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Parting with power, even partially, is not easy. To this day, Al Gore laments his narrow loss of the American Presidency to George Bush in 2000. And according to Dr Henry Kissinger, President Nixon wept like a child the night before his resignation in August 1974.

In Pakistan, power struggles are at the heart of chronic instability in the political system,

both among politicians and between the khaki and the mufti. Given this context, Pakistani leaders need to learn from the wisdom, maturity and statesmanship of the Chinese leadership, which took an historic, unique and unprecedented step of voluntarily parting with power en masse. This was their well thought and planned transition to a new, younger generation of leaders implemented at last week's 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing.

Despite scepticism in the Western media, the script was faithfully followed, with the 9-member Standing Committee, the Communist Party's highest forum, all having new faces barring the new leader, 59-year old Hu Jintao. China has therefore achieved a first in modern history by actually have a mandatory retirement age for political

leaders.

Pakistan too has had a political transition, similar to the script conceived and followed 17 years earlier by a previous military ruler. With one key difference: the transition this time was within the promised schedule.

As in March 1985, so also in November 2002, a military ruler is presiding over a transition to civilian rule after parliamentary polls following a presidential referendum. All 'checks and balances' are in place, including the Sword of Damocles, i.e., the power to sack the Prime Minister and parliament. Then too, Pakistan was a 'frontline state' with full support of the United States. Despite everything scripted to the last comma and colon, why are results contrary to expectation. Probably ignored is the classic miscalculation. In 1985, the fear was of a threat from the PPP, but the challenge was mounted from within parliament. Similarly, in 2002, instead of the mainstream political parties who were feared, the surprise was the resurgence of the Religious parties' alliance. So the lesson, from both the 1985 and 2002 experiences, is that politics charts its own uneven course, where the only predictable aspect is to expect the unexpected, rather than relying on a carefully crafted script that can easily be overturned by ground realities.

Not surprisingly, already questions are being asked about the longevity of the present political experiment, with assurances coming from day one regarding its capacity to survive its full five-year tenure. This question, reflecting a lack of faith in the future, stems from the track record of Pakistan's parliaments given the failure to complete their term. The answer to this question will depend on three aspects. First, the direction of civil-military relations, particularly the willingness of the khaki to give space and autonomy to the civilian government. Otherwise, a needless tussle would ensue over time.

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Second, relations among the political forces, especially fostering a democratic attitude of tolerance and respect for the strongest opposition to emerge in Pakistan's political history. Third, fallout of the US-led 'war on terror', especially the repercussions of the American manhunt for Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants believed by Washington to have found sanctuary across the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and the impact that the coming war on Iraq may have for regional stability.

Unlike the 1985 non-party parliament though, the 2002 parliament is quite representative of divergent strands of public opinion, from religious radicals to secular nationalists, Establishment politicians to militant democrats, plus a large contingent of educated youth, women and the clergy. In that respect, Pakistan is witnessing both an irony and a paradox, indeed an historical role reversal. In the 1980s, the clergy and the religious right were staunch allies of the military regime, assuming an affinity with the regime's Islamization and standard-bearers of the Afghan jihad, which was then being bankrolled by American dollars

It was a cozy troika of America, the Army and the Religious right for a whole lot of reasons of Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy. It was the Left and liberals who opposed that military regime and its policies with an accent on democracy and all that it stands for, i.e., supremacy of the Constitution, the rule of law and human rights. These issues were alien to the thinking of the Religious Right of that period. Now, in the present parliament, it is the religious parties conglomerate that has assumed the mantle of upholding somewhat secular issues like the sanctity of the 1973 Constitution, the rule of law and the role of the armed forces in politics, a departure from their ideological politics of the past. They are in fact staking their claim as defenders of democracy, acting more like the democratic Left and liberals of the 1980s. Even their stance on foreign policy is a throwback to the anti-Americanism of the Left during the Cold war.

Conversely, the Left and liberals had welcomed the October 12 coup, clearly enamoured by the 'liberalism'

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of the military regime, although they later realised such 'liberalism' is more of the cultural rather than the political variety. This is where the paradox of Pakistan's politics comes in, since most of the political forces prefer to suffer from a historical amnesia in this regard. They welcome the military's intervention, which by its nature is extraconstitutional and then carp when the khakis develop their own agenda. This has been a predictable but unfortunate pattern of politics in Pakistan, prior to both the 1977 and 1999 military coups. The government-opposition relations break down with a 'them' or 'us' zero-sumgame approach. The party that came to power with the military's blessings outgrows its khaki mentors. The weakened opposition, unable to dislodge its rivals in government, turns to the military for help in ousting its political adversaries by any means, fair or foul. And the military is willing to oblige since it feels its proteges have become 'too big for their boots' and it is looking to mentor new faces.

In 1977, the PNA preferred a military coup to a political deal with the civilian government. And it was clear on September 14, 1999, when the GDA was created with its 'one point agenda' of ousting the government, that this objective could only be achieved by a coup not by constitutional means. The paradox is that now those political forces who applauded the military takeover can't have it both ways: welcoming the 'original sin' but castigating what flowed as an almost inevitable natural consequence of October 12. It is time that the political forces showed leadership, and learnt lessons from past mistakes. Just as the Quaid had proclaimed in 1947 that even a 'moth eaten, truncated Pakistan' was better than not having any homeland for the Muslims, similarly a quasi-civilian setup with an elected parliament is still an

advance over outright military rule.

Pakistan's political culture would progress if all political forces were able to agree on just one point. That in the future, they would never applaud military interventions or eagerly seek khaki support to destabilise and oust elected governments. That would be one sign that political forces are able to accept responsibility for their decisions and they have the capacity to lead on their own, rather than being led. Surely, Pakistan is politically not more backward than Bangladesh which emerged from the Pakistani State in 1971 and which has had three free elections and changes of government since 1991. Despite their factional fighting and struggles for power both inside and outside parliament, no politician or political party in Bangladesh has demeaned its dignity and selfrespect by asking the military to intervene or help it oust its political rivals. And too in a country which once had a strong proclivity towards Bonapartism, with a dozen or so abortive or successful coups in quick succession.

A strong opposition augurs well for Pakistan, since it will force both the government and opposition to coexist in an atmosphere of tolerance, with most of the political forces now having a stake in the system. Pakistan's political travails having nothing to do with the democratic system, which, as the last three years have proven, is badly needed and is certainly better than any military rule. The challenge is to foster democratic attitudes that can

make democracy work.

E-mail queries an mushahid@nation.com.pk