

Pakistan outlook 2005

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Pakistan faces two roads as never before. The high road, often the subject of a 'pat on the back' or 'cry out of success' of-

ficial syndrome, includes a number of important success stories. And yet, the challenges along the low road are such that they can conclusively define Pakistan's journey to the long-term failure.

On the high road, parts of the economy continue to be in the midst of an upturn — liquid foreign currency reserves remain relatively stable, the Rupee despite recent pressures remains relatively stable, the stock market continues to gallop ahead and the fiscal deficit is nowhere near triggering a fiscal crisis.

A highpoint of the economy is expected in the first quarter of 2005, when the government expects to formally inaugurate the Gwadar port project, which it hopes to develop as the gateway to central Asia. Add to that, General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military ruler, remains visibly on the world stage and the subject of periodic photo-ops with high profile international leaders.

The conclusion for the military led establishment must therefore be that Pakistan will remain on the road to prosperity and in time promises to emulate the world's other impressive success stories, with being another Malaysia often cited as the country's destiny for the future.

Indeed, the lukewarm international opposition to General Musharraf's choice of remaining in uniform into the new year — an almost unprecedented phenomenon for any democracy — must convince Pakistan's military-led establishment that all is well on the horizon. And yet, Pakistan enters the new year with a heavy set of liabilities, which could easily neutralise or even reverse its widely celebrated gains.

Even the uniformed presidency of General Musharraf offers no promise of consolidating and eventually stabilising

the troubled democracy, built on the weak footings put together by the ruling establishment's political 'farishtey' [angels] — to borrow an often used phrase in Pakistani politics. The very fact that General Musharraf in his twin hat wearing capacity remains in charge of Pakistan only promises to aggravate the country's political outlook.

Pakistan's tragic political history is a highly illuminating example of the country's military and its meddling in politics. Time and again, the military has overseen new political experiments ranging from the late Field Marshal Ayub Khan's venture in creating a basic democracy — as if he only knew how to create the basics, to General Zia ul Haq's obsession with a party-less political structure — as if politics can be run without political parties.

General Musharraf has ventured in to a third area — that of creating a new party in the hope of overcoming the fault lines with the existing two-party system. He has also gone a step further by creating a so-called national reconstruction bureau [NRB]. But the devolution plan of the NRB has been popularly dubbed as the demolition plan.

The good reason behind the journey, from good intention to popular lament, has simply been that the devolution plan in parts of Pakistan has landed in almost disaster. The so-called politically powerful politicians of yesteryear have returned to dominate the General's good intentioned political reform plan.

On the economic front, notwithstanding the frequent records set by the stock market or indeed reserves rising to an all time high, almost a third of Pakistan's population of 150 million lives below the poverty line. True, there are no miracle solutions to tackling this profound and historically unprecedented challenge for a country, which has suffered a number of economic and political setbacks in the 1990s.

And yet, much has been said about the failure of the government in the past five years to even begin comprehensively addressing some of the key challenges that have added to the distress of Pakistan's impoverished. Walk in to any government hospital - there is virtually no

medicare for the poor without influential connections. Step in to any government school and there's virtually no evidence of the oft-repeated claim of a strong push to mark a turn around.

On the global stage, notwithstanding the image of the General as the leader who chose to throw Pakistan behind the US in Washington's war on terror, the country's image remains that of being troubled, with parts of it remaining a nursery for future militants. In spite of General Musharraf overseeing the extradition of up to 600 militants to the custody of the US military, there are periodic questions over the future of the 'madrasah' network, which is seen as a principal sanctuary for the community of so-called Islamic hardliners.

Pakistan enters another year without any resolution to such profound challenges, which were not of General Musharraf's own making. But their continuation only serves to underline the failure of his regime in beginning to tackle them.

Indeed, the wide gap between the General's own words and current reality is nowhere more evident than in his own speech in late 1999 when he announced a seven-tier plan to reform Pakistan. That reform plan is now confined to history without any hope of ever returning to become a guiding force.

Faced with such grim prospects, General Musharraf is left with only a three-dimensional choice to rewrite Pakistan's tragic history of the past half a decade — a period which has been dedicated to more lip service than credible reform.

The most vital tier of such a reform plan has to be a complete retreat from the politics of manipulation that have dominated the country in the past two years. The word 'lota' [water pitcher] has been used more frequently for describing turncoat politicians than ever before since elections were held in 2002.

The idea of loyalty to one party has been thrown out of the window during this time, as MPs elected on the ticket of one party, have conveniently walked over to another. Consequently, the political system has lost its credibility and with that its ability to become a representative forum for Pakistanis. The f-u-

out from the past two years only serves to underline the lesson that there are just no short cuts in politics. Pakistan will continue to suffer from periodic bouts of recurring uncertainty, unless the sanctity of its parliament is restored, marking the first step towards restoring the country's democratic character, without a uniformed general remaining the final arbiter of national life.

The second dimension has to be the establishment of a reform plan with consensus from all the main political players. Indeed, political parties may have a point in demanding the return of the military to the barracks. But their positions have been severely compromised with repeated failure in undertaking internal reforms, such as the idea of periodic gatherings to reaffirm the positions of party leaders. Rather than positioning himself to prop up one political group after another, General Musharraf would do much better for his own credibility and standing by promoting such reforms as a quid pro quo for transferring power to a democratically elected government.

Finally, the Pakistani military has done no favour to itself by attaining the image of a force only obsessed with periodic interventions to seize power. A new image for the military must be built upon its credentials as a reformist force, involved in tackling challenges such as the widely dilapidated healthcare and educational system, or indeed being involved in a series of developmental projects. Pakistanis in the Punjab still widely recall the initiative during the regime of former chief minister Shahbaz Sharif, to assign the military for reining in the so-called ghost schools.

If the past year is indeed a mirror image of the future, the year ahead will probably last without an aggressive plan by General Pervez Musharraf to give Pakistan a new direction. But the mere fact that the General remains well in charge of the military and the civilian government, will neither secure his future nor necessarily help to radically turn around his credentials.

The writer is a contributing editor