

Pakistan struggles to restore democracy and end terrorism

President Zardari seeks accommodation with border provinces, victory over insurgents



Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari (right), accompanied by his Afghan counterpart, Hamid Karzai, addresses a news conference in September 2008. Zardari faces many hot-button issues in governing Pakistan. Gone are the glory days of February 2008 when Zardari's secular Pakistan People's Party defeated the forces of General Pervez Musharraf.

BY ISMAIL KHAN

TELEVISION FOOTAGE OF LOCAL Taliban driving captured Humvees near the Khyber Pass in Pakistan in mid-November painted a grim picture of the strains on Pakistan's armed forces.

These strains, plus intense pressure on its economy will make the year 2009 extremely crucial for the country's somewhat shaky civilian government. Late in the summer of 2008 a balance-of-payments crisis hit the country's cash-strapped government - months before the global economic crisis.

Pakistan's army is once again engaged in battles with a local Taliban group near the border with Afghanistan - battles which began after members of the group

bombed a hospital in August. The subsequent fighting signalled the breakdown of a truce that had been signed with the group in May 2008.

In November, when 75 per cent of all of NATO's supplies for Afghanistan were coming up from Pakistan and through the Khyber Pass, attacks on convoys of food and fuel by Pakistani Taliban have made conditions critical.

The situation looks much worse than it did in the glory days of February 2008 following the victory of the liberal and secular Pakistan People's Party over the forces of General Pervez Musharraf.

The convincing win in the nationwide elections allowed the party to form a national government in Islamabad in a

coalition with the other major secular party.

Some analysts attributed their win, following the assassination of the party's leader Benazir Bhutto in December, 2007, to a sympathy vote.

Coalition government breaks down

The coalition finally broke down only months after it had come into being, over the pledges it had made in March 2008. The coalition had pledged to restore true democracy, do away with dictatorship and to restore the 1973 constitution as it existed on Oct. 12, 1999, before the military coup of Gen. Pervez Musharraf. The coalition also promised to abolish the concurrent list of powers in Pakistan's constitution so as to grant more powers to the country's four provinces. The coalition also wanted to increase the strength of the Senate, the upper house of parlia-

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ment where the provinces have equal representation. The lower house, called the National Assembly, runs on a system of representation by population. The Assembly is dominated by members from Punjab province, which has more than 50 per cent of the population.

Benazir's spouse, Mr. Asif Ali Zardari, had a tarnished image, riddled with accusations of corruption. Incarcerated for years, but never convicted, Zardari was eventually released into exile by Musharraf's administration. He was catapulted back into the political limelight by his wife's tragic assassination in the garrison city of Rawalpindi.

Apart from the political legacy left by his popular wife, Mr. Zardari was also the beneficiary of a so-called National Reconciliation Ordinance, a type of 'get-out-of-jail-for free card.' This ordinance was a controversial piece of legislation that Musharraf negotiated with Ms. Bhutto to drop all corruption charges against the couple and others.

Forcing Musharraf out

Notwithstanding pressure from the community of lawyers and pressure from his erstwhile coalition partner, Mr. Zardari managed to manoeuvre the ouster of Musharraf from the presidency, threatening him with impeachment if he did not resign. The General blinked. On August 18, he resigned and was shown the door after ruling Pakistan for nine

years as a virtual autocratic ruler.

But no sooner had Musharraf resigned than political bickering erupted between Bhutto's party and their coalition partner, over the issue of judges who had been forced out of office by Musharraf. The coalition partner demanded that Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudry and the other judges be restored forthwith.

Mr. Zardari moved swiftly to get himself nominated and later elected to become the President of Pakistan, on Sept. 6, 2008.

Shortly before he became president, Zardari reneged on a promise to restore the judges. He never gave a reason but critics charged that he was afraid that the judges would allow corruption charges against him from the 1980s and 1990s to proceed. Zardari's refusal to reinstate the judges prompted the coalition partner to pull out of the government, dashing all hopes of a stable central government.

Analysts believed that Mr. Zardari had outsmarted the coalition partner by using it to undo Musharraf and have the general leave peacefully. That appeared to be the case, as it was a journey few would have believed Zardari would travel – from jail to the presidency in Islamabad.

Now that he has arrived, Mr. Zardari has inherited a complex series of problems in Pakistan ranging from an economic meltdown to a full-blown insurgency in southwestern Balochistan

province and a hornet's nest of Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas to signs of an overall "creeping Talibanization."

Mr. Zardari also faced a weakened state apparatus and an increasing demand for more provincial autonomy, mainly from Balochistan and the North-West Frontier Province.

Redressing provinces' demands

Mindful of these problems, the newly-elected president in his maiden speech asked parliament to scrap presidential powers – including the power to dissolve the National Assembly – and to address the issue of provincial autonomy. Mr. Zardari also asked the legislators to take steps to redress Balochistan's grievances and to change the name of the North-West Frontier Province to Pukthunkhwa to meet the long-standing demand of its people. He vowed to pursue terrorists and extremists who were harming Pakistan.

Others are looking for stability in Afghanistan by bringing peace to the border regions of Pakistan. On Sept. 25, Owais Ghani, governor of the North-West Frontier Province, suggested that the United States should talk to the Afghan Taliban in order to broker a deal for peace for the entire region.

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Border province votes out religious coalition

RECENT EVENTS IN PAKISTAN'S NORTH-WEST Frontier Province have proven to be a true echo of events nationwide. The secular Awami National Party, which swept the polls in the February 2008 elections, vowed to do away with armed militants and to restore peace.

During the six-year rule of the previous provincial government, a religious coalition called the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, there were several Taliban groups founded in Pakistan's tribal backyard that borders Afghanistan.

The different Taliban groups later merged to form a united Pakistani organization called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in December 2007 and they

not only rule the roost in most of the seven federally administered tribal areas but also pose a serious security threat to the province, and by extension to the whole of Pakistan.

It was during their rule in the province that suicide bombings, roadside bombings and bombings of girls' schools became commonplace.

A peace agreement struck with armed militants in May 2008 proved to be short-lived.

The militants reneged on the agreement, accusing the government of backtracking on its promise to release prisoners and enforce Islamic laws in the region. The government hit back, accusing the Pakistani Taliban in Swat of bombing schools and target killings.

Swat is in flames again. The situation around Peshawar, capital of the North-

West Frontier Province - is precarious. Surrounded by three tribal regions to the south, west and north, Peshawar has witnessed a surge in militant activities.

Elsewhere in Pakistan, the situation remains volatile in the southern part of the federally administered tribal areas, North and South Waziristan, which the U.S. government believes are Al-Qaeda's safe-heavens.

Federalism is said to be a useful form of governance in countries populated by diverse elements. But federalism, or any other form of governance, can only take traction when it is backed by firm and unflinching political will. That is the question in Pakistan: do its diverse elements want the federation to function?

Within Pakistan, the coalition government led by Bhutto's widower's PPP party is reaching out to smaller provinces as part of a policy of what it calls "national reconciliation." Supporting the demand to rename the North-West Frontier Province and the withdrawal of prosecutions against Baloch nationalist leaders are part of that strategy of redressing grievances. Already, the signs are as encouraging as they are in Balochistan.

A committee is being set up to look into demands for more provincial autonomy and to give the Senate certain financial and oversight powers over nominations to key offices. Another committee is already looking into introducing political, judicial and administrative reforms in Pakistan's tribal regions.

But barely hours after Zardari's maiden speech to parliament, just when

Muslims were about to break their fast in the holy month of Ramadan in late September, a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden truck into Islamabad's landmark Marriott Hotel, killing nearly sixty people and wounding many more.

Military campaign against militants

The devastating bombing in the heart of the federal capital shook the entire country. There are many more vociferous calls now for a full debate in the national parliament on the "war on terror" to discuss its pros and cons and to evolve a national consensus.

Mr. Zardari and his hand-picked Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, have promised to hold a behind-closed-doors briefing for parliamentarians on the issue, in an effort to begin building a much-needed consensus on dealing with the war on terror.

Since then, there has been no national consensus. The army has continued fighting insurgents in the tribal areas bordering the North-West Frontier Province, and in the Swat valley inside the province. But heavy government losses and the past policies of truces with Taliban and other armed militants followed by fighting, has diminished hopes for peace.

More recently, Mr. Zardari found himself scrambling to placate an outraged India, which blamed rogue Pakistani elements for the Nov. 26 terrorist attack of Mumbai that saw more than 180 innocent Indians and international tourists gunned down in the heart of India's financial capital.

With such grievous troubles erupting internally and externally, realigning the Pakistani federation is dropping lower on Mr. Zardari's to-do list. 