists that surrounded the soldier-president.

Predictably, Ayub Khan opted for the *laissez faire* system practised by the western democracies. His choice was a logical corollary of the imperial system introduced by the British. His reign is of historic interest as it focused on its relationship with the international capitalist system, decide on the identity of his successor. There was no word, however, on when he was going to step down.

Leadership will, nevertheless, remain a critical variable in the current political equation. The dispute over his wearing two hats notwithstanding, President Musharraf has displayed considerable maturity in his dealings with local politicians and foreign heads of state, and the nagging issue of India's insistence on the prerogatives of a major state in South Asia, which remains a constant irritant to policymakers in this country.

However, an analysis of the degree of openness that can be expected in Pakistan in the future must take into consideration two factors which have remained decisive — Islam and the army, in collaboration with the civilian bureaucracy and the feudal aristocracy. In fact, during the last five decades a small privileged minority, the feudal aristocracy, strengthened by the induction of retired army officers and civilian bureaucrats reaped the benefits of better education, economic prosperity and political participation and ensured that the illiterate masses remained virtually disenfranchised.

The two well-entrenched institutions of the establishment, the military and civilian bureaucracy, which form part of the hierarchical system established in Pakistan, benefit from their close relations with their benefactor, the United States. Both are closely related and inter-connected in their ideological and political properties.

But while one is pointing an accusing finger at the various power groups that have militated against the growth of openness, the political parties must also share much of the blame. The two main players in the political seesaw of the last decade, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, haven't left much of a legacy. In fact, during their four bites at the national cherry, the drill was the same. The party out of power, instead of docilely sitting in the opposition, forming a shadow cabinet and trying to make the best of a bad job, would spend all its energies devising ways to oust their

the constant need to defend his homeland, preferred to ask the American president for some Patton tanks and help in building a cantonment in Kharian.

In continuing with the *laissez-faire* system, Ayub Khan established the financial predominance of the "22 families" who ended up owning two-thirds of Pakistan's industry and nearly all assets in the banking and insurance sector. The influence they wielded was admirably sketched in the book *Who owns Pakistan?* by Shahid-ur-Rahman in which the author refers to the new captains of industry and commerce as robber barons.

A few of the 22 families have disappeared in the institutional sense, leaving behind just a name and fond memories of a life of luxury, extravagance and overwhelming hospitality. Others are no longer enjoying the commanding position they once did and have watched with trepidation and undisguised envy how a new crop of rich moguls has surfaced in the recent past and replaced them in the top most column of the rich man's directory.

The clash between the requirements of political stability and the growing demand for greater openness appears to favour a strong unelected leadership. The old cliche that the political history of Pakistan can be summed up as one long extension of military rule, interrupted by occasional bouts of what passes for democracy in this part of the world, is borne out by the considerably long innings that the two former military dictators spent at the crease.

The question that the analysts are now asking is whether or not President Musharraf will be able to demonstrate the same gubernatorial longevity which was displayed by his predecessors Ayub Khan and Ziaul Haq. He made a statement on February 26 that the country would have to decide on who should replace him in the event a terrorist decided to end his temporal existence, and that he would not nominate a successor.

It was a meaningless statement, the kind that politicians slip in when addressing illiterate masses in rural Sindh at election time. If a terrorist did succeed in snuffing him out, the nation would have no option but to

political opponents, even if it meant conniving with weak-willed civilian presidents and soliciting the help of the army.

Pakistan has a strong growth record with current estimates hovering around the eight per cent figure, though there are major regional disparities. But in contrast to India's secularism, Pakistan has a powerful religious foundation and a bent towards authoritarianism is therefore inevitable. Moreover, embedded in the tribal culture is a pervasive military tradition — one which the British found useful to cultivate. Nevertheless, the contest between military rule and openness, authoritarianism and parliamentarianism continues ceaselessly with fluctuating trends.

In Pakistan, as elsewhere, military leaders pledge greater democracy, and on occasion try to "civilianize" themselves, thereby contributing to a course they continue to regard with ambivalence. But while they orchestrate their tirade against unscrupulous politicians, they continue to swallow up top jobs reserved essentially for civilians, and subtly and almost subliminally impose their presence through banking, industry, insurance and landmarks which betray warlike themes. It is this paradox that so graphically epitomizes the quasi-authoritarian state.

On the diplomatic front Pakistan's options are limited. In spite of President Musharraf's brief flirtation with Russia in 2003, and the fact that between him and the prime minister they must have covered every capital, the war on terror has pushed the country into a position from which it cannot extricate itself. It's rather like the *Zugzwang* the great Aaron Nimzovitch inflicted on his chess opponent in a match in Carlsbad. Make a move and you lose a piece.

One does, however, wish that the next time an American senator calls on Pakistan's head of state, he shows a little more respect than the official who accompanied Hilary Clinton to Islamabad last week and turned up tie-less, in jeans and combat jacket. Perhaps the Americans could learn a thing or two about protocol from the Chinese.