

PAKISTAN'S SECOND LAST CHANCE

Stephen P. Cohen

While Pakistan is often labeled as a failed state it is more accurately characterized as a flailing state: searching for a political framework that enables it to cope with its most important domestic and external challenges. Since the 1950s Pakistan was governed by a narrowly-based military-political elite. With policy steered by the generals, India became a foreign policy obsession, domestic corruption and incompetence contributed to a failure to transform Pakistan's economy, and the state's key social indicators—literacy, the role of women, education—reveal that Pakistan fell behind Bangladesh, its former East Wing, once regarded as a political and developmental basketcase.

Last month's election in Pakistan has been correctly hailed as a turning point. It demonstrated that the state is not faced with an immediate Islamist takeover or a civil war. The election (watched by thousands of outside observers) was peaceful, even if preceded by several suicide bombings. The extreme Islamists were defeated and regional parties will play some role in the new coalition. The combina-

tion of resurgent democratic forces, outside encouragement, and the empowering role of new technologies—the internet played a critical role—all contributed to an election outcome that was as welcome as it was surprising.

Pakistan now has still another “last chance” to get things right. My 2004 book argued that Pakistan's critical moment would come when a new government replaced the flawed regime of General/President Pervez Musharraf. That moment has now arrived. While its initial performance is admirable the PPP-PML coalition cannot take on the larger challenges alone. Outside powers have contributed to the distortion of Pakistani politics for decades, it is in their interest that they now play a positive role in assisting Pakistanis to achieve a more or less democratic order that can cope with several critical challenges.

India can do more to shape Pakistan's future than any other state. Indians are deservedly angry at Pakistan for its historic meddling in Kashmir, its support of Islamic extremists, and its attempts to under-

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cut Indian power. But the evidence is overwhelming that Pakistani attitudes towards India have changed markedly – even in the army – and that some kind of accommodation is possible. The four major crises (and several minor ones) that made Kashmir the flashpoint for a nuclear war also taught both sides that it could not be wrested from the other side by force. There will not soon be a formal Kashmir agreement, public opinion in India is not ready for one, but it makes strategic and economic sense for both sides to expand economic ties, encourage non-official dialogue and academic exchanges, and accelerate the process of rolling back sixty years of rivalry. India needs to encourage the development of a Pakistan that sees it as a natural partner, it also needs to assure Pakistan that its presence in Afghanistan is not part of an encirclement strategy (a fear that drives Pakistan's support for the Taliban).

China is regarded by Pakistan as its most trustworthy and enduring friend, but Beijing remains concerned about Pakistan's growing Islamic extremism. For the first time in memory, Chinese officials express concern over Pakistan, and profess their willingness to work with other states (including the U.S.) to stabilize it. China has no commitment to a democratic Pakistan – but it would be content with a competent civilian government that enabled China to develop its ports and roads as a transit point from Western China to the Arabian Sea and the Middle East. A “de-

mocracy with a Pakistani face” was the characterization of one Chinese official of what China could live with.

The United States has a long and inglorious history of supporting military regimes in Pakistan, but it reversed that policy when it became clear that Benazir Bhutto represented a viable challenge to Musharraf, and when she promised a more effective anti-terror strategy than he could deliver. Benazir herself understood the realpolitik behind American policy, but she privately argued that there was nothing wrong in America now tilting towards a civilian government when it had tilted in favor of the military for so long. Washington's error was in not making it clear that it supported all democratic forces in Pakistan; recent U.S. visitors have followed the lead of the American ambassador in doing so in the form of meetings with a wide range of newly elected officials and newly freed judges. America should also conditionalize its military assistance, as it has been paying too much for too little cooperation. Yet, it should increase, without strings, its support for developmental and educational sectors, cut out the contractors that charge predatory administrative costs, and work with like-minded states, notably Japan and the EU countries, to ensure that these programs are effective. The programs that delivered several billions of dollars in 2005 for earthquake show that assistance to Pakistan can be effectively absorbed and distributed.

There is room for an important contribution from other states, as well. Saudi Arabia propelled the exiled Nawaz Sharif into Pakistan when it became clear that the liberal, secular Benazir was emerging as a popular figure. While the Saudis can and should continue to aid Pakistan by subsidizing oil prices, neither it nor any other country should start playing politics within the governing coalition — outside powers must let Pakistanis work out their own arrangements for power sharing and on particular policies (even, when it comes to the U.S. counter-terrorism strategies). The EU states plus wealthy Asian powers, such as Japan and Singapore should take another look at their investment portfolios in Pakistan. Just as important as investment and aid is assistance to Pakistan's enfeebled bureaucracy, which badly needs training and support. One

justification for army rule was that it was Pakistan's only coherent organization. This was true only because other government agencies had been systematically starved over the years. In any case the army again demonstrated under Musharraf that it cannot run Pakistan — his successor has wisely pulled out officers and non-coms from civilian jobs.

Rescuing Pakistan from its own troubled history will not be easy, but Pakistani politicians, journalists, and academics now understand that this could be their last opportunity to fulfill Jinnah's dream of a secular and moderate state. Paradoxically, it is Pakistan's new importance regarding terrorism, as well as its nuclear capabilities, and its potential as a moderate Muslim state that compels others to do more than stand by and watch.