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Why We'd Miss Musharraf

Pervez Musharraf is wobbling, and his political adversaries are moving in for the kill. But Pakistan's former leaders are hardly the democratic saviors they present themselves to be.

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AAMIR QURESHI/AFP/Getty Images

False prophet: Pakistanis should pray former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif doesn't return to power.

These are rough days for Pervez Musharraf. Pakistan's president is beset on all sides by critical U.S. politicians and pundits, a hostile judicial establishment, a resurgent al Qaeda, and an increasingly militant religious extremist wing. Smelling weakness, two ambitious former prime ministers, Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto, are plotting their triumphant returns from exile. Musharraf may finally be running out of options. Speculation is rampant that he may soon have no choice but to take off his military uniform and work out a power-sharing arrangement with Sharif, Bhutto, or both.

We don't yet know how the backroom deals will work out, and Pakistani politics are notoriously difficult to predict. (To wit, Sharif landed in Islamabad on September 10th and found himself deported four hours later.) But observers can count on a couple of time-honored truths remaining true. Despite all the talk of elections and civilian rule, meaningful democracy will not emerge in Pakistan anytime soon, nor will the military abandon its grip on government. Pakistan's military possesses much greater staying power than most U.S. analysts assume, and it will remain the most potent and important political institution in the country for the foreseeable future.

Pakistan's 60 years of history illustrate why this is so. When India and Pakistan parted ways in 1947, most of the British Indian Army's Muslim officers who constituted the bulk of the officer corps went to Pakistan, while the bulk of civilian expertise went to India. This set the course for the military to dominate not only decisions of national security, but also domestic policy. Much like in Egypt and Turkey, the officer corps saw itself as the vanguard of Pakistan's modernization. Under the military dictatorship of General Ayub Khan, a Nasser or Atatürk of his day, Pakistan witnessed a period of successful leadership and economic growth in the 1960s. This was followed by Pakistan's most disastrous period of instability under the civilian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir's father.

Today, the younger Bhutto and her successor Sharif are presenting themselves as the saviors of Pakistan's beleaguered democratic institutions. This begs the question: How real were these institutions before Musharraf came to power? Pakistan has yet to form modern political parties that cut across clan and kinship lines. Instead, the country has produced one dynastic party, Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party, and a collection of local bosses and landowners, some of which make up various fragments of the Pakistan Muslim League.

Moreover, as foreign-policy analyst Anatol Lieven has noted, All civilian governments have been guilty of corruption, election rigging and the imprisonment or murder of political opponents, in some cases to a worse degree than the military administrations that followed. Under the 10 years of civilian rule by Bhuttos and Sharifs constantly warring neofeudal parties, Pakistan was a democracy in name only. Far from building democratic institutions, their governments bereft of competence and riddled with corruption consistently undermined them. Bhutto was run out of the country for skimming millions off the top of government contracts; Sharif orchestrated the storming of the Supreme Court by street thugs as he was being tried for contempt. In an effort to efface their legacies, both former prime ministers are hoping to duck the legal charges that await them upon their return.

If only in contrast, the military fairly exudes bureaucratic efficiency and meritocracy. The Musharraf government has presided over Pakistans most successful economy, averaging 7 percent annual growth over the past five years. Compare this with the anemic 3 percent average in the 1990s under civilian rule. True, the military is diverting more state patronage into its own coffers these days. But arguably the military, instilled with a sense of loyalty to the state largely absent from civilian governments, remains more restrained in its corruption and graft. Indeed, Pakistani generals probably do more to circulate patronage to the lower ranks than their bureaucratic counterparts.

Some in Washington believe that civilian leaders would do more to crack down on Islamist militants and better cooperate with U.S. counterterrorism efforts on the Afghan-Pakistani border. Thats a false hope: Civil-military relations and national-security decision-making cannot change overnight. In the past, civilian governments have deferred to the Army to manage civil unrest, especially in the frontier provinces. And as it did with nuclear weapons development, the military often acts without the full knowledge of civilian leaders.

A deeply unpopular United States and the prevailing ethnic fissures also render it politically untenable for a civilian government to do Washingtons bidding. Neither Bhutto nor Sharif will crack down on the tribal regions, whatever promises they are privately making these days. Nor will Bhutto or Sharif challenge the militarys strategic calculus, which is to hedge against Indian encirclement via Afghanistan and U.S. abandonment of Pakistan, as occurred in the early 1990s. Like it or not, the military is the player that matters when it comes to such vital U.S. interests as fighting al Qaeda, stabilizing Afghanistan, and stemming nuclear proliferationbut military leaders are increasingly nervous that the United States will desert them again.

Rather than embracing false harbingers of democracy, the United States should deepen its ties with the Pakistani military through further commitments in funding, joint officer training, and intelligence sharing in order to procure the full support of the military leadership against the Taliban and al Qaeda. And for Pakistans people, the U.S. government needs to do more to channel visible development aid and encourage the growth of real democratic institutions instead of feudal patronage networks like those of Bhutto and Sharif.

With all the political maneuvering going on, it will be difficult for U.S. policymakers to resist their democratic impulses. Instinctually, it feels wrong to back a military leader over his civilian rivals and the charges of hypocrisy will sting. Pakistans troubles, however, require much more than quick fixes such as elections and power-sharing deals. The question is, does the United States have the patience to stay engaged for the long haul? There's a first time for everything.