**Can Pakistan Finally Become a Real Democracy?**

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Imran Khan is out. Whether or not he and his party PTI can stage a comeback is unknown. Former Punjab chief minister Shabbaz Sharif has been named interim Prime Minister until the next elections. However, key coalition partners PML-N and PPP have been locked in near permanent conflict for decades, predating the Asif Zardari-Nawaz Sharif rivalry.

So, despite the change in leadership, will this give Pakistan the opportunity to make long overdue reform? Or is Pakistan doomed to political gridlock and further turmoil caught in one of the geostrategic hotspots wedged between an Afghanistan in chaos; an Indian enemy; and an increasingly powerful and aggressive China?

One of the key issues remains relations with America. For too long, and after September 11th, Pakistan wrongly believed that it was more important to the US than the US was to it. The so-called trust gap grew. While the Bush administration would designate Pakistan a major non-NATO ally and assisted with arms and financial assistance, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) was never fully trusted.

Further, the US may have understood but never acted on the reality that Pakistani Taliban and domestic extremist terrorist groups limited how close Islamabad and Washington could become because of widely different expectations. Washington expected that Pakistan could do far more in aiding Afghanistan in the fight against the Taliban. Islamabad believed that Washington did not appreciate the then 70,000 dead Pakistanis in the war against terror at home.

The first task of the interim government must be internal and the economy.

The Bush administration was fixated on the security of Pakistani nuclear weapons with the common concern was keeping those weapons out of terrorist hands. However, in many ways, those weapons were more secure than their American counterparts.

The real concern, partially addressed, that if for some reasons those weapons were to be seized by radical groups, could they be detonated.

With the assassination of Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007 and the subsequent election of her husband, Asif Zardari, as president in 2008, both the Bush and Obama administrations were concerned about the health and integrity of the chief executive. Unfortunately, Zardari and his Prime Minister Youssef Gilani were not always on the same page.

The victim was then National Security Advisor (General and Ambassador Mahmud Durrani) who was trusted by senior members of the US government and was forced out of office by the PM possibly with a push from opposition leader Nawaz Sharif.

The Obama administration made a strategic error in how it organized its first major national security review called the Afghanistan-Pakistan Study. The title was reversed. It should have been the Pakistan-Afghan study. No matter, relations continued to decline.

The Trump administration did not have a high priority or regard for Pakistan. And in negotiating the Afghan withdrawal, only dealt with the Afghan Taliban and no other governments including the one in Kabul. The election of Imran Khan in 2018 and his clear anti-American policies and views did not help the relationship.

The question is what next? The US has called China the “pacing threat” even as war rages in Ukraine with the Russian invasion. Pakistan is closer to and more dependent on China than America.

India, its traditional enemy, while hostile to China and often non-aligned, has joined the so-called Quad with the US, Australia and Japan. And Afghanistan has, as a famous journalist observed, “descended into chaos.”

The immediate crises are political, economic and social. Inflation is swelling to 15 per cent and with the food crises stemming from the Ukraine war are likely to increase even more. Foreign debt is about $120 billion and growing. Without IMF help, debt could be economically existential.

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This is an ongoing saga, especially when compared with the state of Bangladesh, former East Pakistan. Pakistan has the talent and the potential for major reform. But politics has not worked to harness those resources.

With a youthful society that has never experienced flourishing relations with the US, extremism, along with anti-Americanism, must be contained. The most effective solution should be a genuine coalition between PML-N and PPP. However, if history counts, this may not occur. Yet it must.

With an allied and coherent government, economic progress can be made. Next, it would be useful to restart a dialogue with Washington to improve relations. Any improvements will take time. And given Washington’s fixation elsewhere, that may be a good outcome. Pakistan has had many incarnations. If it were a cat, it is running out of lives.

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