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NEWSLETTER

Crises of governance

Pakistan is currently faced with an intense combination of tensions, which in certain spheres is breaking into outright conflict, threatening both the viability of the Pakistani state and the economic sustainability of its people. Imran Ali examines this rapidly evolving situation and analyses the underlying factors and issues that have created and subsequently aggravated these problems.

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The multiple crises that are rapidly enveloping state and society in Pakistan are the product of various longer term and shorter term influences. One major contributing factor is the role of Western imperialism, and its interactions with Pakistan's crisis of governance. This relationship needs to be assessed in two contexts: The first is the more endemic problem of Pakistan's continuing semi-colonial position; and the second is the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the subsequent extension of hostilities into Pakistan.

On the first aspect, the sustainability of the narrative of 1947 as the watershed separating colonial rule from an independent Pakistan is now highly questionable. For

one, unlike the territory that became India, the Pakistan area had a weakly developed and unstructured nationalist movement. No political organisation even remotely comparable to the Indian National Congress had emerged in the Muslim majority areas of British India. The Muslim League had remained the representative of a confined section, the Muslim landed elite, in Sindh and Baluchistan. In the Punjab, it was denied even this status. It was not until the climactic moments of decolonisation that a malcontent landlord faction propelled the League into Punjab politics by seeking the assistance of M.A. Jinnah, who was to become Pakistan's founding father. The weakness of the freedom struggle led to the failure to dilute the hold of the upper agrarian hierarchy on power in Pakistan, unlike India where a rapid anti-

feudal land reform reposed rural resources on the upper peasantry, the support base of Congress.

Emergence of a 'hydraulic society'

Historical processes under colonialism had retarded the emergence of nationalism in the Pakistan area. The most potent development had been the emergence of a 'hydraulic society', through the construction of an extensive network of perennial canals. By controlling the settlement of new lands through agricultural colonisation, and then through centralised irrigation management, the colonial state began to exercise a much greater degree of authority and control than in the rain-fed agricultural societies in the rest of India. The land was allotted to the rural elite and to the landholding peasant lineages. The lower caste rural masses were almost completely excluded from obtaining occupancy rights in the new agricultural tracts. Moreover, large reservations of land for military functions and soldier settlement, as well as the coercive, 'hydraulic' authority of the civil bureaucracy, firmly established the economic and institutional basis for the continued resilience of the authoritarian state in post-1947 Pakistan. In addition, the exit of almost the entire professional and com-

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mercials bourgeoisie to India, owing to its non-Muslim composition, removed from the new state a class of people who could have advocated democratic and modernising institutions. Social scientists have failed to recognise the depth of Pakistan's historical continuities, thereby tending to misconstrue the source and nature of its present-day authoritarian structures.

That these structures remained ancillary and subservient to a continuing neo-colonial dependency, was explicated in the post-1947 period. Pakistan's failure to maintain a non-aligned position in world affairs was accompanied by its membership of military combinations sponsored by the US, such as the South-East Asian and the Central Treaty Organizations (SEATO and CENTO). The components of the British Indian Army inherited by Paki-

civilian administration were dominated by politicians emerging under a military aegis. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, later a populist leader, commenced his political career as a cabinet member in the Ayub Khan dictatorship. His commitment to democratic institutions was questionable; he rather preferred civilian authoritarianism with military backing. Nawaz Sharif was sponsored by the Zia ul-Haq dictatorship. The prime minister in the 2008 People's Party government, Yusuf Raza Gillani, himself emerged as a political appointee under Zia. The mafia-type Muhajir Qaumi Movement has links to Pakistan's controversial Inter-Services Intelligence, in addition to its active collaboration with the Musharraf dictatorship. Moreover, there has been undeniable support by the military, and earlier by the Americans, for the religious extremist parties, which have played a

even more porous, its society awash with guns and drugs, and its accountability systems further undermined. The military leadership discovered the attractions of easy corruption money and real estate acquisition, while public functionaries and political intermediaries took rent seeking to historically unprecedented levels.

The Afghan agony was even more severe than the costs to Pakistan, adding to the million odd killed during the Soviet aggression. Having secured the main prize of Soviet collapse, the Americans vanished from the scene. From what once was its largest operation outside its headquarters in Washington, USAID did not leave even a counter open in Islamabad. The people of Afghanistan were left exposed to warlord conflict and then to medievalist Taliban rule, with its own set of distortions. The

spread into Pakistan, thereby endangering its own peace and security. Already, the Swat valley had been taken over by militants, intent upon enforcing Shariah. While the militants forced Islamisation and a range of guerilla tactics, the Pakistan military was being pressurised to kill its own people. There was a perception that these militants, along with the numerous suicide bombings within the country, were being sponsored by an Indian-Afghan axis, perhaps with tacit Western support, aimed at destabilising Pakistan.

External threats have combined with internal contradictions to exacerbate Pakistan's problems of governance and sustainability. On each occasion, military rule has been followed by a grave crisis: the break-up of the country after Ayub, and the criminalised politics and economic downturn after Zia. Musharraf's legacy appears to be no less damaging. A seemingly endemic shortfall in energy generation, the inability to commence construction of the Kalabagh Dam, thus foregoing the cheaper hydro-electrical option, exacerbating the scarcity of irrigation water, hamper both industrial investment and agrarian production. Major inflationary pressure has followed, with shortages and maldistribution in food commodities, thanks to hoarding, smuggling and price speculation. The involvement even of members of Musharraf's federal cabinet effectively impeded efforts to rectify these malpractices. Economic management fell into disarray and businessmen rushed into stock market and real estate speculation. Moreover, both the trade deficit and foreign debt had risen to unsustainable levels by 2008, which began to erode foreign exchange reserves and create downward pressure on the rupee.

Apart from economic distortions, a major and tenacious political crisis threatened the country's stability. With elections looming and the need to manipulate them for returning his support group, in March 2007 Musharraf 'dismissed' the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, on whom he felt he could not rely. Chaudhry had initiated enquiries on various arbitrary state activities, including the 'missing persons' of whom many had been sent to torture facilities run by the US. A resilient lawyers and civil society movement ensued, while Chaudhry was reinstated by a judicial bench in July. Musharraf then passed the notorious Provisional Constitutional Order, under which Supreme Court and provincial High Court judges were again suspended, unless they took a further oath of allegiance. He also had himself elected President for a further five years by the outgoing parliament.

While the US continued to express full support for Musharraf, Benazir Bhutto was enabled to return under the National Reconciliation Ordinance, with corruption charges and accountability proceedings against her dropped. Subsequently,

under the weight of public sentiment, she appeared to change her approach to the 'war on terror' and question the military's counter-insurgency policies: a change of heart that probably proved to be her death sentence. Her assassination in late December 2007 threw the country into further turmoil, with widespread public disobedience, especially in Sindh. The assumption of party leadership by her husband, Asif Ali Zardari, provided a further twist to the convoluted history of dynastic politics in south Asia. Nevertheless, after a short postponement, elections were held in February 2008. By that time ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif had also been allowed to return to the country; and his party, Muslim League (N), together with the People's Party won a resounding electoral victory. Musharraf's supporters were badly beaten, denoting a popular rejection of the incumbent dictator.

Musharraf's fall from grace has been attributed to increasingly adverse economic conditions, the wrangle with the judiciary, and to his uncritical support for the 'war on terror'. However, the People's Party leadership, living under the spectre of corruption, also appeared reluctant to move against him, thereby increasing public frustration and placing the coalition with Nawaz Sharif in jeopardy. Finally, threatened with impeachment, Musharraf resigned on August 18, 2008. Soon thereafter, on August 25, the Nawaz Muslim League decided to terminate its coalition with the PPP, accusing it of delaying the restoration of the sacked judges. Meanwhile, suicide bombings and the armed struggle with militants appeared to gain further intensity. With these growing political, economic and strategic uncertainties, the salvation of 180 million people has become increasingly precarious.

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Former President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf meets President Hamid of Afghanistan.

stan were not reconfigured as a national army; they maintained their regimental structures and traditions. Western arms inflows and officers' training further enhanced the dependence of the military leadership on the US.

It could be argued that maintaining an oversized military structure of around a million people was more to meet the Western need for a defence line against presumed Soviet expansion, rather than the protracted rationale of defence against India. The excessive expenditure on the military, comprising an inequitable proportion of the national budget, thereby constituted a diversion of national resources to meet foreign imperialist needs. The denial of social sector and development expenditure, on children's schooling and basic health facilities for the poor, and of essential infrastructure investment in energy, transport and telecommunications, constituted the real costs of the massive military assistance provided by Pakistan to the US.

An essential component of this continuing dependence was the deprivation of democratic rights to the Pakistani people, starting with the failure of the electoral process in the 1950s. Protracted periods of military dictatorship followed, each accompanied by a marked intensification of relations with the US. Even the interregnums of

highly damaging role in Pakistan's social development. If Benazir Bhutto's two administrations, between 1988 and 1997, could claim to be free of military sponsorship, then their legitimacy was seriously undermined by pervasive corruption and nepotism. This perhaps did more harm to the cause of democracy than its enemies could have inflicted. Thus, Pakistan's major political leaders have, almost across the board and unfortunately again in contrast to India, been little more than appendages of the authoritarian state, a combination of military fiat and imperialist manipulation.

The Afghanistan factor

The second contributory factor in the emerging crisis of society and governance has been geopolitical dynamics, and more specifically the events unfolding in Afghanistan. The first phase was the acceptance in the late 1970s of its role in the Western game plan of destabilising the neutrality of Afghanistan, drawing in the Soviet Union, and then expediting its ultimate ruin. In the process, the seeds of many of the problems currently besetting Pakistan were sown. The task of sustaining three million refugees, the greatest act of collective hospitality in human history, now contrasts with the petty venom expressed by Washington's Kabul clients against their erstwhile hosts. To support the Afghan war, Pakistan's borders became

US and NATO invasion and occupation of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks in New York, apparently engineered by malcontent Arabs inspired by Osama bin Laden, has led to continuing conflict, especially with the resistance movement in the southern and eastern Pashtun areas.

Over 100,000 Afghans are estimated to have lost their lives since the Western invasion. Adding this to over a million dead in Iraq, and to the series of mortifying genocides starting with the destruction of Palestine, many Pakistanis see this as a Muslim Holocaust. In Afghanistan, with a considerable escalation of hostilities, Western forces have extended the conflict to the southern provinces, where the Taliban had retreated. The war threatened to



U.S. Air Force photograph by Tech. Sgt. Joseph McLean.