

Putting a derailed democracy back on track

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General Pervez Musharraf's latest proclamation of his commitment to protect Pakistan's beleaguered democracy from derailling appears out of sync with reality. The democracy that General Musharraf has once again promised to protect during his meeting with editors and columnists in Lahore this week, has already derailed, marred by controversies surrounding the past year's transition to civilian rule, questions surrounding a parliament and a cabinet which appear increasingly inactive and disagreements over presidential powers.

To make matters worse, the unending row over the Legal Framework Order which stands at the centre of the present government-opposition rift, shows no signs of abating. Even a widely expected accord between the ruling, cobbled-together coalition government of prime minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali and a part of the opposition MMA (Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal) hardly promises to ensure smooth sailing ahead for Pakistani politics.

In brief, the disorder surrounding Pakistan's politics of today would carry on unabated with the potential for discord emerging from the fundamental flaws overseeing plans for a transition to civilian rule. In the past year, controversies unleashed from the outcome of the presidential referendum - in effect a one-candidate election — to the shenanigans unleashed by the proverbial hidden hand, which forced together the new coalition government after last October's elections, to the disagreement over General Musharraf's role — with or without his uniform — have together undermined Pakistan's political outlook. Pakistan's journey towards democratisation has in effect already seen a derailment from its course as the future of politics appears only in the hands of General Musharraf rather than falling in the hands of its elected representatives.

Travelling on its present course, Pakistan's outlook seems to only carry one prospective outcome for its future politics. Muddling through recurring crises may well be the best hope for the architects of Pakistan's new political order, rather than stability of the kind expected by General Musharraf. Ultimately, any extent of further fine-tuning, ranging from attempts to blatantly break the opposition's back to extracting support for the government through the use of fresh incentives, hardly makes a difference to Pakistan's long-term outlook.

In sharp contrast to the emerging scene, and tragically so, the lesson of history so conveniently ignored by the makers of Pakistan's political dispensation must be that the present day disorder can only be cured with a fundamental reorientation in re-turning to the basics.

That return, however, must be preceded by a hard-nosed look at the preferred choices so far including the military's long-term involvement in politics, the military-led establishment's routine penchant for choosing politicians of preference and the denial of a role for the opposition. Without such profoundly fundamental choices, it is difficult to foresee the first significant step towards striking an agreement on vital national interests requiring bipartisan support.

The gap between General Musharraf's perception of politics and his critics is essentially that while he expects Pakistan's outlook to consolidate on its present course, the compelling counter argument must be that a weakening of the political order could be the more likely outcome.

Ultimately, a failure to consolidate the political outlook would not only trigger far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's medium to long term stability but also undermine the military's own future in the country's affairs, not necessarily helped by that institution's frequent interventions of the past.

The way to a relatively more stable political future must be built upon three vital planks — each necessary to lay the course for stability.

First, Pakistan's political order must remain incomplete as long as controversies surrounding its military-led establishment's passion for picking politicians and political groups of choice does not come to an end. For far too long, Pakistan's political destiny has been set by a combination of hard-nosed players operating



Farhan Bokhari

The writer is a contributing editor
sfabokhari@hotmail.com

from the federal capital with the absolute eagerness to pull together an ideal new ruling order. In that process, the outlook for the existing order has been undermined as Pakistanis have found themselves pressured to accept one controversial

regime after another, brought to power in the midst of controversy and therefore subject to tough questions over its popular credentials. The repeated failure to bring together a representative government has meant that regimes in Islamabad with weak political credentials neither have the assurance of public backing on matters of vital national interest, nor indeed the clout to take the country towards a fundamentally different direction from its past.

Second, the Pakistani military's role in politics, which is often the subject of discussion, should in fact not be an issue. There can be no stable democracy under the watchful eyes of arbiters, with no constitutional role in politics, determined to emerge as the main umpires. Indeed, Pakistan's misfortune of the past, so often lamented by General Musharraf as the outcome of its 'sham' democracy, would remain unexplained unless backed by a close scrutiny of the role of the military in running the country. It is not surprising that the military's assertion to drive politics has only led to failure after failure as Pakistan has continued to search for a new ideal order to lead it towards a new future. The future of stable Pakistani politics can best be assured with a clear commitment to keep the military out of politics rather than attempts to formalise its role.

Finally, the true test of Pakistan's ultimate success or otherwise must come from the extent to which a new ruling order can successfully undertake hitherto ignored reforms, driving the country towards a new future. In the past four years since the bloodless coup of 1999, General Musharraf has overseen what his top officials claim to be a reformist government which has set the pace for a new future. But an objective assessment must draw the conclusion that such a claim of unequivocal success could not be further from the truth. There has clearly been a determined effort in areas such as joining the so-called US led war on terror which has helped to dilute Pakistan's previous international diplomatic isolation, and has triggered financial payoffs which have brought about relative prosperity for the country's macroeconomic indicators.

Yet, the so-called symbols of success have been largely triggered by exogenous factors rather than those intrinsically endogenous to Pakistan. Claims such as the phenomenal rise in Pakistan's liquid foreign currency reserves need to be soberly measured against the set of global circumstances which helped to perk up the foreign currency flows to the country. Other claims such as those predicting an upturn in this year's economic growth also need to be explained as more an outcome of timely rains, which helped the agriculture sector, rather than the outcome of successful government policy.

On the contrary, the hitherto un-tackled challenge remains that of confronting fast rising rates of poverty which have made Pakistan the proportionately most impoverished nation of South Asia. Tackling this challenge however cannot be done in isolation from confronting the array of issues related to a badly broken down system of governance and collapse of key institutions responsible for delivering social services. General Musharraf's claim of success may easily be ignored by a large chunk of Pakistan's mainstream population which remains at the periphery of the country's political and economic orders.

Indeed, the General's claim during the initial part of his tenure in moving towards lifting Pakistan's fortunes by way of forcefully reforming the most defunct aspects of national life, have become a matter of history and visibly detached from present day affairs of the state. It's not surprising then that the sentiments from those Pakistanis, who denounce the government for its failure to improve their lives, also bear testimony to the failure of the democratic order. A political structure, which delivers the assurance of unassailability to the president while failing to address the challenge of reform, can hardly mark the first step towards turning the corner for Pakistan.