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ANALYSIS

PAKISTAN: BETWEEN ROCKS AND HARD PLACES AS ELECTIONS APPROACH

Toufiq Siddiqi

No election in Pakistan's history has been followed so closely worldwide as that scheduled for February 18. The main reason for this is the strategic role of Pakistan in support of U.S.-led operations in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Another important reason is that Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons, and given the rise of militant attacks and instability in the country, there is concern, particularly in the Western media and popular imagination, about the possibility that these weapons might fall into the hands of extremist Islamist groups. Yet another reason for the interest in the elections is the recent assassination of former Prime Minister and Leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Benazir Bhutto, who the United States hoped would reach a power-sharing arrangement with President Musharraf. The assassination delayed the elections originally scheduled for last December and has brought further unpredictability to the results of elections now scheduled for February 18th.

Almost 60 parties have candidates running in the elections. Pakistan clearly has no shortage of aspiring leaders, but rather a shortage of followers. Only a handful of the parties are national parties, while the rest are regional or religious ones. Assuming that the elections are free and fair, the most likely outcome is one where no party emerges with a majority of the seats and a coalition government must be formed. Whichever government comes into power will be under enormous pressure to meet the urgent shortages of water, bread, electricity, other forms of energy, basic education, and employment opportunities. It would also need to do more to provide an atmosphere of security conducive to rapid economic development.

Many of these issues are interlinked. For example, shortages of natural gas, electricity, and other forms of energy make it difficult to start new industries that could provide more jobs. The large number of poor, illiterate, and unemployed young people makes it easy to organize huge political rallies, which can quickly turn violent. While some of the leaders of extremist groups may be from the educated middle class, the ranks of the unemployed or illiterate provide fertile recruiting grounds for "foot soldiers," including those who carry out suicide bombings.

CHALLENGES FACING U.S.-PAKISTAN RELATIONS AFTER THE ELECTIONS

The main priority of the United States and some of its principal allies after the elections will continue to be that the new government in Pakistan pursues the extremists, particularly in the tribal areas adjoining the border with Afghanistan. Further, there have been suggestions in the Congress and elsewhere to link assistance to Pakistan with its achievements on

countering these extremists. While Pakistan is likely to continue its ongoing efforts to fight the militants in the tribal areas, this may not necessarily be the top priority of the next Pakistani Government, which is likely to have diverse constituencies who would want their domestic concerns addressed first. Former U.S. Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill's famous remark that "all politics is local" applies to Pakistan as well as to most other countries.

Pakistanis point out that they have suffered more military and civilian casualties in their anti-extremist campaigns in Waziristan than the combined losses of the NATO coalition led by the United States in Afghanistan. In fact, most of the major terrorists apprehended so far have been captured by Pakistani forces and subsequently turned over to the United States. U.S. offers to increase the number of clandestine operatives in Pakistan for possible operations in the tribal areas have been declined by President Musharraf, and are likely to be declined by the next government. This may emerge as one of the major policy disagreements between the United States and a new government in Pakistan. Any new Pakistani government will be acutely sensitive to an overt U.S. role in anti-extremist operations on Pakistani soil.

Many in Pakistan believe that the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the several attempts at assassinating President Musharraf, and the targeting of military and police personnel in several cities are a direct consequence of Pakistan's having pursued the extremists in Waziristan and other tribal areas. The tribal communities there have enduring cultural and territorial roots, and their fierce loyalty to family and traditions often lead to revenge killings. Hence many Pakistanis and a new Pakistani government will likely heed the need for carefully balancing the struggle against extremists with the need not to further inflame the situation in a way that undermines Pakistan's stability—notwithstanding the priorities of countries such as the United States.

Moreover, older Pakistanis recall that the country's current gun culture was a result of the huge quantities of weapons supplied by the United States and others to fight the Russians in Afghanistan and the concurrent buildup of religious *Madrasas* to provide the trained recruits

that did the fighting. They worry that a global power such as the United States has shifting world priorities, and that its interest in supporting Pakistan might wane once another major crisis claims its attention. This lurking worry in Pakistani minds shapes their understanding of how to calibrate the struggle against Islamist extremists with the need for constructive relations with Washington.

The security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons has become a growing worry of the U.S. news media, yet it is not viewed as a major issue in Pakistan or by many in the U.S. security establishment. Pakistan is believed to have relied heavily on U.S. technologies, practices, and procedures to ensure the physical security of its nuclear weapons. Reportedly, the warhead cores are kept in separate locations from the weapon detonation components at a number of sites under security provided by tiers of military personnel. During the current U.S. Presidential campaign, it was suggested that Pakistan's nuclear weapons be guarded by troops from the United States and the United Kingdom. Such suggestions exacerbate the sensitivities of Pakistan and any new Pakistani government will likely react strongly to such infringements on its sovereignty even if quiet assurances and cooperation for nuclear security continue.

In conclusion, while the United States and NATO would like Pakistan to take on an even larger role in combating the extremists operating in Waziristan and other tribal areas, the next government in Pakistan would have to balance this mission with the other urgent domestic priorities it faces, which would determine the survival of the coalition that might emerge. The war in Afghanistan against Al-Qaeda and their allies may go on for years. It is important for Pakistan not only to fight the extremists in the border areas now, but also to reduce the number of future recruits to their ranks. Providing general and secular education to the masses, and opportunities for employment, are crucial for attaining this goal. The United States and the international coalition it leads must focus not just on improving the current security situation in Afghanistan and in the tribal lands of western Pakistan, but also on the longer-term objective of building a modern and moderate Pakistan.

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