



COMMENTARY

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Not the Same Pakistan

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Six years ago this week, the United States launched a new relationship with Pakistan – or more precisely with its president, General Pervez Musharraf. Today, Musharraf is fighting for his political life, and the U.S. government is trying to help him stay in charge. Neither he nor the United States can restore the relatively open government he has run since taking power in 1999. The United States needs to manage the transition to an eventual post-Musharraf setup, so as to protect America's enduring interests in this volatile part of the world.

The United States expected Musharraf to help the United States fight the terrorists in and near Afghanistan; in return, the United States would support his continued rule in Pakistan. Washington had other goals as well – strengthening Pakistan's institutions and bringing in a gradual transition to democracy, which in turn might sustain anti-terrorism cooperation over the longer term. But these were secondary. The stability of the Musharraf government, seen as the passport to anti-terrorism work, came first.

Musharraf's disastrous effort to remove Pakistan's chief justice in March galvanized the opposition and effectively ended the "old Musharraf government." The United States backed his long-running dialogue with former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, hoping to keep Musharraf firmly in the saddle and anchored to a moderate partner. The tepid U.S. criticism of Musharraf's decision to re-exile his nemesis, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, prompted speculation that the United States quietly encouraged the Saudis to take Sharif back.

Pakistan's political drama seems to be playing out in slow motion. Musharraf has certainly benefited by the divisions among his rivals. But the United States will not gain much from its political maneuvering. The "kinder, gentler" government is gone; Musharraf will now rule by more autocratic methods. Sharif's second exile violated a recent Supreme Court ruling. Musharraf will not allow his political opponents any space to organize, if his mass arrests of Sharif's party-mates are any guide. The government is already warning the media about coverage of sensitive issues. There are ample indications that major demonstrations or a judicial decision invalidating his election in uniform may lead Musharraf to declare the state of emergency Secretary Rice talked him out of a few weeks ago.

Some see a Musharraf-Bhutto deal as a "transition to democracy." Musharraf's temperament and the logic of his current situation both argue against this. Musharraf speaks of "unity of command" as the hallmark of his leadership. That is hard to reconcile with real sharing of power, especially since both Musharraf and Bhutto have publicly expressed contempt for one another. Moreover, a successful power-sharing arrangement would need to build on genuinely free elections. After arresting the leadership of Sharif's party, would Musharraf and the army allow his other rival to win a major electoral victory?

The bigger problem is Pakistan's likely policies. Musharraf will have to be cautious precisely in those areas where the United States wants boldness: with domestic violent extremists and with pro-Taliban elements. He will continue to regard the religious parties as potential allies. The army and police will focus on controlling activists from the mainstream political parties; this makes it hard to conduct a campaign against lawless extremists. Continuing violence, trouble in the streets, and the erosion of respect for the army already make the army uneasy. Thoughtful Pakistani commentators foresee a bitter confrontation, with potentially dangerous results.

At some point, accumulating pressures will lead to a transition, and we'll have someone else to work with. This may take a while, but the trends inexorably point in this direction. If we hold to our present course, the United States will be blamed for the failings of the outgoing regime, as well as for imposing an unpopular government on Pakistan. The top U.S. priorities – Pakistan's energetic participation in anti-terrorism operations and its political support in stabilizing Afghanistan – will become, even more than they already are, a "U.S. war" from which a new Pakistan government will want to dissociate itself to show Pakistan's independence. The army will welcome the chance to back out of the "American" operations in the frontier, where they have lost men and prestige.

It is not too late for the United States to focus on managing the inevitable transition. We will of course continue to work closely with Musharraf as long as he is in power. But we should make clear publicly that we will work with anyone who can win a genuinely free election and who will fight against the terrorists and lawbreakers that threaten Pakistan's society. We have worked with many different Pakistani leaders. Pakistan will be better able to pursue the policies that really matter to us if its leaders are free of the taint of being "Washington's creatures." And recent events remind us of one of the big benefits of democratic elections: they provide an honorable means of changing leadership.

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