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Policy Options Paper—Pakistan

by Daniel Markey

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POLICY OPTIONS PAPER—PAKISTAN

Issue for Decision

How should the United States respond to Pakistan's ongoing political crisis? In particular, what position should the Bush administration take with regard to Pakistan's national elections?

Background

Last week President Pervez Musharraf passed his military baton to former vice chief of the army staff, General Ashfaq Kiyani. The next day Musharraf was sworn in as a civilian president, ending Pakistan's eight years of direct military rule. Musharraf's latest moves followed months of political turmoil, punctuated by his November 3 declaration of a state of emergency in Pakistan.

At present Musharraf has announced his intention to end emergency rule on December 16 and hold national elections on January 8. The recently returned leaders of Pakistan's largest opposition parties, former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, have not yet announced whether their parties will participate in these elections.

Over the past year the Musharraf regime has faced increasing pressure from two very different fronts, exposing the fragility of Pakistan's civilian and military institutions. The first front was opened in March, when civil society leaders, led by Pakistan's lawyers, responded violently to Musharraf's attempted removal of Pakistan's Supreme Court chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Since then, Musharraf's heavy-handed attempts to quell dissent—up to and including the imposition of emergency rule—have backfired, undermining his popular legitimacy, providing a focal point for a wide variety of opposition groups, and exposing the authoritarian underpinnings of his regime.

After Musharraf ordered the storming of Islamabad's Red Mosque in July, Pakistan's militant groups and terrorists escalated their challenge against the government and army. Pakistan now faces an unprecedented level of internal violence, including suicide bombings and significant militant operations well beyond the semiautonomous

tribal areas. The bombing of Bhutto's homecoming caravan was the single most deadly terrorist attack in Pakistan's history. After militants overwhelmed Pakistan's local constabulary forces in the scenic Swat valley, thousands of regular army troops were required to dislodge the Pakistani "Taliban" from their positions.

Analysis

The debate over U.S. political strategy toward Pakistan boils down to three main issues.

1. Rhetoric versus Substance

U.S. government declaratory policy and most commentators agree that the United States should support democratic institutions and processes in Pakistan. But Washington must determine what constitutes an "acceptable" election process, and what concrete leverage—inducement and/or coercion—the United States should deploy in order to back up its rhetoric.

2. How to Achieve Democracy

In Pakistan, as elsewhere, free and fair elections are a necessary but insufficient part of democratic practice. Sustainable democracy in Pakistan will also require the establishment of strong civilian institutions: bureaucracy, parties, judiciary, and media. Building institutions takes time, and long-term U.S. assistance, including technical training, education, and financing, could play a vital role in each of these areas. With this broader transitional context in mind, Washington must assess the relative importance and priority it should grant to Pakistan's 2008 national elections.

3. Democracy versus Stability

Democratically accountable institutions are likely to be the best remedy to political extremism and instability in Pakistan. At least in this sense, choosing between democracy and stability is a false choice. Even so, any leadership change or political disruption poses at least potential risks to U.S.-Pakistan counterterrorism and military-military cooperation. Washington must assess its tolerance for short-term risk, recognizing that Pakistan is already in the midst of a political transition.

Options

The following U.S. policy options represent two short-term alternatives.

1. Seize the Democratic Moment/Break with Musharraf

Pakistan's ongoing political transition offers the United States an unusual opportunity to take a principled stand in promoting its values, help Pakistanis take dramatic strides toward democracy, and lay the foundations for a more enduring bilateral partnership that advances U.S. counterterrorism goals.

Logic

By taking strong actions to demonstrate its support for Pakistan's democratic institutions, Washington can begin to win the popular support of many Pakistani citizens who now view U.S. rhetoric on democracy promotion as deeply hypocritical, particularly when it comes to the Muslim world. The Bush administration should press Islamabad for elections that meet international standards and a full rollback of emergency rule, including the reinstatement of Pakistan's former Supreme Court and a repeal of limits on the media.

These actions will establish a healthy precedent for Washington's future partnership with Pakistan, demonstrating its desire to emphasize Pakistan's people and civilian institutions rather than connections to an individual military leader. One of the greatest weaknesses in the current bilateral partnership is that most Pakistanis view the United States as a fickle ally, likely to drag Pakistan into its post-9/11 war on terror and then to walk away as soon as Washington's own interests are served. The Bush administration's close ties to President Musharraf and the army have done little to quell these popular beliefs.

The current period of transition is a rare chance to shift political authority away from Pakistan's military and into civilian hands—a breakthrough for a nation that has known army rule for a great deal of its post-independence history. Musharraf's military regime is unpopular, the army is exhausted by eight years of political leadership, and civil society has mobilized in support of change. Today the United States may be in a position to tip the scales decisively toward democracy. But if the 2008 elections are blatantly

rigged to deny opposition party victories, if the judiciary and media are undermined without redress, and if Musharraf remains president without a constitutionally legitimate mandate, then Pakistan's civilian political leaders will miss an opportunity to gain experience, further hollowing out their capacity for effective governance and reducing Pakistan's long-term capacity for sustainable democratic rule. In this context, Washington should recognize the extreme importance of immediate political outcomes, as they will set a pattern for the future.

Finally, the risk to Washington of forcefully pressing the democracy agenda in the near term is now relatively low. Today's most likely beneficiaries of a free and fair election process are Pakistan's large centrist parties, headed by Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto. Either of these leaders—indeed, any politician who might be expected to assume office through a popular mandate—would be inclined to work with the United States in fighting terrorism. Even a Pakistani leader with little inherent sympathy for the United States would be swayed into cooperation by the real threat of U.S. sanctions, the lure of U.S. assistance, and the pressure of other international partners (including China). Pakistan's Islamist parties control only a small sliver of the electorate and pose no strategic threat by way of the ballot box. Nor is there reason to expect that the United States' relationship with Pakistan's army, under the professional stewardship of General Kiyani, would be seriously disrupted.

For all of these reasons, even Musharraf's departure—should he fail to survive Supreme Court challenges and a new presidential election—would likely result in only a limited disruption in the U.S.-Pakistan working relationship. But should the United States continue to be seen as supporting an increasingly unpopular and illegitimate Musharraf, it might find itself with even fewer friends in Islamabad on the inevitable day when he finally leaves office. Instead, Washington should align itself with democratic forces and be prepared to work with any leader that emerges from the elections.

Policy Recommendations

In order to seize the democratic moment, the United States must be willing to place a premium on near-term transition. The Bush administration should therefore take the following steps:

- It should deploy credible threats, including but not limited to a cut off of U.S. military assistance not directly linked to the counterterror mission, in order to pressure Musharraf’s regime into meeting clear procedural benchmarks. These benchmarks must include: an immediate rollback of emergency rule; the release of all arrested activists; the elimination of all new media restrictions; a level playing field for elections, including full participation of all major parties, international monitors, a new election commission acceptable to all major parties, and a new code of conduct designed to meet security needs without limiting reasonable freedom of assembly; and respect for the rule of law, including the return of the Supreme Court chief justice and other justices who were dismissed.
- It must prepare for the possibility that Musharraf may be forced from power by opening channels of communication with all major civilian politicians as well as General Kiyani.
- It must publicly declare the United States’ intention to work with any democratically elected leader of Pakistan, refrain from favoring any candidate, and end its public endorsements of Musharraf’s leadership.
- It must limit U.S. statements to concern for the constitutional sanctity of the political process.

2. Manage a Democratic Transition/Work with Musharraf

The United States should view Pakistan’s upcoming elections as but one step toward building a strong working relationship with Pakistan’s leadership and effective democratic governance over the long term. U.S. interests are best served by a transition that offers Pakistan’s army a “soft landing,” expands the role of civilian political leaders, and maintains a degree of leadership continuity with Musharraf as president.

Logic

The United States has too many critically important interests in Pakistan to grant any one—including democracy promotion—an absolute priority. Accordingly, while the Bush administration should continue to press Musharraf—in public and private—to hold free and fair elections and to roll back the most egregious provisions of emergency rule,

in the process Washington should take care not to alienate him or the army's leadership in any way that might jeopardize counterterrorism and military cooperation. Coercive threats, especially placing political conditions on military assistance, could undermine U.S. efforts to convince Pakistan's army and strategic elite that the United States intends to stick with Pakistan over the long haul. Without that confidence, Pakistanis have far less reason to believe their interests line up with America's, and far greater reason to hedge against the threat of abandonment.

In addition, the United States should recognize that the stumbling blocks to sustainable democracy in Pakistan are profound: a troubled civil-military relationship, entrenched feudal power structures, and a hollowed-out civilian bureaucracy. Pakistan's political parties are large, patronage-based, and only loosely ideological, or small, with religious and/or regional appeal. Most parties lack internal democratic processes and mirror traditional power structures, making them inherently less responsive to the electorate. By most indications, Bhutto and Sharif have not changed significantly from their prior periods in office, and they might easily revert to past—corrupt, failed—form, should either win power again.

For all of these reasons, Washington should view Pakistan's ongoing political transition as an opportunity for modest rather than transformative gains. If elections include participation by most major parties, the newly elected government in Islamabad would enjoy a greater popular legitimacy than its predecessor. In itself, Musharraf's retirement from the army is significant, first because it constrains his own power, and second because it takes the army a half-step away from direct political leadership. Over time, a gradual and nonthreatening "soft landing" for the army might prove less prone to dramatic reversal than a rapid transition. Musharraf might therefore have a constructive role to play in Pakistani politics—as a presidential bridge over the civil-military divide—despite the fact that he has never yet won power through constitutional, democratic means. In this context, accepting less-than-perfect democratic procedures in the near term could promote more sustainable civilian rule over the long run.

The greatest threat to progress of this sort lies in the possibility that Pakistan's main political parties may choose to boycott the upcoming election and turn to street violence in a bid to unseat Musharraf. The electoral participation of Nawaz Sharif's

Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) is ultimately less important than that of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), if only because Sharif has already made it clear that he is unwilling to work with Musharraf as president. Since Sharif has done nothing to indicate that he would be a particularly stalwart U.S. ally, Washington should not view his boycott alone with grave concern. But if Sharif is joined by Bhutto's PPP, the legitimacy of the entire electoral exercise will be called into question. For this reason Washington must work with Musharraf to guarantee an electoral playing field acceptable to Bhutto's party. For her part, Bhutto appreciates that the PPP's power at the ballot box is more reliable, and manageable, than its street muscle, and that forsaking elections may play to Sharif's advantage more than her own. Therefore, even though promoting cooperation between these two leaders has so far proven quite difficult, each retains an interest in tactical cooperation upon which Washington might build.

Finally, while it might be true that Musharraf's departure from office would result in only a brief disruption to U.S.-Pakistan cooperation, the stakes are high enough that even a short, unanticipated breakdown between the United States and Pakistan could prove costly to U.S. security. And although almost any new Pakistani leader might eventually cooperate with the U.S. counterterror agenda, it is not hard to imagine that he or she might also demand a higher price or back away from some of the significant steps Musharraf has taken during the past several years, not least Pakistan's about-face in its relationship with India. As such, the value of top-level continuity of leadership in Pakistan should not be entirely discounted.

Policy Recommendations

In order to pursue a gradual, managed political transition that might offer greater democratic legitimacy to the next government in Islamabad and the potential for sustainable civilian leadership, the Bush administration should balance its approach to Pakistan's upcoming electoral process by undertaking the following steps:

- It should work quietly with Musharraf and Bhutto to identify conditions necessary to avert a PPP boycott of national elections, including international observers, improved voter rolls, and other technical fixes to the polling process; an immediate rollback of those emergency rule provisions that continue to hinder campaigning prior to

December 16; and a new code of conduct to permit opposition parties adequate access to the electorate, recognizing the real security threats that exist, as demonstrated by the October 2007 Karachi bombing. This could include guaranteed free media access for political candidates in order to make up for constraints on assembly.

- It should resist the imposition of conditions on assistance to Pakistan that could undermine confidence in U.S. partnership.
- It should refrain from demands that would compromise Musharraf's ability to remain in office as a civilian president, particularly the reinstatement of the previous Supreme Court justices.
- It should recognize the next five weeks as a particularly fragile period of the ongoing transition and devote senior-level attention and resources to the monitoring and coordination of all U.S. interaction with Pakistan's political and military leadership. To this end, the Bush administration should designate U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte (or another official) as Washington's interagency point person for policy coordination and direction. This step would assure daily communication at the highest level to avoid new surprises in the lead-up to elections and help coordinate all U.S. messaging to avoid mixed signals.
- It should prepare for postelection engagement with a new "troika" of president, army, and prime minister and establish a regular forum for four-way dialogue to avoid systemic breakdown or miscommunication.

Final Policy Recommendation

In the context of Pakistan's ongoing political transition, the United States should pursue the second option of seeking near-term balance and long-term gains by trying to manage the transition to democracy.

- Option One overstates the extent to which U.S. coercion, including the threat to curtail military assistance, is likely to force Musharraf's government to take steps that endanger its own survival. Option Two preserves a close working relationship between the Bush administration and the Musharraf government and places greater emphasis on consultation than on coercion.

- Option One understates the extent to which civilian parties, including the PPP and PML-N, remain relatively weak organizations, still prone to corruption and mismanagement, less experienced with Pakistan's post-9/11 security challenges, and ultimately unlikely to be able to insulate themselves from an eventual return to military rule. Option Two offers a more gradual, and potentially more effective, approach to building a sustainable civil-military balance that will provide a better foundation for democratic practice over the long run.
- Option One understates the potential costs of a complete leadership change in Islamabad, whereas Option Two places a greater emphasis on continuity.

Of course, there are significant costs to Option Two, mainly associated with Musharraf's lack of popular legitimacy. Should Pakistan's major political parties boycott the upcoming elections, Option Two will look far less desirable and the Bush administration will again be forced to reconsider its close association with a president who faces opposition across most of the political spectrum. In this case, the United States will need to consider options for working with the army and civilian political leaders to manage the removal of President Musharraf.