

***The Roots of Pakistan's Political Crisis.***  
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It seemed too good to be true. Pakistan had a judiciary asserting itself. The media was feeding a nascent democracy movement. The military was being challenged. Even the intelligence services were being asked to produce those it had been “disappearing” for years. If you were accustomed to CNN quiescence and had grown up in a Pakistan with one state channel on which hyper-formal anchor-people mechanically read the news in an Urdu inaccessible to most of the nation, this new noise was evidence of a genuine political vitality.

This might seem a strange thing to say; there was much to be depressed about this year. Islamist radicals, the product of Zia-ul-Haq's era, were holed up in Lal Masjid (the Red Mosque) in the heart of Islamabad, and were demanding the imposition of Sharia upon the land. They had accused Chinese nationals of running brothels posing as massage parlours, abducted the “madam” of another joint which might actually have been a brothel and made her apologize in a public shaming ritual, were now unleashing women in *burqas* armed with sticks upon the city. There were reports that male students of the *madrassa* attached to the mosque had been recording the license plate numbers of women drivers in Islamabad—presumably to cleanse the city of this obscenity. But if all this seemed like the long expected outcome of the plague unleashed upon Pakistan by the joint forces of the U.S. and Zia-ul-Haq, further fuelled by an ever growing rage at the U.S.'s war on terror and the Musharraf government's forced alliance with George Bush, it was still hard not to feel some glimmer of hope at the fierceness of the media, which criticized the government and the U.S. and asked tough questions of various religious leaders. The media's alliance with the judiciary even made one feel proud. Perhaps, just perhaps, there would be an end to military rule. And then came Saturday's announcement of the Emergency—effectively an imposition of martial law.

It's tempting to blame all of Pakistan's political woes on the military, but to understand the reason military rule continues in Pakistan, it's useful to think about the corruption and complacency of the country's elites: military, business, political. The authoritarianism that is right now so much in evidence—as the government cracks down on the political opposition, jails lawyers, tear gases political protesters out on the streets—is also rife in the drawing rooms of the rich and affluent or just (no easy task) the borderline comfortable. An example, which is quite typical, from this summer: right after the Lal Masjid nightmare I was at a dinner in Karachi. The event was nominally religious—an evening-long open house of great food and people I hadn't seen for years. In waltzed a woman, resplendent with long bob and bangs, dressed in the height of Karachi fashion, who started proclaiming very loudly that the mosque should just have been flattened (bombs, bazookas, bulldozers—she didn't specify; it seemed any weapon would do). She then went on to say that the only thinking people in Karachi lived in Defence Housing Society—which is a bit like arguing that the only thinking people in L.A. live in Bel Air. It turned out that she was a civil servant and had done some work with the Pakistani embassy in DC—she managed to insinuate all of this loudly without any prompting into a conversation with a husband conveniently tucked at the far end of the room. All of this information could then be shared with her hapless audience trapped

on sofas and armchairs strewn in the path of the soundwaves. The civil service resume, especially with its American stamp, was presumably meant to shore up her mosque flattening credentials. She then proceeded to praise the Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz, solely on the basis of his World Bank affiliations, which conferred, it seemed, an automatic guarantee of brilliance. The media was roundly criticized. Business was lauded. English was spoken, and the non-English speaking mass outside Defense Housing Society consigned to the dustbin of bare, lumpen existence. The problem was also democracy (we aren't ready for it the room was told and many assented). The people are uneducated, primitive, foolish. And these sentiments—that the people aren't ready for democracy, that the media illustrates this unreadiness in its reckless agitation, that politics is the business of the educated (meaning English speaking elites)—find more takers than we might want to think. The fact is that democracy is noisy and Pakistan's elites (rather like America's at this point) are not used to any noise but their own.

Let's add to the mosque flatteners—who are not, it must be noted, secular either—the people who often assert Pakistanis don't want Taliban rule or Islamist vice squads banning music and shrouding women. These people may seem similar but are not always the same. They produce as counterevidence South Asian Sufism, Pakistan's shrine culture, its wonderful tradition of devotional and antinomian music. But this vision is also balanced on the wobbliest foundation: all it takes is a determined and destructive minority to shut down the traditions of religious openness and dissent, to turn them into memories held in huddled solitude. This is, in fact, what has slowly been happening since the eighties when Zia-ul-Haq launched his assault on Pakistani culture.

What faces Pakistan, then, is a kleptocratic military, arteries pumped with money from the US, a reckless, inbred and corrupt middle class, feudals, (Benazir Bhutto included) who seem to belong in a Transylvanian nightmare, exercising their seigneurial rights, businessman politicians, like Nawaz Sharif, who use their political positions to consolidate their financial empires, and a growing body of petty bourgeois Islamist clerics who want their piece of the national and global pie, and are determined to leave anything that's heterodox and wonderful about the Muslim tradition smouldering and ruined.

Meanwhile, as in Swat, where an Islamist cleric is trying to set up a little mini state, the radical Islamists of the Pakistani kind try to ensure that children don't get polio vaccinations and forbid education for girls in the name of God. One of the most heartwrenching sights during the Lal Masjid catastrophe was that of parents and family members of students of the *madrassa* who had come to get their children back—they seemed lost and reduced, caught between a contemptuous bureaucracy they didn't know how to negotiate and clerics who had promised their children a free education and turned them, instead, into indoctrinated cannon fodder. Most striking, though, was that they had sent their sons and daughters from villages across the NWFP for an education. It is in the absence of a functional educational system and the presence of tremendous poverty that such crises thrive. Yet the Musharraf government and its supporters seem to think that BMW and Porsche outlets in the major cities that are now, more than ever, centres of consumption will fix the ills of the nation. Segments of Karachi have begun to seem like a giant mall—people dashing back and forth in greedy paroxysms while the poor watch the carnival of consumption. It's not even so much that we have mimic men and women—we always had those—our cities are becoming mimic malls.

There is for dissenters then—especially of the secular stripe who want music and all it symbolizes, education for girls (and not just snuck in under the cover of a women's piety group) and economic justice—a much bigger problem: when people like Musharraf don the mantle of the secular or of the moderate (not always, it must be said, the same) the very foundations of the heterodox and humane traditions seem diseased. The problem, then, is simply one of credibility: how can an alliance (still being pushed) of a deluded military despot and a corrupt and blank feudal princess deliver Pakistan from the very real threats that engulf it? How can those who are seen as at the very source of the violences that assail ordinary Pakistanis, claim the moral authority to deliver them from the violence of the barbershop burning militant?

We had an alliance like this once: Benazir's father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, was ushered in by Yahya Khan (the military leader) as Chief Martial Law Administrator. That alliance gave us half a nation, unparalleled atrocities against the soon to be Bangladeshis and (eventually) Zia-ul-Haq—the most systematically destructive leader in a nation glutted on destructive leaders. Bhutto shattered the left, had his own ministers tortured, gave Pakistan the prohibition on alcohol and the declaration that Ahmadis were non-Muslims in an attempt to revive his wilting political career. The PPP, the party he helped build, and whose principles he systematically betrayed, is still one that has tremendous following—precisely because it is the party that has a language of economic emancipation. And that emancipation is what the alliance between the dictator and the princess being pushed by the United States is unlikely to provide. It is not that Pakistan is not facing tremendous dangers—it is—it is rather that these leaders, and their US backers, cannot deliver us from them.

Nov. 12. 2007