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A Toxic Cocktail:
Pakistan's Growing Instability

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Pakistan, a nuclear-armed, predominantly Muslim nation of 165 million, has experienced a dramatic rise in political turmoil and violence in the last year. Following the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on December 27, 2007, analysts have raised serious concerns about Pakistan's stability and the possibility of a collapse of the federation.

With elections scheduled for February 18, 2008 amidst political turmoil, a succession of suicide bombings in major cities, and open warfare between state security forces and Islamist militants in the tribal areas, further shocks to the system could ignite broader conflict in Pakistan. The nation must overcome a confluence of serious challenges in the coming months to move back towards stability, including: holding legitimate national elections and restoring democratic rule; confronting the increasing power of militant Islamist groups; and assuaging widespread minority grievances fueling separatist movements.

How many more shocks to the system can Pakistan bear? Does the situation in Pakistan indeed "*pose a potential threat to the federation of Pakistan*"? What are the dangers of schisms within the military and security forces, and the implications for state integrity and nuclear security? As turmoil continues, is consolidation of militant control over the border areas with Afghanistan inevitable? What is the likely impact on Afghan stability? A group of veteran Pakistan watchers and policymakers gathered at USIP on January 14, 2008, to discuss the potential for worsening conflict in Pakistan, and the prospects for stability. Participants included: General David Barno (Ret.), Lisa Curtis, Christine Fair, Col. John Gill (Ret.), Qamar-ul Huda, Minister Ali Jalali, Daniel Markey, Barmak Pazhwak, Bruce Riedel, Larry Robinson, Ambassador Howard Schaffer, Col. David Smith, and Marvin Weinbaum. The views presented in this report do not necessarily represent the views of these participants.

A Toxic Cocktail

The situation in Pakistan has become dangerous and unpredictable due to a confluence of volatile factors that are interact in a high-tension environment. Since the unconstitutional sacking of the chief justice of the Supreme Court in March 2007, the government led by President (and then Army Chief) Pervez Musharraf has been on the defensive.[1] Nationwide protests and a successful court challenge led to the reinstatement of the chief justice, who was then sacked again, along with most of the Supreme Court, when Musharraf effectively declared martial law in November

2007. Acting under the cover of this state of emergency, the Musharraf government eviscerated the independent judiciary, revoked media freedoms, and arrested thousands of opponents and civil society activists.

During this period of political turmoil, the government has also faced a dramatic challenge from invigorated and coordinated militant groups affiliated with the Pakistani Taliban and al Qaeda. This campaign has included brazen attacks on Pakistani security forces, targeted assassination campaigns against government officials, politicians, and tribal leaders, and the Red Mosque (Lal Masjid) incident that lead to a bloody siege in the heart of Islamabad, the capital. Militants have adopted suicide bombing as a key tactic, with over 60 suicide bombings in every corner of the country in 2007 and early 2008, up tenfold from 2006. The armed insurgency has also begun to spread beyond its base in the unregulated Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) into the provinces, most notably when militants captured the Swat Valley, a summer resort area, in November 2007, provoking a full-scale military intervention. These factors combine with a low-level nationalist insurgency in Balochistan, heightened Sindhi disenfranchisement, and extremist groups that continue to provoke both Sunni-Shia sectarian violence and the conflict with India over Kashmir. It is sadly ironic that the very region relied upon by Pakistan as bulwark against an advancing Indian Army should itself become the crucible for an existential threat to the Pakistani state.

This toxic cocktail came together in December 2007 when Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's most popular politician, recently returned from exile, was assassinated. Days of rioting in southern Sindh province caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damage, and stoked smoldering sentiments of alienation, distrust, and disenfranchisement. This event and its aftermath provided an intersection for each of these deep faults within Pakistani society. Numerous foreign and domestic commentators were led to despair for the future existence of the national federation, and raised the specter of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falling into the wrong hands.

With the world on high alert, it is important to ask whether Bhutto's assassination was a dramatic enough warning to bring Pakistan's population and political class back from the brink of unraveling, or whether the roots of further deterioration are now taking hold.

Elections: Pressure Cooker or Release Valve?

Several scenarios for increased conflict, as well as an easing of tensions, center around the parliamentary elections now scheduled for February 18, 2008. Postponed after the Bhutto assassination, these elections are scheduled to take place in a hostile climate due to anger at the Musharraf regime, an incompletely lifted state of emergency, suspicion of government involvement in Bhutto's death, increased ethnic and sectarian tensions, past history of government vote rigging, and a surge of militant terror attacks throughout the country.

If the elections are perceived as free and fair and result in a change of political regimes, including the marginalization or removal of the deeply unpopular President Musharraf, political tensions in the country could be significantly reduced, and the new government will be able to focus on the challenges of Islamist militancy, building a national consensus on how to deal with the problem.

However, a *present, it is highly unlikely that the elections on Pakistan will be either free or fair, and even less likely that they will be perceived by the public to have been credible.* Therefore, in the event elections are held, but the outcome does not comport with public expectations, there will likely be massive nationwide protests. At the same time, any attempt to further delay the polls without the consent of the major parties will be seen as a Musharraf effort to deny the opposition parties their right to rule. Thus, in the event that the elections are postponed, there is also a high likelihood of crippling protests.

These protests may be unruly, portending further violence. They may also pit Musharraf, and the military and police forces, against the population -- forcing a confrontation that will end either in the collapse of the government or government violence against its citizens. This continued political turmoil, while itself threatening violence, has an enormous secondary impact: *the inability and unwillingness of the national political and military leadership to focus on the enormous threat posed by militants in the West of the country.*

Growing Militancy and the "Nightmare Scenario"

The threat of a nationwide collapse of government and military command structures, resulting in a meltdown of the state and loose nuclear weapons and/or an extremist government, while critical to consider, does not appear high. However, state failure in Pakistan is a key stated objective of al Qaeda, In her final interview, Benazir Bhutto said "I now think al-Qaeda can be marching on Islamabad in two to four years."[2] Safeguarding against these events, which would have catastrophic consequences for Pakistan, the US, and regional and international security, should be considered a long-term policy goal, rather than simply a crisis response.

In the near-term, a key threat is loss of control of territory in Western Pakistan to a unified and increasingly capable alliance of Pakistani militant groups, Pakistani Taliban recently united as Tehrik-i-Taliban under one leader, and a resurgent al Qaeda.[3] The Pakistani Taliban leader, Mullah Baitullah Mehsud, has pledged his allegiance to Afghan Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and to aims of al Qaeda's Osama bin Ladin and Ayman al Zawahiri.[4] Warfare between these groups and the Pakistan security services has grown in scope and intensity, including the capture of soldiers, munitions, and recently established forts in the FATA and surrounding areas. Intimidation tactics against girls schools, music and video shops, and other Taliban "vice" targets are also increasing in the Northwest Frontier Province, creating an atmosphere of fear and a sense of loss of government control.

The ability of the Pakistani military and security forces to deal with the current threat, let alone a widespread insurgency, is questionable. The Pakistani military is organized and trained for set-piece warfare with India, not counterinsurgency against its own people in the forbidding physical and social geography of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border region. The use of artillery, helicopter gunships, and other air-to-ground munitions has literally led to overkill, deepening the enmity of the tribal belt population towards the government. The militant groups, once assets of the military Inter-Service Intelligence branch, or ISI, have seemingly turned against their patrons, severing Pakistani government means of influence over these groups short of military tactics.

At the same time, Pakistani popular opinion is thus far not in favor of the use of military tactics to combat Islamist militancy. While a vast majority of Pakistanis favor democratic government and an independent judiciary, and a majority see the Taliban and al Qaeda as a threat to the vital

interests of Pakistan, fewer than 50 percent approve of using the army to combat the Taliban and al Qaeda on Pakistani soil.[5] The reluctance or refusal of the members of the Pakistani Frontier Corps, drawn from the areas where they are deployed, to fight the local population, reinforces this view.

Even more striking, the population of Pakistan is resolutely opposed to the presence of US or other foreign troops to fight al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan. Fully 80 percent of the population rejects US troops engaging in Pakistan, as 84 percent of Pakistanis view the US military presence in Asia as an important or critical threat to Pakistan. Tellingly, 86 percent of Pakistanis believe that a U.S. goal is to weaken and divide the Islamic world.[6] In other words, the grave threat posed by home-grown militancy is still perceived to be far less than that of U.S. hegemony.

This combination of factors leads to what several experts have termed the more realistic "nightmare scenario": *an act or series of actions that would lead to a full-scale insurrection of the Pushtun-dominated regions of Pakistan against the government.* Military intervention on the part of U.S. forces, or potentially further heavy-handed action from Pakistani forces, could ignite such a development. It is easy to imagine either of these triggers coming to fruition. As with the London train bombings and numerous other attacks, there is a high likelihood that a significant terrorist attack in the U.S. or Europe would be traced back to groups within Pakistan. In such an event -- perhaps intended to influence U.S. elections -- the call for unilateral military action against terrorist groups in Pakistan would be very strong. Similarly, the continued decline of security in Afghanistan will also lead to demands for action on the part of Pakistan. The negative reaction to such a U.S. or European response in Pakistan could then touch off a far-wider insurgency that would quickly overwhelm Pakistani capacity to contain it. The logic of this progression is such that al Qaeda may well attempt to provoke such a reaction-cycle in hopes of escalating the conflict in Pakistan.

This scenario raises the conundrum that the very actions intended to deal with the threat may make it far worse. Indeed, the U.S. government is already discussing increasing the presence of U.S. military and intelligence assets in Pakistan -- with or without the assent of the Pakistani government.[7] The Pakistani government has rebuffed recent offers of increased support in training for and fighting counterinsurgency. Furthermore, as noted above, the longer that Pakistan's military and political elite remain deadlocked over the politics of leadership in Islamabad, the less likely they are to be willing or able to confront these growing threats.

A Way Out?: Conclusion and Recommendations

Pakistan faces the prospect of further and worsening instability in the near future due to a mixture of factors and forces. In order to forestall further violence and turmoil, Pakistan, with the support of the US and other allies, must act to simultaneously restore democracy and stability to the national political system, while also addressing the threat that militant Islamist groups pose.

First, it is critical for U.S. and European policy makers to remember that Pakistan is more than a geographically necessary ally in fighting militant Islam. It is a complex and poor country of nearly 165 million Muslims, only a fraction of whom are engaged in anti-Western militancy, and the vast majority of whom want democracy -- along with security, education, and a decent standard of living. The failure to treat the partnership with Pakistan as more than an unpleasant

marriage of convenience has created deep mistrust, and dangerously undermined the aspirations of its people. President Musharraf, who has suppressed moves toward democracy, is deeply unpopular in Pakistan, and is seen by the population and militants alike as an agent of the US.

It is also essential to look at the problems in Pakistan in a regional context, and to get others in the region -- such as India, China, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan -- to take steps to reduce tensions and increase cooperation in Pakistan.

Restoring Democracy

The upcoming elections hold enormous possibility for unrest or reconciliation. However, more than just holding elections, Pakistan must emerge from this crisis with a *democratic* government. As such:
- The February 18 elections must be free and fair, and must be perceived as such;
- efforts must be made immediately to create a more level playing field by reforming those elements in the electoral administration that give advantage to government loyalists;
- if elections are postponed, it must be with the consent of key opposition parties, and would entail formation of a temporary national unity government.
- The fundamental precepts of constitutional rule must be restored, in particular the re-establishment of judicial independence and the re-instatement of improperly removed judges.
- The armed forces, security and intelligence services should be placed under civilian control.
- The beginning of a process that will legally incorporate the FATA into the Pakistani political system, including allowing political parties to compete in the FATA and the suspension of egregious provisions of the antiquated Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) governing the FATA, should take place. The goal should be to eventually replace the FCR altogether.

Addressing Extremism

As militant groups in Pakistan grow in strength, controlling territory and extending their violent reach to all corners of the country, it is clear that the current measures in place are not succeeding. Several steps should be taken to address this challenge more effectively:
- begin national debate and information campaign aimed at shaping Pakistani public opinion about the threat of extremism, and directed towards shaping policy to ensure popular support;
- enhance the performance of Pakistani military and security forces conducting counterinsurgency operations in the provinces bordering Afghanistan and the FATA;
- work with the Afghan government and NATO forces to cut off the free flow of men and munitions across the frontier, and to isolate the hard-core militants from the tribal population that has been skeptical of but increasingly sympathetic towards militant aims;
- eschew support for militant groups, even those the Pakistani government believes to be in their interest (e.g. Kashmiri groups);
- promote political and education reform in the FATA that will end its isolation from Pakistan;
- increase support for education and development throughout Pakistan, focusing especially on the Western provinces and the FATA;

- align US policy in Pakistan to support the aspirations of its people, rather than picking specific allies who, as a result, will be estranged from the population.

Due to the near and long term dangers it presents and its nexus with stability in Afghanistan, Pakistan has leapt to the top of the global security agenda. The unraveling of the country is by no means a foregone conclusion, but its current course must change to prevent catastrophe. The greatest threat posed by an unstable Pakistan is, of course, to its own population.

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[1] President Musharraf officially gave up his command as Chief of the Army on November 28, 2007.

[2] Gail Sheehy, "A Wrong Must be Righted: An Interview with Benazir Bhutto" Parade Magazine, December 27, 2007.

[3] See "The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland," National Intelligence Estimate, National Intelligence Council, July 2007, stating "We assess [Al-Qa'ida] has
protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including: a safehaven in the Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)…", and; Bruce Riedel, "Al-Qa'ida's Resurgence in Pakistan", CTC Sentinel, December 2007, Vol 1:1.

[4] Interview with Baitullah Mehsud, Al-Jazeera Television, January 2008.

[5] Fair, Ramsey, and Kull, "Pakistani Public Opinion on Democracy, Islamist Militancy, and Relations with the US," WorldPublicOpinion.org and US Institute of Peace, January 7, 2008. Accessible at: http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/pdf/jan08/Pakistan_Jan08_rpt.pdf

[6] Fair et al. "Pakistani Public Opinion"

[7] Steven Lee Myers, David E. Sanger, and Eric Schmitt, "US Considers New Covert Push Within Pakistan, *New York Times, January 6, 2008; and* Eric Schmitt and David E. Sanger, "Pakistan Shuns C.I.A. Buildup Sought by U.S.", *New York Times, January 27, 2008.* At present, the U.S. has nearly 28,000 troops in Afghanistan, but they are officially restricted crossing into Pakistan to pursue Taliban or Al Qaeda militants.