

# No alternative to democracy

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WHILE the jury is still out on Bush administration's strategy for winning hearts and minds of the Arabs and Muslims, the winds of democratic change are starting to blow in the region. Within the last quarter, national elections — albeit flawed — have been held in Palestine and Iraq and Saudi Arabia has held its first municipal elections since 1963.

President Mubarak of Egypt, who a month ago had dismissed the idea, has changed his mind. Instead of the usual single candidate presidential referendum, multiparty candidates will now be contesting in the first ever direct elections to the office of the president of Egypt.

Governance reforms were also on the agenda of some other new initiatives organized in the region during the last three months. The 'Forum for Future' in Rabat, the 'Gulf Strategy Forum' in Dubai, 'Good Governance Conference' in Amman, and Jeddah 'Economic Forum' — all discussed not only economic reforms but also, for the first time, the need for political reforms and the issue of governance in the Arab and Muslim world.

The interesting thing about 'Forum for Future' — an official event of G-8 countries — is the list of the participants invited to discuss the progress of economic and political reforms in their countries. The invitees include not only the 22 members of the Arab League, but also four non-Arab countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. This is the 'Greater Middle East' that is now the focal point of interest in the region.

How was it that after decades of their independence, these countries still needed outside prodding and pressure to think of democratic reforms in their internal governance while some others were able to do it on their

components of its modern elite, Argentina ranks 72 in the per capita GDP standing in the world (2003 figures).

Haiti has been an independent nation since 1804. In its 200 years' history, it has had some 26 coups and counter coups by its civil and military elite — one coup after every eight years, on an average. Consequently, the 2002 Human Development Index of UNDP places Haiti at the bottom of the pile of nations surveyed — at 153.

In the traditional societies of the Middle East, the overthrow of the monarchical regimes in Egypt and Iraq during 1950s pushed the governance in another direction. The remaining monarchies and emirates took measures to stop their recurrence by keeping a tight leash on both segments their populations, especially in regard to the movements of military formations in their countries.

Therefore, while in some soci-

In our age and time, the question of governance and succession has been decisively settled by the tried and tested system of democracy based on the principles of free and fair election, political accountability of rulers, plurality of opinion and impartiality. There is simply no alternative to this system in modern times. The system can give both stability and progress to a country.

eties, the forces of modernization fought among themselves for supremacy and weakened themselves in the process, in many others both civil and military components of the modern elite were generally kept at bay from influencing the governance which in some respects still reflects the practices of the old Ottoman Empire.

try where the civil and military components of its elite have not wasted their energies in infighting over governance and the country has practised uninterrupted democratic governance since its inception. It has never disrupted this process under any pretext and has reaped immense economic and political benefits on this account.

There is also much talk of a possible economic takeoff in the wake of an increase in the GDP growth rate. That is a good thing, although it is not for the first time that the country has been close to an economic takeoff. In its 58 years' history, Pakistan has been at the takeoff stage at least four times, but every time its economic recovery has been derailed by the problems of its internal governance.

The problems of governance in Pakistan were pointed out by a distinguished friend of the country. Former prime minister of Singapore Lee Kwan Yew,

himself a very successful leader of his country and a respected statesman of the world, had an intimate understanding of our affairs, having visited this country as well. In one of my meetings with Mr. Lee Kwan Yew, after I had presented to him some ideas for high growth potential of Pakistan and how Singapore can join us in developing that potential, he turned around and asked: 'why is it that despite these positive things, Pakistan had not realized its potential in all these years?'

In his usual plain-speaking manner, the builder of Singapore answered his own question saying that "at any time in Pakistan, those in power are constantly looking over their shoulders to see who might be trying to stab them in the back. And those outside power are just as vigorously scheming to overthrow them and gate-crash into the corridors of power. In this kind of situation, how can the energies and resources of a nation be harnessed to realize its full potential?" The solution to Pakistan's economic problems does not lie