**Our best era**

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| PAKISTAN turned 72 this month.  Political instability gave it a new regime type in each past decade. An inapt focus on short-term growth may see the Ayub and Musharraf eras as the best ones. But an indepth, integrated lens covering durable economic, political and security progress gives a different view. Durable political progress means fair and regular polls that improve governance and the rights of all societal groups. Durable economic progress is about growth, but also its apt drivers, quality and equity. Durable security comes from durable political and economic progress.  The patterns on these three axes in the three army eras were similar. Coups were justified based on civilian misrule. Such misrule is common in poor states, yet most armies do not step in. Each era promised real democracy, but gave rigged polls and autocratic rule, which excluded key parties and ethnic groups. Governance was poor and even Ayub`s famed bureaucracy focused on elite services. Legislative progress was weak. Each era ended with the fake political system ending when it was finally forced to hold fair polls (1970, 1988 and 2008), with oddly PPP winning each time.  Growth was high. But driven by politicised short-term US aid, it ebbed once aid ended. Some say we were an Asian tiger then. Actually, we were an American poodle. Ayub-era growth spurred industry, but mainly light industry, unlike fast Korean forays into heavier industry under army rule. Huge inequity created major regional tensions then. Zi a`s and Musharraf`s growth was facile and did not upgrade the economy much. Sans durable political or economic progress, each era produced longterm violence, which ironically all came from the same US ties that gave only shortterm aid and growth. So, given the mega failures on all three axes, they rank the three worst eras.  While Ayub-Yahya and Musharraf eras resulted in more violence, Zia left deeper national imprints by founding the flawed structures of today`s Pakistan. Socially, this included bigotry, deep conservatism and politics of faith. Politically, it meant a move from issues-based to corrupt patronage politics. Economically, it meant a state that ran high fiscal and external deficits and debt levels, abdicated its role in spurring industry, and chased IMF loans. The security mix included raising militants to achieve regional aims.  Then there were four civilian eras. There was the 1947-58 era of the original sin where, unlike India, we shunned democracy. Bhutto`s era started promisingly by giving a strong consensus constitution andan egalitarian economic vision, but later gave autocracy, poor economy, Baloch insurgency, and finally rigged polls. His civilian era most closely resembled autocratic eras. The 1990s era of political musical chairs run by Pindi saw slow growth and misrule.  Finally, there was the 2008-2018 decade which curbed Musharraf-era militancy.  Operationally, this was due to the army. But strategically, the point is that, instead of curbing militancy in its own era, it had planted its seeds then. Once in the saddle, it developed political compulsions from which it was only freed by democracy`s return. Everyday governance remained poor even after 2008. But political progress occurred via the emergence of more open and tolerant politics where the media, civil society and opposition were freer.  While Musharraf vainly promised new leadership, it emerged in this era with PTL The first-ever institutionalised free polls and civilian-led peaceful transition wereheld in 2013. Key legislative work was done that autocrats never did, eg, on devolution, electoral reforms and Fata merger. A key failure was on local bodies.  A notable aim was to replace short-term security-linked US ties as growth driverwith long-term Chinese economic ties.  Growth increased. But this policy did not give results quickly. So it too ended with large deficits and debt and crashed growth.  But overall, this era had better political and security results than others. Hence, it ranks as the best era, but one still with many gaps. So startlingly, even muchmaligned corrupt politicos from inept parties gave better results.  Unluckily, our best era was ended by those who gave us our worst eras. Despite past lessons, we are back to the illusion that political progress can be sacrificed for economic progress and security aims by having a `selected` regime. But in deeply fractured states like ours, political progress is most crucial as without it one cannot have durable security or economic progress.  Autocracy is up, but governance and economy remain abysmal. Thus, this political experiment of our paternalistic ideological guardians may end too, but only after inflicting deep wounds on society.  The writer heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive think tank.  Twitter: @Niaz Murtaza2 |