A New Year's Resolution for U.S. Foreign Policy? How Not to Promote Democracy in Pakistan

By Sahar Akhtar

What is the real lesson of the tragic late December assassination of Benazir Bhutto? It is that no single leader’s survival in Pakistan, political or otherwise, is durable. This means that contrary to America’s historical foreign policy with respect to Pakistan, it is a mistake to back any individual leader or aspiring leader. If the U.S. really wants to help itself, and the nation of Pakistan, it must instead shore up democratic political and civic institutions. This is the lesson that the U.S. must once and for all learn along with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The world is now well aware that Musharraf is not exactly the protector of security and liberty that the U.S. had once thought he was, even with his resignation from the army in late November. While it is true that Musharraf has acted as a moderating force by increasing opportunities for women and opposing extremism in Pakistani society at large, his suspensions of the Supreme Court justices and the constitution have only deterred the moderate and educated Pakistanis he ostensibly sought to bolster from achieving the restoration of their civil and political rights. In addition, his attempts at coming to agreements with Islamists in the Northwest were unsuccessful and he neglected the particular areas where extremism has continually flourished.

Even though Musharraf has dispatched over 90,000 troops to tribal areas in the northwest of his nation, he still lacks control of these areas and would be content merely to restore a 2005 ceasefire agreement. Also, the region’s Islamic militant leaders have become more organized under his regime. By

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unofficial accounts, the madrasas, or religious schools, which numbered about 8,000 to 9,000 seven years ago, have increased to about 20,000 today. While there are multiple causes for the additional schools, the fact remains that there has been an increase—not a decrease—on Musharraf’s watch.

The extent of the problem with Musharraf is not limited to his inaction or inability to lead. Rather, it lies with Musharraf’s ties to the extremists, despite their mutual hostility. Because he came to power without popular support, Pakistan’s president was forced to cultivate an alternative legitimacy by allying with Islamic hard-liners and partnering with Islamic groups, such as his coalition with the JUI party (Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam or the Council of Islamic Clerics) in the Balochistan region. According to a recent and thorough report by the International Crisis Group, the JUI operates the single largest network of extremist madrasas in Pakistan. Reinforcing Musharraf’s connection to the extremists is the army, which frequently sympathizes with the hard-liners because of their armed involvement in Afghanistan and Kashmir. Even as Musharraf begins his rule as a civilian leader, he must appease the army, which continues to fuel his political machine.

Past civilian leaders, although often corrupt and unworthy, have not needed to forge the same coalitions with hard-line Islamists, especially since (and contrary to persistent widespread opinion in the West) the Islamists are not embraced by the general Pakistani populace. Despite political and religious differences and an often bitter rivalry between them, Pakistan’s main cultural kinship still lies with India, rather than with the fundamentalist influences of its western neighbors. It is certainly true that conflict with India remains a drain on Pakistan. By most accounts, Pakistan spends roughly fifty percent of its budget on defense while a large portion of its populace remains poor and uneducated. But on some primal level many Pakistanis still feel the pull of India—not to its Hindu religion but to its cultural resemblance and their shared past. The two countries speak many of the same languages and share the same music, food, art, social customs, jewelry, celebrity icons, and, more importantly, the same intensity of appreciation of these things. In other words, Pakistanis truly value the richness and diversity of their common heritage. Though many Pakistanis would not want to admit it, the cultural norms they share with India signal a Pakistan that is capable of moderation, genuine democracy and serious market reforms.

We witnessed a shimmering example of this in recent months, first with the lawyers’ protests over the ousting of independent-minded Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and other judges, and then with the sophisticated and organized opposition to the suspension of the constitution. Perhaps more importantly, we have seen this in the aftermath of Bhutto’s death. Even if Bhutto was far from the committed democrat that the Western world
thought she was, her language of democracy gained many followers—a fact that has become clearer since her assassination. But none of these sentiments will have the chance to develop into genuine reform as long as the U.S. continues to choose sides.

Despite the recent problems in Pakistan, many analysts continue to believe that Musharraf is still the best bet for combating terrorist groups and for keeping its nuclear weapons out of the hands of hawkers. The army controls Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal and is seen as the only effective force to counter terrorism. Furthermore, as the recent former head of the army, Musharraf still enjoys far greater ties and loyalty than his rivals Nawaz Sharif and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the son of the late Bhutto and the new chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The military is Pakistan’s strongest institution and it is true that an intact and well-funded army is essential to combating terrorism and the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and indeed to the stability of the nation. However, this does not necessarily mean that Musharraf, in any form, is essential to this task. We must not confuse Musharraf’s ties with the military with that of real power, which tends to fluctuate, and which varied even while Musharraf was commander. While select senior officials are still loyal to Musharraf, these loyalties could shift at any time, especially if they (rationally) anticipate that his power grab will lead to a fiscal loss as U.S. aid discontinues. Since 2001, the United States has poured an estimated $11 billion in aid into Pakistan. Since the military has been the greatest receiver of this aid, the expectation of a fiscal cut will likely cause more than just grumblings. In addition, the rank and file of the army has often sympathized with the Islamic militants for reasons of informal kinship ties with tribal areas, suggesting that the very decisions necessary to secure future aid, i.e., attacking the militants in the northwest, could alienate the troops.

The U.S.’s current policy of supporting Musharraf risks losing the very justification for its support—his command of the loyalty of the army. This could prove to be more detrimental to the cause of freedom and security than if they immediately commit to cuts in financial support—something that in the aftermath of the death of whom many in Pakistan consider their beloved democratic matriarch, would be perceived less as the U.S. attempting to control Pakistani politics and more as the U.S. making good on their talk to support democracy there. Musharraf’s continued obstruction of democracy and failure to control extremism and the mounting pressure on the U.S. to rein him in has likely created an expectation among the military that the U.S. will eventually cut back on their assistance to Pakistan regardless. This expectation will breed tension between the army chiefs and Musharraf, undermining
his control. In this case, not only will Musharraf lack the political legitimacy of a freely elected civilian leader, but he will also lose his remaining ties to the army; this is the only value he still possesses for the U.S and for a stable Pakistan. Furthermore, a prolonged period of the U.S. dangling its policy threats before Pakistan only allows anti-American sentiment among certain groups of Pakistanis more time to grow.

On the other hand, if the U.S. immediately commits to cuts, unless certain conditions are met, Musharraf will have little choice but to concede, especially in his weakened state, preempting the need to make good on these threats. Not only would this serve the short-term interest of securing stability, but it would also bring about the necessary reforms for lasting democracy. What should the terms for continued U.S. support be? The U.S., in a coalition with Pakistani human rights groups, must insist that Musharraf not only hold the promised general elections, but also bring in external oversight, preferably non-American, to ensure that they really will be free and fair. Furthermore, Musharraf’s amendments to the constitution must be reassessed once the new government forms. Finally, Musharraf must reinstate the dismissed judges and release them from house arrest.

In order to avoid the growing hostility among those in Pakistan who argue that their country is being manipulated by the United States, the U.S. must set these terms without favoring any candidate, whether Musharraf or otherwise. Pakistan is in many ways ready for genuine democracy, if not in its institutions and infrastructure, then in its mood. The spirit of both democracy and autonomy are alive, and the strongest evidence of the latter is the patent fact that Pakistanis hate to see their leaders bought by outsiders—a fact which incidentally is seen as playing a large role in the downfall of Bhutto. The best way for the U.S. to help both Pakistan and its own interests in the region is to recognize this fact and to respond by investing in institutions, not individuals.

-Nate Heller served as lead editor for this article.