

## **Pakistan's False Alternatives**

Faisal Devji

Distinctions between civilian and military rule, secular and religious authority or democratic and dictatorial power cannot describe politics in Pakistan today. The most egregious instance of this is the fact that a secular leader like Pervez Musharraf occupied until recently both the civilian position of President and the military one of Chief of Army Staff in an Islamic republic largely administered by British law. Rather than being anomalous, however, I want to argue that the interchangeable nature of such categories extends deep into Pakistani society and is not limited to Musharraf's changing role. If anything the President-General's ambiguous status does nothing more than reflect the wider uncertainty of constitutional categories in the country as a whole.

Pervez Musharraf came to power in a bloodless coup, with wide support from Pakistan's middle class and secular elite, promising to ensure the state's transparency and accountability as well as to secure law and order. While these are claims made by all military dictators, Musharraf, who in his early days referred to himself by the corporate title of Chief Executive, succeeded in attaching a civilian front to his administration by leaving the press free, advancing economic liberalization and placing technocrats in high government positions. This civilian image was so successful that his imposition of emergency rule in November 2007 came as a shock—giving the absurd impression that Musharraf had displaced a civilian government with a military one.

In fact he had mounted a coup against himself. But declaring an emergency is the function of a civilian government, and in doing so Musharraf was following the precedent set by the Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. Like Musharraf, Mrs. Gandhi had attributed the need for an emergency to a meddling judiciary as well as to the threat of militancy and mass protest. Again like Musharraf, she had imprisoned the same kinds of people: political opponents, professionals and civil society activists. By following this Indian model the Pakistan confused more than its civilian and military functions, having in this case departed from its own history of coups to latch onto a rival's past. Whether he is the general declaring an emergency or the president holding elections Musharraf is only being true to the civilian role he has always cultivated.

### **Militarism in the market**

The army can hardly be defined as a purely military body because it happens also to be the largest stakeholder in the country's economy, running companies with no connection to national security, providing medical, educational and welfare services and owning large tracts of land. Of course many armies provide for their servicemen in these ways, but the sheer scale of the profit-making enterprises this one possesses makes it a private player in the market as much as a public body. Indeed the army's military role can be seen merely as one part of its business empire, which is not surprising given its direct descent from the forces of the East India Company. It is in this context that we should

place the military scientist A.Q. Khan's extraordinary trade in bomb-making plans and materials until he was placed under house arrest last year.

Military rule in Pakistan represents the takeover of the state by a corporation that claims to defend the people from bad government. In this sense it is neither a public nor a private body, neither civilian nor military, but a bizarre hybrid distantly related to the Soviet or Chinese communist parties, which also claimed to represent civil society against the state while running both it and the economy. Whatever its claims, however, the army's formerly solid base among its recruits from the northern Punjab and North-West Frontier Province has recently begun to break down, with soldiers refusing to fire on fellow citizens and surrendering to militants rather than confronting them. This is a situation the army has never before experienced and signals a looming crisis in its constitution.

### **Expatriate politicians**

Until she returned from Dubai in order to work out a power sharing deal with Musharraf, Benazir Bhutto was one of the three most important Pakistani politicians in exile—the others being the Pakistan Muslim League's Nawaz Sharif in Riyadh and the Mutahhida Qaumi Movement's Altaf Hussain in London. But these leaders were much more than mere exiles, having left their country to join a trans-national elite based partially or wholly outside Pakistan. Together these absentee landlords safeguard their property by preventing the emergence of rivals and replacements alike, thus consigning Pakistani politics to enforced immaturity. Such exiles can then vie for American support and be parachuted back into Pakistan to take the reins of government, all of them, Musharraf included, being friends of the US and enemies of each other.

Benazir Bhutto arrived in Pakistan anointed by the US as its future prime minister, her chief rival Nawaz Sharif having been unceremoniously deported to Saudi Arabia when he had first tried to return. There was no semblance of democratic legitimacy in Bhutto's homecoming, which was the result of an arrangement between Musharraf, the Americans and herself. Yet at the same time that the US was trying to broker a power-sharing deal that would bring an exiled leader to power in Pakistan, it was doing the opposite in Bangladesh. There the Americans wanted to send two dysfunctional but elected leaders into exile, to be replaced by a Musharraf-style Chief Executive promising a fresh start with new political stock.

### **The professions in revolt**

While the options facing Musharraf, Bhutto or Sharif are entirely predictable, and their actions scripted in advance, the unexpected rebellion of Pakistan's judiciary, together with street protests by lawyers and other civil society actors have introduced an element of unpredictability to the situation. Like its army, Pakistan's judiciary cannot be seen simply as a branch of the state, not least because it hasn't played this role for a long time, being for much of its history entirely at the disposal of the general or prime minister in power. Moreover the development of a parallel system of Islamic law outside its purview,

incomplete though this might be, has pushed the judiciary even further from its constitutional role to make it into another kind of civil society actor.

Having written the agreements and compromises between civilian and military rulers in a state with no effective constitution or rule of law, this judiciary and the legal class as a whole have become fixers and middlemen whose revolt comes from outside the state rather than within it. This is why both the army and political parties like Ms. Bhutto's are colluding to appropriate or destroy such judicial activism, which has already wrecked the power sharing deal that the US had brokered between them and made possible the return of Nawaz Sharif. But in doing so they will destroy the only functioning organ of Pakistan's body politic: a civil society that appears to have grown in the absence of a state rather than as its complement.

### **Post-political Islam**

The final pieces in Pakistan's political jigsaw puzzle are the Islamists, who occupy a wide variety of positions from Leninist political parties to social movements and militant outfits. Secular and civilian governments have been as eager to nurture the radicals among them as military and religious ones. Probably the first prime minister to encourage the Islamists was the landlord-socialist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, whose equally secular daughter Benazir went on to establish diplomatic relations with the Taliban. The fact that she was a Shia woman seems not to have deterred either the sectarian or the misogynist in Mullah Omar, to say nothing of deterring Benazir Bhutto herself.

Both military and civilian leaders in Pakistan continue to rely upon Islamist groups, offering financial inducements and political opportunities to turn one against another in sectarian squabbles, intimidate rivals in government and serve as the militant arm of foreign policy in India and Afghanistan. Of course these Islamists are by no means creations of the state, but it is possible to say that they have been radicalized by it. It is probably also the case that Islamists achieve more power under military than civilian rule, since the army requires organizations in civil society they can depend upon in the absence of electoral support. Musharraf, for example, allowed some of these groups to form a political alliance and take control of a province by banning Pakistan's legitimate political parties.

Incidents like the bloody standoff in July 2007 between the previously acquiescent clerics of Islamabad's Red Mosque and the government demonstrates the fragmentation of the alliance between some Islamists and the state. But more important is the fact that the mosque's clerics and students had abandoned the old language of Muslim politics, dominated as this was by demands for an Islamic state and constitution, to focus instead on the civil society concerns of transparency and accountability. By making Islam's claim on the state a nominal rather than political one, these men and women were only joining, in their own way, the discordant but dynamic process by which Pakistan's peculiar civil society is coming apart from its stunted state.

