

Pak- Democracy

# Can Pakistan mix

By David Rohde

*Moderates are seeking the end of military rule, but that may not be good for the United States*

**T**ENS of thousands of pro-western moderates took to the streets of Pakistan recently and demanded an end to military rule. Benazir Bhutto, the country's exiled former prime minister, is offering to return and push for democracy, which she says would act as an antidote to extremism.

Before the Iraq war, the United States might have welcomed such a vigorous call for democracy. But with the war faltering, Bush administration officials, and some Democratic presidential candidates as well, are reacting with caution, fearing that democracy could be a recipe for instability. While the country's military has a mixed record, they fear change, however well-intentioned, could endanger American security. George Perkovich, a senior analyst at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, described the state of debate in Washington this way: "People on the

right and the left will say: 'You're just going to repeat the same mistake as Iraq. Don't you understand that these places can't change and that you're much better off having someone with a heavy hand, who can have some kind of order versus disorder?'"

Pakistani moderates find the American attitude bewildering and dangerous. Just as they are beginning to believe democracy might return, they complain, the United States is abandoning them.

"This is a movement of the enlightened, urban upper middle class," said Rasul Baksh Rais, a Pakistani political analyst, in a telephone interview from Islamabad. "Where in the Muslim world have you seen a movement going on for three months and not a single shot fired by the protesters? It is unique in many respects."

The stakes for the United States are high. Osama bin Laden and other top leaders of Al Qaeda are believed to be hiding in remote tribal areas along the border with Afghanistan and regaining some of their ability to launch international attacks.

American officials say that while

General Musharraf, the president, has aggressively hunted members of Al Qaeda in Pakistan's cities, he has taken poorly conceived, or half-hearted, steps to gain control of the tribal areas. Critics say Pakistan's secretive intelligence apparatus has largely turned a blind eye to Taliban forces in Pakistan who engage in attacks on American soldiers in Afghanistan.

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better. They, like some Americans, argue that countering militants is not just a military task. It is also important to use political and economic programmes, they contend, to prevent extremism's spread. A civilian government, the argument goes, can do that more effectively than a military one.

Experts like Mr Rais and Mr

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Perkovich say the vast majority of the population and the military remains moderate. So, they argue, Pakistan has little chance of becoming so unstable that hard-line Islamists will gain power or seize control of one of the country's nuclear weapons — the worst nightmare for Western officials.

General Musharraf has not reformed the country and is quickly losing popularity, according to Frederic

political parties have been weakened.

"The longer the military governs, the weaker they become," Christine Fair, a Pakistan expert with the United States Institute for Peace, said of the democratic institutions. "Only by practicing democracy can Pakistan democratize."

The counterargument is that Pakistan's secretive intelligence service would be even less likely to cooperate

the military four times.

During the last attempt at Pakistani democracy in the 1990s, Ms Bhutto and her civilian rival, Nawaz Sharif, engaged in winner-take-all tactics that undermined each other's governments. Behind the scenes, the military meddled, further destroying confidence. Then it took power and declared civilian rule a failure.

Stephen P Cohen, a Pakistan expert at the Brookings Institution, said military and civilian leaders there needed to strike a grand bargain that gradually reduced the military's role in politics, while securing its role in national defense, as has taken place in Turkey and Latin America.

"My greatest fear is that it is too late," Mr Cohen said. "Too late for civil society in Pakistan to withstand growing pressures from radical Islamists, and too late for the army to come up with a strategy that would lead to its successful withdrawal."

Over the last year, some members of Congress and experts inside and outside the government have called for a review of American policy towards Pakistan. They say American aid should

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Grare, a Pakistan expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. General Musharraf has voiced support for democratic reform, but the army dominates Pakistani society as never before. The economy has grown, but long-term changes in land and education policy have not been implemented. The judiciary and

with efforts to crack down on radicals than it had under a military leader.

Democracy has failed before, points out Teresita Schaffer of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. In fact, in an impoverished, ethnically divided nation of 149 million people, democracy has often been linked with corruption and has been overthrown by



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be conditioned on improved performance in the war on terror and an increase in Pakistan's spending on development and education.

But Bush administration officials have continued to express public support for General Musharraf, and Democratic presidential candidates have advocated caution as well. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton said General Musharraf had "become quite antidemocratic". But she added that "we depend on him to try to control the tribal areas, out of which come the resurgent Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters".

Senator John Edwards was more blunt. "Given the power of radical Islam in Pakistan," he said, "there's absolutely no way to know what kind of government will take his place."

Mr Perkovich, the Carnegie analyst, said sophisticated American diplomacy was needed to broker an agreement that gradually shifted power from the army to civilians. But, he added, "neither party has thought about Pakistan and gotten it right."

"It's a problem," he said, "that is bipartisan in its avoidance of a solution."

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