

Already a failed state? Pakistan in the aftermath of Bhutto's assassination

Marco Mezzera
Conflict Research Unit,
Clingendael Institute

With all the due precautions necessary when referring to quantifications of societal processes, it is nevertheless interesting to look at the way Pakistan has been performing on the Failed States Index (FSI) that The Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy have been compiling since 2005. Whilst the total score registered in 2005 placed Pakistan on a comfortable 34th position on the overall ranking (just outside the red zone of the 90+ scores), the situation for 2006 drastically changed. In that year, the country made an incredible leap “forward” to land on position 9 of the index. According to the authors of the FSI, “the October 2005 earthquake...[was] the single largest factor in Pakistan’s significant jump”,¹ as it brought about enormous demographic pressures and internal displacement. However, the same authors concede that another social indicator (ie: Group Grievance) also played an important role in the growing instability of the country. More precisely, they mention “a spike in clashes between government security forces and militants in Baluchistan and the North West Frontier Province (and) a widening rift between the government of General Pervez Musharraf and the powerful Pakistani security apparatus and religious leaders”.

2007 brought a slight improvement in the overall assessment of the situation in Pakistan, which was reflected by a three-point decrease in the total score and a lower position on the ranking (ie: 12th instead of 9th). The improvement, however, was decisively minimal, almost irrelevant, and the country therefore was still dangerously close to the top of a list whose main purpose is to identify those states that are more vulnerable “to violent internal conflict and societal deterioration”; or rather, to state failure. The result was somewhat unexpected, as the steady recovery from the earthquake, which was due in part to the intervention of the international community, had been expected to bring those indicators that had surged most in the immediate aftermath of the disaster back to the levels of 2005.

Whilst such a decrease was smaller than expected, other socio-economic and political indicators, strongly related to issues of legitimacy of the state, internal political competition and the positioning of the security apparatus in the broad governance landscape, showed clear and worrying signs of degeneration and instability. In particular, the aforementioned rift between the powerful military and its supreme leader on the one hand, and the religious authorities and institutions on the other hand, continued to expand, mainly due to General Musharraf’s controversial support to the US-led War on Terror and its repressive ramifications in Pakistan. In addition, the government’s crackdown on suspected Islamic extremist groups and schools seemed also to create tensions with one of the main traditional sponsors of such groups, the Inter-

¹ For more details, see the “Country Profiles” section at <http://www.fundforpeace.org>.

Services Intelligence Agency (ISI). The same hard approach to domestic security issues appeared to further alienate the government's legitimacy and acceptance in those areas bordering with Afghanistan, which had traditionally enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy from the state and which now found themselves the target of increased militarisation, without the positive benefits of increased attention from the central state.² Overall, the increasingly authoritarian and militaristic tendencies of the Chief of the Army Staff and head of state clearly spurred a contrary process of democratisation that would further develop in 2007 and be characterised by a series of traumatic events.

Deepening crisis of legitimacy

The main trends of instability registered during 2006 seemed to continue unabated in 2007 and although they have not yet been incorporated in an updated score of the FSI, it would not sound far-fetched to assume a new worsening of Pakistan's ranking. For example, in January tensions began to mount between the government and the Red Mosque in Islamabad, a religious center that lies at the heart of the capital city, just next to the main government and military buildings, and which was accused of promoting a radical brand of Islam. After months of heated exchanges and a hardening of the reciprocal positions, eventually in early July 2007 the confrontation degenerated first in an armed siege and then in an intervention that saw Pakistani security forces take full control of the religious site at the cost of more than 100 casualties. The military stand-off between the government and the mosque's clerics and students was another symptom of the increasingly unpopular policies of General Musharraf, especially with regard to his support to the US-led War on Terror.

During the period that the Red Mosque drama was unfolding, another major event disrupted the artificial order that the head of state was trying to impose on the country. Normally not renowned for its independence from external manipulation, the judiciary suddenly found in the figure of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry a counterbalancing force to the until-then undisputed power of the President and the allied military apparatus. The struggle for a containment of General Musharraf's exceptional powers was however short-lived as the Chief Justice was finally suspended by the former in March. But the wave of protests that the sacking generated, especially considering the fact that it mainly originated within a sector, that of the lawyers, that could hardly be accused of extremist positions, further eroded the legitimacy of the government. International pressure for genuine implementation of democratic principles also started to mount, though it soon clashed with the contrasting interests of supporting the political legitimacy of General Musharraf as a champion of the fight against Islamists in that country and in neighboring Afghanistan.

The following period witnessed a continuation of the power struggle between the judiciary, represented by the Supreme Court, and the executive, which eventually culminated in General Musharraf's declaration of the emergency rule in November. While the pretext used to justify such an extreme measure was the need to curb growing threats to the stability of the country, coming from domestic and international Islamic terrorists, it was obvious that all the doubts raised over the constitutionality of General Musharraf's double role as head of state and army chief, and about the legality of his election in October for another five year term, were effectively cleared out of the way. At the same time, perhaps because he was sensing the growing political vacuum around him, or more probably in order to control from close range a political opposition that was growing stronger by the day, he also tried to jockey his two main political rivals, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto. Interestingly enough, while the first was expelled from the country within hours of his arrival in Pakistan, notwithstanding an August ruling of the Supreme

² Such as the delivery of basic services and development.

Court that allowed him to return from exile, the second did manage to remain on Pakistani soil. Rumors that she had struck a power-sharing arrangement with General Musharraf behind closed doors, in order to be able to compete in the upcoming general elections were soon silenced by the first attempt on her life, which took place in October in Karachi, killing more than 140 supporters of her party.

From that moment on, and until her assassination on 27 December 2007, Benazir Bhutto was quite outspoken about her conviction that domestic state actors, and not the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, had to be considered as the main suspects in any attempt to take her life. And even now, while all the evidences seem to incriminate the top Taliban commander in South Waziristan, Baitullah Mehsud, several questions remain unanswered with regard to the dynamics of the attack and the immediate events that followed it. In spite of all the reasonable doubts emerging from the events, it appears firmly clear that all the attention is currently being diverted towards the need to contrast the biggest threat to the country: the steady revival and growing embeddedness of the Taliban in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. And the peculiar shift in focus from “the traditional external threat from eastern neighbor India to waging a counterinsurgency campaign against the internal threat from militants” in the tribal areas of western Pakistan, is definitely welcomed by the US too, as recently indicated by the recommendations of the head of the US military’s Central Command. In that regard, all the violent events of the recent months, namely “the rise of militants in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and the siege of the Red Mosque in Islamabad” are conveniently deemed to converge towards the western border.³

Is Musharraf losing grip?

The evident trend towards authoritarianism that President Pervez Musharraf has embraced since 2006 and that has culminated in the 4 November 2007 declaration of emergency rule, is often regarded as a mere show of force, but it could also be looked at as a last effort to counter and conceal growing weaknesses in the power system. In that respect, the assassination of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) chairperson, Benazir Bhutto, might have opened a new chapter in the growing sense of instability that grips the country. It might become the ultimate event to tip the balance against her main political opponent, President Musharraf. Growing numbers of Pakistanis are finally linking to him all the multiple crises that have been affecting their country in the recent past.

In addition to those problems of legitimacy and stability, already discussed in the previous part of the article, new issues are inexorably emerging, which are starting to pose huge challenges to Musharraf’s capacity to manage state affairs. For instance, energy and food shortages have been hitting the country in the last couple of months. While the government has been fast in blaming hoarding and smuggling interests for this problem, its strategy for correcting the situation has not been received with open arms. Honoring his own military origins, General Musharraf has decided to deploy paramilitary forces to monitor the wheat supply chain at warehouses and flour mills. But as one local political commentator pointed out, “for Musharraf, the military appears to be the panacea for all ills when clearly its extensive engagement in the civilian sphere has created insurmountable issues of security and political instability which are causing a challenge to the integrity of the state”.⁴

In addition, the faltering provision of basic services and goods, such as food and energy, have been further aggravating the crisis of state legitimacy in those territories where the Pakistani military have been conducting anti-militant operations. And it should therefore come as no

³ Gray, Andrew. “Pakistan to do more against militants-US commander”, Reuters, 16 January 2008.

⁴ Rizvi, Muddassir. “Pakistan: Beset By Multiple Crises”, Inter Press Service News Agency, 15 January 2008.

surprise that people in the northern Swat Valley, for example, have already announced that they will boycott the 18 February general elections if the government does not provide them with sufficient energy for their homes. This specific case is also interesting because it emphasises the close relations existing between political legitimacy and state effectiveness in the form of service delivery.

Finally, the energy shortages have also started to leave their mark on the general running of the Pakistani economy. The current unreliability of the energy supply to the industrial sector (mainly cotton and textile factories) has already forced the closure of many of these industries. In the Punjab province alone as many as 300 textile plants have closed in recent months. Such an impact on private business operations has obviously had its negative repercussions on state revenues too. When compared over a one year period, tax collection has dramatically dropped, by about 83% between December 2006 and the same month of 2007. A steady GDP growth of between six and eight percent over the last couple of years has probably been one of the most important factors in correcting negative trends in state fragility in Pakistan. Now that the national economy also seems to be heading towards an unstable period, even this last bastion of stability might disappear, with all the related consequences for the country.

Musharraf's political survival seems therefore to hang on a very thin thread, as he is increasingly being associated with all the aforementioned problems affecting the country, and his removal from power is therefore perceived as the most immediate solution to the same problems. Given to his seeming incapacity or unwillingness to cope democratically with the degenerating domestic situation, or to design a substantial set of political and economic reforms, the question at this point centres on the chances for success of a militaristic approach. Musharraf seems inclined to choose the hard way to deal with the various issues threatening his position and legitimacy, but will that be workable in the long run? And won't there eventually be other actors within the security apparatus who will decide to remove him because he would have become more a liability, than an asset, to the current system?

A cohesive security apparatus?

In his attempt to maintain his grip on power, President Musharraf has not done democracy a big favour. On the contrary, his shift towards authoritarian measures has "alienated all the modern, secular and liberal forces in Pakistan, with the exception of some businessmen and his own community" of refugees from India that has settled in the province of Sindh. To effectively rein in the aspirations for independency of some sectors of the judiciary, suspend the Constitution, silence the hostile media and contrast the increasingly vocal political opposition, he had no choice but to rely on the support of "the military, an assortment of feudal politicians and some friendly fundamentalists".⁵

The armed forces in particular remain the most secure ticket to Musharraf's political survival. A complex process of integration and exchange of reciprocal favours between the President and the military, which was set in motion after the 1999 coup, has produced a governance system whereby the latter exercise extensive control on both the Pakistani state and its economy. Retired generals, for instance, have been regularly placed in key positions of authority within the government and national companies. "The army's business interests now span banking and insurance, cement and fertiliser, electricity and sugar".⁶ This system of rewards in exchange for loyalty has apparently been extended also to the lower-ranking officers and soldiers. Jobs, other opportunities and rewards such as land, are regularly promised after five years of service.

⁵ Zakaria, Fareed. "Musharraf's Last Stand", *Newsweek*, 12 January 2008.

⁶ Mian, Zia. "Pakistan Under Siege", *Foreign Policy In Focus*, Washington, DC, 17 August 2007.

It seems increasingly obvious, however, that at this specific political conjunction, Musharraf needs the military more than the military needs him. Should he become an evident liability in the eyes of key international allies such as the US, too, sudden power upheavals within the armed forces and eventually within the Pakistani government are not to be ruled out. In this regard, Musharraf will face a very complex balancing act in his effort to appease on the one hand US interests in the war on terrorism, and on the other the likely susceptibilities of sectors of the security forces that throughout the years have established stable relationships with the Islamic militants of the frontier provinces.

The union of interests and intents between the military-led Pakistani elite and Islamic forces dates back to the partition of 1947. Religion was then used to justify the separation from Hindu-dominated India, and soon after Islam became a useful tool in the hands of Pakistan's ruling civil and military elite. At home, Islam was used "to co-opt and reward the clergy of all Muslim sects to keep the secular, democratic political parties at bay. Internationally, the Pakistani government showcased its Islamic credentials to prove its allegiance to the anti-communism cause".⁷ A convergence of conservative interests had taken hold according to a pattern that is still clearly recognisable in current day Pakistan. Musharraf's political party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Q), and the military establishment at large, both keep looking for political alliances with Islamic parties (some of them openly pro-Taliban) in order to resist challenges to their power by more secular parties such as the PPP. As a result of this regressive alliance, religious parties managed to win elections and become the major coalition partner respectively in the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan, two provinces where "Talibanisation" has been rampant and where Pakistan shares its border with Afghanistan.

At the same time, the government has been promoting its new brand of moderate Islam as deserving a legitimate position within the international war on Islamist terror. It has also been careful in trying to maintain at least the appearance of a formal democracy. However, increasing pressure from the US to have laudable statements of intention followed by adequate actions, has somehow disturbed the power balance that existed between the central government and the frontier provinces. The evident limits of a series of peace deals with tribal areas eventually led the central government to order a huge military operation, in which eighty thousand Pakistani troops were deployed in the agencies of North and South Waziristan. But the military solution did not work either. On the contrary, the conflict in those areas has become "increasingly unpopular with the Pakistani armed forces, the core of Musharraf's support, among which there is a sense they are fighting their own countrymen under US pressure".⁸ The escalation of this internal conflict therefore contains potential dangers of fragmentation in the security apparatus, especially given that Pashtuns represent the second-largest ethnic group among the Pakistani troops. Musharraf's daring balancing act between domestic interests and international pressure may eventually reach a point of collision that could deprive him of the traditional support base.

Furthermore, increased pressure from the US to go after the Taliban and other terrorist groups operating on Pakistani soil might start to estrange the more nationalist elements within the armed forces. As a matter of fact, "officers, especially at the junior and mid-ranking levels, who generally appreciate [Musharraf's] strong and macho image, are [said to be] discontented when they see him bow to foreign pressure".⁹ In addition, within the army there is growing doubt over the sustainability of US-Pakistan relations. Many believe that the US will abandon Pakistan once it achieves its objectives in Afghanistan.

⁷ Mushtaq, Najum. "Islam and Pakistan", *Foreign Policy In Focus*, Washington DC, 21 December 2007.

⁸ Zisis, Carin., and Bajoria, Jayshree. "Pakistan's Tribal Areas", Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, 26 October 2007.

⁹ Siddiqi, Ayesha. "Between Military and Militants", *The World Today*, April 2007.

One of the security agencies traditionally being more susceptible to allegations of supporting Islamic extremists in the region (primarily in Afghanistan and Kashmir) is the renowned ISI. In the past there have been regular allegations regarding its autonomous position vis-à-vis the rest of the security apparatus. And given the recent hardening of the government's position towards the Taliban and their supporters in the tribal areas of Pakistan, various doubts have been raised over the ISI's continuing loyalty to President Musharraf. According to experts, however, Musharraf still "exercises firm control over his intelligence agency". On the other hand, "with a reported staff of 10,000, ISI is hardly monolithic", and many of its "agents have ethnic and cultural ties to Afghan insurgents, and naturally sympathise with them".¹⁰

A contradictory agenda for the West

In a timely attempt to shore up his declining popularity abroad, President Musharraf embarked, at the end of January 2008, on a diplomatic counteroffensive mission in Europe in which he tried to push forward a contradictory agenda. While on the one hand he professed his commitment to a transition to democracy that would be inaugurated by the next general elections, on the other he was also confirming his allegiance to the global war on terror. Unfortunately, Musharraf has used the second pledge too often in the recent past to justify all sorts of repressive policies. The declaration of emergency rule in November 2007 is just one of the most telling and recent examples of such measures. Since the beginning of their intervention in Afghanistan, Western countries have regarded the Pakistani army and its leader as the only actors able to contain the risk of an expansion of Islamist violence to Pakistan. Support to them has been awarded on condition of their commitment to cooperate in the war on terror and to ensure that the tribal areas bordering with Afghanistan would not become safe havens for the Taliban and other Islamic terrorists moving in and out of that country. As we have already seen, not much has been achieved by the Pakistani army in terms of stabilising and securing those areas. On the contrary, the military approach has increasingly alienated the local population and probably even reignited long-standing ethnic and political divisions between the semi-autonomous tribal lands and the rest of the country.

The main rationale for the West's support to Musharraf seems therefore to become increasingly void of significance. This perspective appears even more valid if we consider the fact that the main force behind the creation of the alleged Islamic threat in Pakistan has been the army itself. Such a strategy, as we have seen above, was conceived in order to consolidate the army's hold on power. It is thus the armed forces themselves, and their prominent position in society, that form the biggest threat to Pakistan's stability. Therefore, if the West is really interested in avoiding state failure in that country, it should look at ways to address this destabilising factor. A thorough demilitarisation of Pakistan's political life should be at the objective, with multiple centres of power ushering in a new democratic transition that is not limited to the holding of an election.

¹⁰ Kaplan, Eben. "The ISI and Terrorism: Behind the Accusations", Council on Foreign Relations (Backgrounder), 19 October 2007.

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Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior
C/ Goya, 5-7 pasaje 2ª - 28001 Madrid - Telf: 91 244 47 40 - Fax: 91 244 47 41 - E-mail : fride@fride.org
www.fride.org