On Campus

The Promise of Pakistan

Fired judges, a state of emergency, suicide bombings, the return and assassination of Benazir Bhutto. The past year was among the most tumultuous in Pakistan's chaotic history. SIPA's Saeed Shafqat explains the danger — and sees hope for a democratic future.

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Rizwan Tabassum / AFP / Getty Images

Saeed Shafqat, who lives in Pakistan and is an expert on its politics, spoke at length with *Columbia Magazine* about his country’s current climate and future prospects.

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Benazir Bhutto was elected prime minister in 1988 and 1993 and probably would have won a third time had she not been assassinated. What does her violent death mean for Pakistan?

Pakistan is entering a new phase in its political history. Bhutto's death may have brought the leaders of the political parties to a realization that there is an opportunity to forge a minimal consensus. We could see the birth of a party system as an alternative to military hegemony and dictatorship. Almost all the parties have demanded an impartial probe of her assassination. The PPP [Pakistan Peoples Party] has demanded that it be made under the auspices of the UN.

What is her legacy?

For almost two decades Bhutto was on center stage, whether she was in or out of power, inside or outside the country. She showed courage and imagination in confronting military rule and in the process facilitated a democratic transition. She also portrayed the image of a transformational leader — forward-looking, moderate, but with a democratic disposition that was well versed in the dynamics of global politics. She aspired to transform Pakistan into an economically developed, religiously and socially tolerant, modern democratic nation-state.

She demonstrated that her skills of mass mobilization, regime confrontation, and manipulation of political elites were far superior to her managerial skills. But despite her disappointing performance as prime minister, the promise and mystique of her leadership persisted. In the face of threats to her life, she campaigned in all four provinces and showed courage of conviction in launching a frontal attack on religious extremists and terrorists. She forcefully argued that democracy was the only alternative to an authoritarian military dictatorship. And people were listening. At the time of her death, she was our most popular, credible, and legitimate political leader.

Her assassination and its aftermath were yet further blows to Pervez Musharraf ’s credibility. Is there any way for him to restore his standing?

The credibility of Musharraf ’s regime is so low that one finds it hard to imagine how he can.

In my estimation, March 9, 2007, the day he dismissed the chief justice (CJ) of Pakistan, Iftikhar Hussain Chaudhary, could be described as the beginning of Musharraf ’s downfall. The regime took Chaudhary’s judicial activism as challenging the executive authority; the unconstitutional removal of the CJ has been a serious judgement of error on Musharraf ’s part.

This single act produced a legitimacy crisis of huge proportions and Musharraf has not been able to recover from this misstep. He has tumbled from one crisis to another. In all probability, the noose around Musharraf will tighten, both at the popular level and at the level of political parties. The critical question is, When will the military top brass consider Musharraf a liability who needs to be eased out? The new army chief, General Ashfaq Kiyani, is not showing any signs of impatience. Not only the political parties but civil-society actors and NGOs have begun to demand the removal of the president. Since the November 3, 2007, state of emergency, more than 30 retired ambassadors and 100 retired generals have issued a statement asking Musharraf to resign. No military ruler in Pakistan has ever received such a call from ex-bureaucrats and generals.

Musharraf has been in power for over eight years and that has created an illusion of political stability, but it is on shaky and illegitimate foundations. Therefore, Musharraf ’s removal could cause some tremors in the short run, but in all probability no major chaos. Those who think Pakistan would become a more dangerous country if Musharraf is removed need to think afresh. The real pillar of stability and strength in this country has been the military.

Surely that stability comes at a cost.

Yes, the role that the military has been playing in politics for so long is shameful. Let’s look at the last 36 years. For 21 years the military has been in power. During the 15 years of party-led civilian governments, the military’s persistent interference has not only disabled political parties, but also constrained liberal political space and

liberal political values.

It is imperative to disengage the military and to curb its political role. If Musharraf were to be removed, there could be fresh negotiations and a sort of new contract could emerge between the political class, urban professionals, and the military. That is a choice that the military under the new army chief may be compelled to make soon.

When you say “removed,” do you mean “impeached”?

In all probability, yes. Musharraf ’s legitimacy, and that of the interim government he set up, is being challenged almost daily. The demand for his removal is likely to grow after the elections — if they’re held. The same people who are demanding the restoration of the judiciary and of the chief justice also seek the removal of Musharraf. Lately, Musharraf has begun to say that if he loses respect and support of the people, he will step down.

Who supports Musharraf today?

In the political arena, the only support he appears to have is from his coalition of the PML-Q (the Pakistan Muslim League or “king’s party”) and from the Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM). Among the religious parties, the Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) and Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman seem to provide implicit backing.

There is also some support among the groups that have benefited from Musharraf ’s economic policies, such as those in the banking, telecom, and real-estate sectors.

Many knowledgeable Pakistanis think that Musharraf ’s only international support comes from the Bush administration. Certainly the European Union has been more vigorous than Bush has in pressuring Musharraf on restoration of the judiciary, human rights, civil and political liberties, and genuine democracy.

In recent cover stories both *Newsweek* and *The Economist* have called Pakistan the world’s most dangerous place. Is it?

Most Pakistanis do not share that perception. That said, these are very troubling times. There is turmoil and political chaos. People are really disturbed and afraid of the unknown. There is a feeling of uncertainty, which, in the minds of many among

the Pakistani political class and average citizens, is strongly reminiscent of 1971 [the year of both war with India and the civil war that led to the separation of Bangladesh] and the breakup of Pakistan. People are haunted by the feeling that an outside hand is trying to destabilize the country and the conspiracy theories abound.

There is hardly an article in the U.S. press that does not refer to Pakistan as "nuclear-armed Pakistan." Are there not risks of nuclear material or weapons falling into the wrong hands?

The chance of this happening is remote. To begin with, Pakistan's nuclear assets are under the control and custody of the Pakistani military, and are so jealously guarded that even the civilian prime ministers have complained about lack of access or accurate information — which says a lot about the confidence the military elites have for the political leadership.

It is true that the Pakistan military once formed alliances with the religious groups to pursue political and security interests in Afghanistan and Kashmir. And in the eyes of many observers the Pakistani intelligence agencies have not made a clean break with the Taliban remnants and other militant outfits in Kashmir. Nonetheless, the military is modern, professional, competent, and well trained, and its officer cadre remains by and large pro- West. In that sense, the military continues to be a strong countervailing force against the militants, with the capacity to confront, disrupt, and dismantle the jihadi groups.

I should add that the relative safety of the nuclear assets is assured by the way in which the top decision-making functions are conducted by the Pakistan army. The corps commanders and top staff officers on major security issues pursue a consensual approach to decision making, and their relationship is more political and equal than hierarchical. Therefore, decisions are made by consensus and in the spirit of unity of command. The only chance of nuclear assets falling into the hands of militants is if the military command structure collapses, and that seems unlikely.

The North-West Frontier Province (NWFP), less than 100 miles from Islamabad, has been the scene of serious losses for the army in clashes with militants. Has the army lost control to the Taliban and other jihadi groups?

Good heavens, no; it hasn't lost control. There is a serious insurgency in Swat in the NWFP and in North and South Waziristan and in parts of the Federally Administered

Tribal Area (FATA). In these areas the military is deeply engaged in combating terrorists and Al-Qaeda remnants. For the first time, the Pakistan army has moved into Waziristan and Darra Adam Khel (parts of the FATA) with tanks, heavy artillery, and helicopter gunships, and is facing fierce resistance from the militants. For the military, failure is not an option. An upsurge in suicide bombings is indicative that militants are under pressure.

But what is most disconcerting is that the current interim government in the province is seriously working on a proposal to accede to the demands of religious extremists to have special ordinances through which Shariah laws would be enforced in the NWFP. If that happens, it would embolden the militants and amount to capitulation. The NWFP could slide toward Talibanization. The appeasement policy did not work in the past and it won't work now.

Do you, your family, your friends, and colleagues fear that you may not have a future in Pakistan?

For the first time, the middle class and the upper-middle class are beginning to feel the pinch. The people who were able to send their kids to the few elite educational institutions in Pakistan were emerging as the new social elites and trendsetters. These are the people who had benefited from the free-market reforms that the Musharraf regime had encouraged. Under Musharraf, banking, telecom, real estate, and electronic and print media boomed and expanded. In this sense, regime stability was contributing toward economic growth.

When Musharraf fired the judges last year and reversed freedom- of-press protections, the educated urban professional class and their children rebelled. What energized the urban professionals, particularly the lawyers, journalists, and the intelligentsia, was the ruthlessness and callousness of the regime on May 12, 2007, when Karachi burned. On that day, the chief justice was invited to address the Karachi Bar. However, he and fellow lawyers were not allowed to get out of Karachi airport. These lawyers had planned a peaceful rally to take the CJ to the Sindh High Court, where he was to give a speech. The rally was disrupted with the complicity of the government, the procession was disrupted, lawyers were terrorized and detained, over 40 people died, and the CJ was forced to abandon attending the rally and speech.

Students from elite schools reached out to the students of public universities to sustain the protests against the ruthlessness of the regime and to defend civil liberties and human rights. These are the new groups of students — generally apolitical — who had prospects for upward mobility. For them it began to appear that they may not be able to get what they expected from life. The revolt signals that a substantial segment of society has democratic aspirations.

And yet my impression is that the lawyer-led protests were not able to capture the imagination of ordinary citizens. The mainstream political parties have kept a distance from the lawyers' protests and the lawyers are opposed to participation in the forthcoming elections because of what the Musharraf regime has done to the judiciary.

Unfortunately, the political parties were not able to constructively engage and lead the protests or demonstrate a commitment to building a party system as an alternative to military hegemony. The political parties appear to be participating in the elections on the premise that elections, however flawed, are still a better option than martial law.

Benazir Bhutto's son, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, is back at Oxford after Bhutto's husband, the shadowy Asif Ali Zardari, dramatically named him PPP chairman, apparently in accordance to Bhutto's will. Can the PPP hold together post–Benazir Bhutto?

Benazir Bhutto was a unifying force for the party and its structure is still intact, although the PPP does suffer from factionalism. To retain the Bhutto legacy and also to eliminate the potential family contenders who could lay claim on the party's leadership, Asif Ali Zardari very shrewdly inserted "Bhutto" into his son's name and made a public announcement of the change and got approval from the Central Executive Committee to have Bilawal as chairman.

Musharraf 's allies are reportedly working to encourage breakaway factions within the party, as they did in 2002. The postponement of elections may affect the PPP's sympathy vote somewhat and any further delay could cause fissures in the leadership. For the time being, though, the prospects of elections and the hope of victory should keep the party united. It does enjoy nationwide support.

But the PPP is a party of adversity. While in opposition it has shown enormous resilience and bravery. In power it has been mismanaged and has shown signs of decay.

Neither Benazir Bhutto nor Nawaz Sharif had absolutely clean hands. Sharif — who was PM from 1990 to 1993 and from 1997 to 1999, when Musharraf overthrew him — is not someone strongly associated with democratic ideals. Can he come round and accommodate both the popular desire for a more democratic society and the political demands of the PPP?

Back in the 1990s, Sharif had been openly hostile to Bhutto. Lately, he has been smart and effective. In the three to four weeks before Bhutto's death, they were communicating and he showed considerable respect for her. That was seen as a good omen for democracy in Pakistan.

Right after Bhutto was shot, Sharif showed a lot of courage by going to the hospital and then to her grave at Garhi Khuda Bakhsh. These symbolic gestures have earned him a lot of good-will. He is seen as somebody who could muster support from the PPP and come out as a potentially strong national leader.

It is worth noting that, like Benazir Bhutto, Sharif has also been in communication with the military. In fact, the Pakistani media are buzzing with the news that his younger brother visited Islamabad and the dialogue process has begun with Musharraf. So, a deal between Musharraf and Sharif would not surprise me and could give a new twist to the Machiavellian nature of the Pakistani political class.

How might the hard-line Islamic parties do in an election?

If the elections are fair, open, and transparent, the Islamic political parties would be major losers. More and more people and civic groups are becoming vocal against violence and suicide bombings and even the religious parties condemn them. Therefore the possibilities of religious hard-liners acquiring power are remote.

The worry is that attacks by the militants, and particularly the suicide bombers, are on the rise and are disrupting social and economic life here. Now, the religious parties insinuate that suicide bombings are on the rise because the United States is pursuing anti-Islamic policies. They see the U.S. as supporting Musharraf, leading to alienation among the people. Therefore this religious extremism is seen by large segments of Pakistani society as an outcome of the Bush administration's policies.

That the religious parties are noisier in maligning America is undeniable. But they cannot translate anti-Americanism into electoral victory.

The armed forces seem to have had an on-again, off-again relationship with Islamist hard-line parties and militants.

Yes. Over the last 30 years or so, the army has connived with, collaborated with, and patronized the religious groups, both in Kashmir and in Afghanistan. During the Afghan jihad, the U.S. gave support to this policy of the Pakistan army. In the post-2001 period, as the U.S. policy changed, the army reluctantly began to withdraw support from the religious groups. There is considerable skepticism both within Pakistan and internationally that at least some within the armed forces, particularly at the top level, have not shown complete support for this reversal.

So, yes, within the top brass there is some tension between those who want to support the jihadis and those who want a clean break from them. The possibility that that could lead to some kind of collision between the extremists and some army generals cannot be absolutely ruled out.

If President Bush or his successor were to telephone and ask you for suggestions on how to mend U.S.-Pakistani relations, what would you advise?

The relations between our two countries are driven by strategic interests and not by shared political values. The U.S., which has had strong, stable relations with the Pakistani military, would like to see a democratic process, liberal political values, and a representative form of government gain ground. But it has not gone all the way to support that, and the more liberal-minded Pakistanis have become unsympathetic to the U.S. because of its continued support for Musharraf.

Now, the U.S. should stay focused on ensuring that fair elections are held in Pakistan. America may have to accept the election of leaders who will be more critical of the U.S. Unfortunately, the mainstream Pakistani parties have not been able to effectively highlight the positive contributions of the U.S., while at the same time the religious parties have become the die-hard opponents of the U.S.

Instead of standing behind Musharraf, it is about time for the U.S. to adopt a robust pro-democracy policy for Pakistan, strengthening groups, institutions, and values that could sustain a representative form of government.

Is this, then, a time of promise for Pakistan?

Escalation in suicide bombings. Intense military operation in the tribal areas of NWFP. The revolt of urban professionals. Dwindling support and credibility of Musharraf. In spite of all this, I am hopeful that fair elections will be held, the voter turnout will be heavy, and Pakistan will shakily but surely make a transition toward democracy. There is growing consensus among the political community to search for an alternative to Musharraf ’s entrenched military rule and that augurs well for democracy in Pakistan.

Guide to school abbreviations

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