

Pakistan's Domestic Political Crisis

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On August 22, 2012, CNA hosted a workshop to discuss the implications of Pakistan's current domestic political crisis. Three experts, two of whom had been in Pakistan only days before, presented their perspectives on the state of Pakistan's democratic experiment, its ability to cope with developing crises, and the future of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship.

Summary

Pakistan is in the midst of a major transformation. The 2008 ouster of President Pervez Musharraf ended an era of military rule and ushered a grand coalition into parliament. Led by the Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP), that coalition is poised to become the first civilian government in the country's history to complete its elected term uninterrupted by military intervention. The return of civilian rule, however, has not allowed the government of Pakistan to better tackle either the long-term chronic problems it faces as a developing nation or the string of crises that have erupted in recent years. At the same time, the geopolitical situation in the region is entering a period of change and uncertainty as the United States prepares its drawdown from Afghanistan.

Pakistan's Democratic Experiment

President Asif Ali Zardari is very likely to become Pakistan's first civilian president to complete an entire term. While significant, this achievement may not be the testament to civilian leadership that it appears to be. Since 2008, Pakistan's army commanders have largely retreated from the political stage, leading one expert to assert that the military is at its weakest point since the Bangladesh War of 1971. Furthermore, the military is preoccupied with a campaign against the Tehrik-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), which it has deemed to be the 'bad Taliban' that threatens the stability of the state. But this retreat has in turn led to an array of domestic actors vying for influence in a new, dynamic political sphere.

Among the political parties, Zardari's PPP remains the leading force, and opposition parties have not yet succeeded in their gambits to achieve power. Nawaz Sharif's branch of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), seeing little political benefit to challenging the PPP on the national stage, has focused its efforts on building its base among its traditional constituency in the Punjab. In a similar vein, the charismatic former international cricket star, Imran Khan, has been cultivating his popular support and building his Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) party through populist rhetoric. Imran Khan has been gradually attracting a group of experienced advisors who have defected from other parties. Speakers at the August 22 CNA workshop agreed that it was doubtful that any other single political party in Pakistan would be able to effectively counter the PPP in the upcoming elections.

Meanwhile, the PPP finds itself challenged by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, as Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry continues his efforts to depose President Zardari by bringing corruption charges against him. These efforts are likely to continue as long as Justice Chaudhry remains on the bench, although the date of his forced retirement is rapidly approaching. According to one panelist, all of these political conflicts should be understood in the context of Pakistani institutions vying for influence in a greatly changed domestic political landscape.

Failure of Governance

Amid this political tumult, the government of Pakistan has shown little ability to resolve endemic problems that threaten the country's future. Yet, there was some disagreement among the panelists as to why, exactly, there has been such inaction. One speaker posited that the government would rather avoid making difficult and painful decisions, out of a need for political survival. A second speaker agreed, noting that the PPP government has shown no signs of willingness to adopt any of the painful reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund in 2008. But the third expert disagreed, explaining that, in cases where government will is not lacking, capacity is. On the topic of reform in the electricity sector, for example, several proposals have been put forward, but the fundamental problem of the government defaulting on its bills continues to hamstring the entire industry.

While there was some disagreement among the speakers about the causes of inaction, they were in no doubt about the failure of governance in Pakistan. They pointed out that failure can be seen in the record levels of religious violence in the country, which have come about as a result of an un-empowered and under-resourced police force that has left communities to take matters of justice into their own hands. It is also seen in the pattern of cyclical debt in the electricity sector. This failure of governance is rooted in the history of patronage politics and the record of electing candidates who can distribute services, rather than those who can govern.

Implications for US-Pakistan relations

It is not only Pakistan's fragile domestic politics that make the country's future uncertain. As the United States prepares to drawdown its forces in Afghanistan, changing regional dynamics are also impacting Pakistan. The panelists argued that a diminished U.S. presence would probably negatively affect regional stability, as regional powers will compete for strategic space. In its efforts to maintain its regional position, Pakistan is likely to make choices that diverge from U.S. interests, such as declining to take military action against the Haqqani Network.

This prospect calls into question the nature of the U.S.-Pakistan relationship, which has typically been rooted in mutually beneficial, but short-term, security arrangements. One expert who previously served in the Obama administration noted that while there is a great deal of concern about anti-American sentiment in Pakistan, the concept of describing Pakistani factions as pro- or anti-U.S. may not be legitimate. Policymakers should remember that there is not just one center of gravity in Pakistani politics, and that the United States is not at the heart of Pakistan's most pressing issues. Particularly in this era

of great change and uncertainty, the United States should avoid past pitfalls of restricting its interaction with domestic actors to only those believed to be pro-American.

As to how the United States should approach Pakistan in the future, one panelist argued that the United States should scale back its involvement in Pakistani politics, questioning the wisdom of the historical involvement of US ambassadors in Pakistan's internal politics. A second speaker noted that past U.S. involvement in Pakistani domestic politics has been mutually beneficial and often at the request of Pakistani actors. Even though the situation eventually turned for the worst, the U.S.-brokered deal between President Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto is an example of the desire of Pakistani actors to use the United States as a mediator. Furthermore, the United States must not ignore Pakistan's domestic issues that directly impact U.S. national security. The problem is that the United States has often failed to clearly identify those issues that are essential to its national security.

It is impossible to predict what will happen in the U.S.-Pakistan relationship. Panelists emphasized that circumstances are changing rapidly, and noted that the relationship lacks the personal and institutional relationships that could provide stability predictability in relations. What brittle relationships had existed in the military, intelligence, and diplomatic spheres have suffered great damage from recent crises between the two countries that have highlighted the misalignment of national interests.

Finally, the panelists discussed the prospect of state collapse in Pakistan but noted a number of safety valves that mitigate against such a scenario. The first of these is the existence of patronage networks. Even though the patronage system as embodied in the country's political parties is a hindrance to both good governance and democratic progress, it also provides a vital safety net that stabilizes the base of Pakistani society. Second, a large number of social welfare and private sector entities exist in Pakistan that provide many of the services that the government is incapable of providing. The existence of these entities is well-known, but their operation and detailed roles, which occurs primarily in the informal economic sector, is not well-documented. Finally, as has been shown by historical example, the Pakistani military can still intervene to fill the governance gap if the current domestic political crisis sufficiently erodes the legitimacy of the civilian government.