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Are generals good for you?

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General Pervez Musharraf suspended democracy in order to sort out Pakistan. So far, success is limited, and democracy may be a long time returning

HE IS a general who calls himself president, but he sees himself as a saviour. "I have a job to do here and therefore I cannot and will not let the nation down," declared Pervez Musharraf upon appointing himself president of Pakistan on June 20th. There is no doubt that Pakistan needs saving. It is deeply in debt and poverty has been rising. It is an Islamic federation regarded as insufficiently Islamic by zealots and imperfectly federal by most of its ethnic groups. Many of the malcontents are armed. Formally, Pakistan calls itself a democracy, but it has no sitting parliament.

If Pakistan were a run-of-the-mill third-world dictatorship, few apart from its 134m citizens would care. But Pakistan is not ordinary. It is the world's seventh declared nuclear power, at bitter odds with the sixth, India. It is the chief sponsor of the dread Taliban government in neighbouring Afghanistan and itself a nursery for groups of all sorts that seek to wed politics to intolerant versions of Islam. The possibility that Pakistan might someday fall into the hands of religious radicals concerns not only India but China (now a friend), the United States and others. The number of people who ought to care how well General Musharraf does as saviour runs into the billions.

His biggest opportunity since seizing power in October 1999 will come on July 14th, when he is to meet India's prime minister after more than two years of angry silence between the two countries. The summit is important for India, too. Its half-century-long dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, a Muslim-majority state now parcelled out among the two old foes and China, costs India men, treasure and reputation. Without coming to terms with Pakistan, India is unlikely to assume what it regards as its rightful place in the world, which includes a seat on the UN Security Council. But for Pakistan the stakes are still higher. The conflict with India sustains a gigantic military establishment that has been ruinous both for the exchequer and for democracy. To keep a proxy war going in India's part of Kashmir, Pakistan sponsors mujahideen who, fear liberal Pakistanis, could turn their guns and their ideology on Pakistan itself. Peace could liberate Pakistan from these burdens.



Reuters

Hope flies in the face of intuition and history. It supposes that a military man can make peace with India, thereby diminishing the institution that made him. It suggests that a president who has arrogated to himself near-absolute power can create the basis for a durable democracy. It implies that a country that for more than 20 years has pursued its foreign aims by exploiting religious zealotry can now tame it. It has not happened before, and most Pakistanis do not expect it to happen now.

Reform deferred

Such legitimacy as General Musharraf's regime enjoys depends on the awfulness of what came before. Nawaz Sharif, the prime minister he toppled, was democratically elected but behaved like an autocrat, shearing the presidency of its powers and undermining the judiciary. While talking to India of peace, he authorised an incursion into Indian-controlled Kashmir that ended in a humiliating pull-out. The economy tottered on the verge of default.

In taking power from him, General Musharraf promised relief. He would bring "true" democracy in place of Mr Sharif's "sham" one. The corrupt would be hounded, but even-handedly. The economy would be revived and "inter-provincial disharmony" quelled. Mr Sharif had flirted with theocracy, but General Musharraf asked clerics to practise tolerance.

So far, he has disappointed most Pakistanis. The regime's favourable rating has slumped from 57% at the start of its tenure to 23% now. Ijaz Gilani, director of Gallup, a polling firm, describes the government as "friendless but tolerated". The main organised opposition is the Alliance for Restoration of Democracy, more than a dozen parties (including those of Mr Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister), which the general has so far kept in line by banning political rallies. The only people who seem happy with him are international agencies, such as the IMF, which underwrite Pakistan's economy.



The time has come when General Musharraf will no longer be able to rule without leading. The summit will oblige him to begin to clarify where he stands on India and Kashmir. The next month or two will show how serious the government is about

At the upcoming summit, General Musharraf will be obliged to clarify his stand on India and Kashmir

"deweaponisation", its programme to disarm anyone, including religious extremists, who holds illegal weapons. August will mark the debut of devolution, which promises a revolution in local government but evades the highly charged question of where the provinces fit in.

The Supreme Court has given General Musharraf a nearly free hand to amend the constitution but a deadline for doing so: he must hold elections by October 2002. If his constitutional changes are to gain democratic assent, he must now start consulting political parties, which he regards as the root of most of Pakistan's problems. His rule will be considered a success only if he accomplishes a paradox, using the untrammelled power he has acquired to give power away.

Some glimmers of light

General Musharraf is trying to resolve by fiat contradictions that were embedded in Pakistan at its creation. Islam was the reason for carving Pakistan out of India in 1947, but the chief carver, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, was for most of his life secular in outlook. Pakistan remains uncomfortably poised between the two world views. Its four provinces are also mismatched. Punjabis account for more than half the population, dominate the army and bureaucracy and, say non-Punjabis, exploit the wealth of other provinces.

Pakistan's unsettled state encourages caricature. The back-and-forth between military and civilian governments is the stuff of *opera buffa*, the corruption tragi-comic. Armed mullahs are thought to roam about like turbaned gunslingers. Political and sectarian disputes can be lethal, periodically turning cities like Karachi into virtual war zones. The population is mostly rural and pitifully poor. Many see Pakistani society as feudal: the serfs supply their lords with votes as well as labour.

There is truth in these images, but they obscure the extent to which Pakistan has modernised despite its frail economy and exploitative political class. The literacy rate in 1998, according to the census, was 45%, still far too low but 20 points higher than it was in 1980. Electrification of rural households rose from 16% to 61% during the same period. Terrestrial television, which shows state-owned channels, reaches 75% of urbanites and half the rural population. The share of parents who want their daughters to have at least a college education has doubled to 60% in the past decade.

Pakistan is also more urban than its reputation. Reza Ali, director of the Urbanisation Research Programme, points out that city outskirts and "ribbons of development" along roads, especially in Punjab, have population densities and economies that resemble those of cities. Although the census classifies a third of the population as urban, Mr Ali calculates that the share of Pakistanis living in urban conditions is close to half.

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General Musharraf must deal with these novelties as well as the clichés. So far, though, his most notable achievement has been the accumulation of power. In this he has not been far different from his civilian predecessor, Nawaz Sharif. The courts are no less beholden to him. The Supreme Court has taken an oath under the "provisional constitutional order", with which he installed himself in power. His stand-in as president when he is away is the chief justice. The drive for accountability, through a special office that investigates and prosecutes corruption, has largely bypassed the military and judiciary; it is seen as more effective but little more even-handed than Mr Sharif's.

The slap of firm government

When the time comes, General Musharraf may find it awkward to restore democracy. Under the constitution, the president is elected by parliament and the four provincial assemblies. If elections to these houses are free, they are likely to be packed with politicians hostile to his rule. General Musharraf will be tempted to rig them, or find some other way to remain in power. "There will be no election," predicts Haji Mohammad Adeel, a former deputy speaker of the dissolved assembly of North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). Although General Musharraf has refrained from imposing martial law, some analysts suspect he eventually will.

He has inducted more uniformed men into civilian institutions than previous military rulers, says Hasan Askari Rizvi, an observer of the armed forces. Military monitoring teams have been dispatched to most nooks and crannies of the bureaucracy with a mission to discourage graft. There is a justification for this pushiness: the claim by the top brass that they alone can provide technocratic rule.

Comparing General Musharraf with previous governments, economists give him highish marks. For the first time in its history Pakistan is staying on a course of therapy, prescribed by the IMF, which entails cutting subsidies and tariffs and other politically unpleasant measures. It is no longer in immediate peril of default on its \$37 billion external debt, and now has some prospect of climbing out of the financial hole into which earlier governments had plunged it.

Institutions that largely preyed on the public are being told to serve it. Independent commissions are being set up to hear citizens' complaints against the police and if necessary recommend (though not carry out) dismissals. The generals, it is said, have banished corruption from the top ranks of government.

Many foreigners involved in helping Pakistan give its military government good reviews. "Pervez Musharraf is the best thing that happened to this country in years," says Simon Gillett, who until recently helped run a development project connected with the UN's drug-control programme. But the list of only-the-army-can-do-it reforms is lengthy, and there is some shying away from battle. The government has so far ducked the restructuring of the notorious Central Board of Revenue, whose corruption robs the state of income and discourages businessmen from investing. Officers or ex-officers have taken over institutions that are ill suited to management by command, such as universities.

Better administration has yet to thrill ordinary Pakistanis. Although Pakistan is financially more stable, the economy is weak. Drought held growth to just 2.6% in the fiscal year ending in June, barely faster than the rate of population increase. Pakistanis complain of unemployment and rising prices, though official inflation rates are moderate. Despite General Musharraf's promises of continuity in economic policy, investors—both foreign and domestic—are staying away.

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Pakistan's most explosive problems are unlikely to be solved in a democratic limbo. In the smaller provinces resentment against the centre is running high, though few Pakistanis are outright secessionists. "GHQ [General Headquarters] decides the fate of our province," says Mr Adeel of NWFP. "Provinces are more unhappy now than before." This is truest of Sindh, the second-largest province, which has been hit especially hard by the drought. The belief that Punjab is drinking Sindh's water helped forge an alliance between groups usually hostile to one another: *mohajirs*, descendants of immigrants from India living mainly in Karachi, and Sindhi nationalists drawn from the rural population. In a demonstration on June 10th police killed two Sindhi activists and injured dozens of protesters. The main *mohajir* party, the MQM, boycotted the local election in Karachi on July 2nd.



Sindh has also seen sectarian violence, most recently between doctrinally strict Deobandis and the more relaxed Barelvis. The murder of a Barelvi leader prompted his armed adherents to impose a statewide "curfew" on May 28th. General Musharraf declared that such extremists represent no more than 1% of the population. That shopkeepers were nonetheless too scared to open up is, as one columnist wrote, "a severe indictment of the state."

Devolve and disarm

General Musharraf's hopes of dispelling such doubts hang largely on three initiatives. The first is devolution of power to local bodies. Historically minded Pakistanis sneer. An earlier dictator, Ayub Khan, used such a scheme to give the illusion of democracy and cement his position in power. Soldiers, instinctive centralisers, like local democracy in part because it distracts attention from provincial issues, which are the real challenge to Pakistan's architecture.

General Musharraf has not proved the cynics wrong, but the scheme has features that make it worth watching. One is its attempt to encourage participation in politics by segments of society that have largely been excluded. All three tiers of local government have assemblies with a third of their seats reserved for women, a revolutionary notion. Seats are also reserved for peasants and workers, though a minimum educational requirement will bar many of them from advancing to the post of *nazim* (administrator). In theory, local services such as schools and health clinics will be held accountable by citizen community boards, which will report on them to committees of the local council.

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Also revolutionary is the subordination of the bureaucracy to elected officials. Under a system inherited from Pakistan's former British rulers, district commissioners are nearly omnipotent in their realms, with administrative, police and revenue responsibilities. Under the new system, a district co-ordination officer will manage the dozen functions assigned to the districts. He is expected to be shorn of judicial and revenue-raising powers and to answer to the district *nazim*. The bureaucracy is furiously resisting. Lastly, the plan brings rural areas, for the first time, into a framework for obtaining municipal services. Mr Ali, partly a sceptic, describes this as a "giant step".

In the eyes of some critics, the local-government scheme is perhaps too deeply flawed ever to work. Arif Hasan, chairman of the Urban Resource Centre in Karachi, notes among several examples that the city's municipal government will not apply to army cantonment areas, which account for nearly half of the area and a fifth of the population. "They are effectively not citizens of Karachi," he says.

General Musharraf's greatest challenge, though, is to deal with religious extremism. The government fears no force more than the religious right, or so it seems. It backed away from an earlier plan to make it harder to file blasphemy charges, which carry the death penalty, for fear of a collision with the right. The diffidence is unsurprising. Successive governments have used zealots as warriors, first against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and now against India in Kashmir. Pakistan's constitution invites the enforcement of religious norms at home. Under a court order, for example, Pakistan has a year to abolish interest from banking. Religious groups have the power to mobilise the faithful on the streets, as the curfew in Karachi showed.

The threat of zealotry

So far, their power has not been political. Religious parties rarely win seats in parliament, because they are split and because Pakistan's first-past-the-post voting system rewards the biggest parties. But political power for them some day is not unthinkable. According to Mr Gilani of Gallup, the religious parties combined have the support of about a quarter of the would-be electorate. That support normally melts away in elections, because people vote for parties that can win. But that could change if, as some expect, the government introduces proportional representation.

Pakistan will never drive Islam out of politics. General Musharraf has promised to tame the most extreme groups by disarming them and anyone else who holds illegal weapons. General Moinuddin Haider, the interior minister, boasted last month that 86,000 weapons had been turned in before

an amnesty expired. He promises to “take arms from all and sundry, no exceptions made.” But guesses about the number of illegal weapons, many of them kept by law-abiding folk, run into the millions.

Divorce from the extremists will come only if Pakistan makes peace with India. The hurdles, some of them on the Indian side, are innumerable. One of the highest, the army’s presumed reluctance to give up its pre-eminence, may be surmountable. General Musharraf looks likely to entrench the army’s role by giving formal status to the security council, which will oversee the work of the government. Mr Askari Rizvi argues that the army is now so bound into institutions and the economy that it need not depend so much on the Indian bogey. “Even with peace with India the army continues to enjoy a privileged position,” he says. This year it accepted a freeze in its budget, which means a decline in real spending on defence.

Whatever happens, the army will not fade away. The government has indicated that General Musharraf means to be president for five years at least. Less clear is whether he will let Pakistan develop a workable democracy, or continue to stifle politics in the name of good government. Perhaps as president he will grasp the difference between soldiers and politicians: the former take orders from above, the latter from below.

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