

Political elite: poverty of thought

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In many ways, the imposition of emergency/martial law by President Gen. Pervez Musharraf on Nov 3 is part of the cyclical pattern of Pakistan's political history. The country oscillates between periods of direct military rule and civilian governments operating under the oversight of GHQ. George Friedman, the founder and CEO of the private US intelligence firm STRATFOR in a recent article aptly explains how the military's domination of the Pakistani state is a function of the geopolitics of the South Asian polity.

To a great degree, the pathetic performance of the political parties and the divided nature of the electorate have facilitated the military establishment's hold on the state. This is not to say that the men in uniform have fared any better than the civilians with regards to the governance. On the contrary, the army has taken advantage of its status as the country's most robust institution to enhance its own corporate interests and of course has acted as the leviathan ensuring the continuity of the state and that society does not revert back to the Hobbesian state of nature.

Put differently, the army has only managed to keep the state together (of course there is the great exception of the 1971 loss of East Pakistan). The outcome of this is that the country continues to exist in a perpetually arrested state of political development. More recently, however, global geopolitical events involving the forces of transnational militant Islamism are placing additional stress and strain on a significantly weakened state.

The inability of the army to deal with both increasing political unrest and a growing jihadist insurgency has given rise to the question whether the army can maintain its role as the praetorian guardian of the state. All things being equal, the logical remedy would be to allow for the emergence of a democratic dispensation. But the fact of the matter is that all things are far from being equal -- the political landscape lies in shambles.

There is no escaping the reality that an election -- whenever it is held and let us even assume that it will be more or less free and fair -- will produce a coalition government. A coalition government by definition is an unstable beast -- even in the consolidated democracies of the West. And we are talking about Pakistan here, where the instability of any government -- coalition or otherwise -- is off the charts.

Nevertheless, the most sophisticated of Pakistani politicians, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, has been stressing the idea that only democracy can save the country from being torn apart by the various centrifugal forces in play. In principal, this assertion is valid. But there is a need to qualify it and furthermore it is not in synch with the former prime minister's own behaviour.

Rhetoric aside, Bhutto very much appreciates the de facto situation where the military will determine the extent to which democracy will be allowed to flourish in a post-Musharrafian setup. This is obvious from the fact that Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party continues to reach an accommodation of sorts with Musharraf and the army as an institution -- these days one cannot consider the two as necessarily synonymous entities.

For the moment, however, let us assume that when the dust settles the army's top brass will hand over a great degree of power to the civilians, which is a very large assumption to make but there is no harm in indulging in speculation. Such a proposition, however, begs a key question.

How will a democratically elected government restore stability and security? It is not enough to say that democracy is the panacea of all ills political, economic, social, and otherwise. There are many critical intervening variables between the restoration of democracy and the creation of stability/security, which are getting very little attention, if at all. There is a huge lacuna in the political discourse on how the sundry political forces intend to go about making things better. But many would argue and rightly so that socio politico-economic instability is the norm in Pakistan and it is not unusual for those in and out

of government to privilege slogans and ideology over concrete policy prescriptions. Not too long ago this state of affairs may have been accepted as business as usual.

In the here and now, however, the Frankenstein's monster of extremism and terrorism (the Pakistani army and its intelligence apparatuses being Dr Frankenstein in this case) is beginning to manifest itself in the loss of control over large swathes of territory not just in the tribal badlands but also in the NWFP – especially in areas that in a not too distant past were considered tourist attractions.

It is all too clear that these former instruments of the state have now turned against the military and the former patron is unable to control its erstwhile assets. But the more important question to ask is what plans do those aspiring for office in the aftermath of the next elections have for dealing with this unprecedented threat of anarchy? It is safe to say that no one has any good ideas on how to combat (let alone defeat) Islamist extremists and terrorists. Though this is a global dilemma but for Pakistan the stakes are much higher because it is the future of the polity that is at stake.

Even a workable power-sharing agreement reached between the military and the civilians, alone will not be sufficient to solve the problem posed by the jihadist insurgency. Combating Islamist radicalism and militancy requires skilful policy-making, which in turn is a function of expertise.

Here is where a huge poverty of thought exists not just in Pakistan but globally on how to fight the scourge of jihadism. Not only do governments and other political actors lack ideas on how to go about tackling the issue, there is a massive saturation of "experts" who are contributing to the intellectual confusion. There is the dire need to bring together those who truly understand the phenomenon and are also familiar with the needs of policy-making in order to come up with the appropriate means of fighting transnational Islamist terrorism. We are talking about a very small group of people from within the global epistemic community who at their individual level have some decent ideas. There is however, no ready-made repository of knowledge that one can simply dig into and craft the appropriate policy.

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