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Audit of the Conventional Wisdom

The Audit of Conventional Wisdom

In this series of essays, MIT's Center for International Studies tours the horizon of conventional wisdoms that define U.S. foreign policy, and put them to the test of data and history. By subjecting particularly well-accepted ideas to close scrutiny, our aim is to re-engage policy and opinion leaders on topics that are too easily passing such scrutiny. We hope that this will lead to further debate and inquiries, with a result we can all agree on: better foreign policies that lead to a more peaceful and prosperous world. Authors in this series are available to the press and policy community. Contact: Michelle Nhuch (NHUCH@MIT.EDU, 617.253.1965)

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Pakistan's Governance Imperative

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After the kind of year that no country ever wants, with its government in crisis, repression replacing even the most remote notion of good government, political assassination, and terror standing in the wings, Pakistan elected a new parliament in February. Led initially by a coalition of three parties previously deemed outcasts by President Pervez Musharraf, its cabinet of familiar political faces quickly agreed in principle, and at least in public, on a compelling and daunting political agenda. It reversed some emergency rulings, negotiated a hasty truce with insurgents living in the contentious tribal agency of Waziristan—and then broke down on divisive issues left to them by Musharraf.

Domestic politics and foreign policy alike are now fair game for ambitious politicians long removed from power. This isn't the first time that civilians have inherited the detritus of a military-led state, and past success has been elusive at best. Prime Minister Yousef Raza Gillani therefore faces not only the problems created by Musharraf's national security state, but also the accumulation of decades of mangled constitutions, mixed civil-military law, weakened state institutions and fragmented political parties. Today's refreshing, if cautious good will nonetheless reflects a political order that was fragile and complex before Musharraf's 1999 coup d'état, and remains so now.

The recent blur of pronouncements, plans and policies reflects this history as it touches on Pakistan's perennially sensitive topics: jumbled electoral rules, imbalances between provincial powers and central government authority, political corruptions long deemed acceptable, and a testy relationship between parliament and the president. Parliament is understandably keen to replace the opacity of Musharraf's tenure with a transparency that matches Pakistan's avid, 21st century media, and in so doing, cement the coalition's public image.

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But daily life in Pakistan is increasingly punctuated by targeted, violent incidents and a prevailing insecurity that has not diminished since Musharraf's government was defeated. Ever-present, hard to diagnose and equally hard to fight—a product of misalliance and miscalculation, equal parts foreign and home-grown—Pakistan's anxious security problems could easily dominate the new government's agenda. Certainly the effects of Pakistan's engagements in Afghanistan's thirty years of war and the spillovers of global terror are searing reminders that neither past antagonisms nor allegiances disappear when new governments are born.

At first glance, stopping violence would seem to be the highest priority for parliament and voters alike. But it is Pakistan's governance—the incomplete compact wrought among its people and provinces in an often-abused constitutional order—that requires fixing first. The imbalances and inequities built into the country's current governance are not only problems themselves, but affect every effort to stop violence at its source, and rationalize foreign policy.

Counterintuitive? Perhaps. But this coalition came into office at a time of immense opportunity: so much that is wrong has become so obvious to so many that the deeply seated problems of the state are now part of common political parlance. That fact alone represents a challenge to the stability and efficacy of civilian government. After all, coalitions—particularly among parties known more for their mutual enmity than their newly found amity—are rarely as sturdy as they need to be. If the government can ultimately rise above the fissures that have been exposed already to seek stability more than separate political gain, the Pakistani state may have a chance to set a course that it can, finally, navigate.

Politics and the State

It has been left to the new parliament to tackle hard problems: how to restore judges who were fired by Musharraf; protect the often notional independence of the judiciary and repair the constitution; ensure rather than compromise (or undercut) citizen rights; repair immediate resource shortfalls and resolve long-term differences of economic ideology; revisit the over-arching structure of the federal compact; and, of course, decide what to do about Musharraf, whose determination to remain in office seems to mock the new government's future. These issues literally forced the winter's election, and cry out for prompt resolution.

The peculiar demands of the coalition's internal compromises both illuminate and slow progress in all these areas. The Muslim League (PML) campaigned zealously to restore the judges, for example, and its stalwart commitment (and perhaps savvy political allegiance) to this restoration was too much for the People's Party (PPP). The PPP was slow to embrace this matter; its tense histories with judges tend to color passions on this subject, and the late Benazir Bhutto's reluctance to challenge Musharraf continues to shadow the party's negotiations on fundamental problems of judicial autonomy. Each party has followed different economic policies during their previous tenures in office. Ambition more than principle may resolve these issues—but also underscores the ease with which any Pakistani coalition can turn brittle and unyielding.

The first order of business, of course, was to ensure that this unanticipated coalition could make government really work, but in the wake of its first major disputes, the coalition challenged its own fate. Old time politicians beholden to families and feuds lead parliament, the cabinet and the provincial assemblies, but it is the party leaders who announce policy and personnel decisions, host diplomats and negotiate intra-coalition agreements. After many years in the wilderness, the parties are flexing their muscles, but their relationships to state institutions are uneasy. Just when the stature of parliament needs strengthening after nine years of injury under the rule of a general, it is Asif Zardari (PPP), Mian Nawaz Sharif (PML) and Asfandiyar Wali Khan [Awami National Party (ANP)] whose names dominate the headlines. Political parties are essential to frame national discussions on programs for progress; parliament, however, must lead the government. The first blush of electoral success, however, led almost inexorably to policy differences. But serious rethinking about the quality of governance is already overdue.

In this sense, history is repeating itself, but as a cautionary tale. In its sixty years of independence, Pakistan's politics has almost always been in conflict with major state institutions. The military and the bureaucracy have taken a dim view of politicians, who in turn have treated these institutions as impediments to their programs and prerogatives. No state institution has escaped the high-handedness of party rule; no party has survived the reflexive wrath of military and bureaucratic control, and

too many politicians have died, sometimes at the hand of the state. The simple concepts of representation, political participation and honest constitutionalism are so eroded that Pakistan's history is usually narrated as a contest between those who seek power and those who wield authority. The space between them—under both civilian and military governments, with rare independent adjudication from a frequently pliant judiciary—has nurtured corruptions of many sizes and shapes.

The luxury of bad governance is no longer an option. Pakistan's population is growing at a rapid rate, and health care, literacy, education and jobs are too scarce. The economy has grown but the poor have not benefited, economic opportunity is uneven, and tensions between the rural and urban sectors cannot help but increase over time. Recent street riots over power shortages and looming shortfalls in the food supply are bound to occupy the new government's attention far more than it anticipated.

Expanding the Borders of Governance

And then there is Pakistan's place in the world. Its domestic governance is a function of its foreign policy, and its regional and global roles are a function of the way it governs itself. This is evident in the way its taxes are raised, its budgets configured, and its revenues are augmented from abroad. It is most painful, perhaps, in the ways that the state exercises its authority in the peripheries.

Here again, history is close at hand. Pakistan's independence arrived with three concurrent problems of political reach and all led to regional conflict: the political dispensation of the former Indian princely states, of which Kashmir's disputed status is the last unresolved case; the political and economic imbalance between East and West Pakistan, which led to a terrible war that partitioned the country; and the contentious mixed-governance of the tribal agencies—and Balochistan—on the western border.

The semi-autonomous tribal area is today's fulcrum for Pakistan's security and governance. Lodged between the Northwest Frontier Province and Balochistan, and literally configured as a porous zone that facilitated dissension and occasional conflict with Afghanistan, this frontier has long been a haven for the state's sub-rosa activities. It is home to tribes that straddle a formal border delineated in 1893, which has made it possible for Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran, foreign fighters and superpowers to ease the movement of people, money, goods, services, weapons and ideology. Conveniently for Islamabad, residents of the tribal agencies have never been fully-fledged citizens of Pakistan. The noxious Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), a precursor and unfortunate substitute for constitutional rights, made it possible for Pakistan and its allies to stage wars with implausible deniability.

This is a place where foreign and domestic politics converge. It is changeable and changing: its population and economy reflect centuries of migration of people and capital, particularly in the past three decades, and political allegiances span not only the formal boundaries of neighboring states but also the informal phenomena of mobility peculiar to porous frontiers. After decades of dispersion and diaspora, Afghanistan's refugee economy spans Asia, the Middle East and beyond; with weak governance in southwest Asia, it's hard to know how any state—let alone Pakistan or Afghanistan—can capture these revenues and thereby build stronger local economies. Today, the border has become an urgent issue for the coalition government. Although the tribal agencies are usually portrayed as a signal element

in Pakistan's fight against Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and other terrors, the problematic border embodies the challenge of learning how to govern a region defined by movement.

It's hard to tell this from foreign coverage of the region. The United States, with Pakistan, used this region for their fight against the Soviet Union in the 1980s, but both have failed to gain traction against insurgents during their post-2001 battles. The coalition government has already abolished the FCR, but did so without much consultation in the region. This is a symptom of divergent interests—tribal leaders want to end corruption and the power of state-appointed political agents, the central government wants a quick fix to end an enormous headache. The U.S. has lobbied to incorporate the tribal areas into Pakistan's body politic—not simply to extol citizenship rights on their merits, but to make the area more accessible to Pakistan's military and punish more easily those who transgress current policy. (A quick look at the U.S. foreign aid budget to the region tells the story: 98 percent of assistance to this remote, poverty-stricken area is for the military.)

Pakistan's policy toward Afghanistan and its attitude toward insurgents and ideologues lined up against the army will come next. The Peshawar-based ANP, a crucial coalition partner, campaigned ceaselessly to re-orient the state's attitude toward the tribes, these fighters and by extension, to the border itself. It claims quite rightly that the government's full agenda should protect individual and political rights—not far from the frontier, the Balochistan Assembly's first act was to demand that the army cease to fight Baloch on Baloch soil—and respect an as-yet diffuse definition of provincial autonomy.

Make no mistake: time is not on the side of the new government. Increasingly vocal resistance to the U.S.-Pakistan alliance, which many believe has imperiled the security of the region as a whole, is now a political, and not just a strategic, problem for the government. Previous military-led governments could manipulate governance to suit its concept of state security, but the new and relatively weak parliament cannot ignore voters. Despite belligerent sound bites from American presidential candidates and the Bush administration, Pakistan is set to interpret the problem of the border not as a problem of war, but as one to be solved by rethinking the obligations of the state.

It won't be easy to translate theory and campaign promises into practice, and it may not work. Allies and the surrounding region are likely to be impatient, and there is good reason to worry that Pakistan's voters will tire of terror long before the government sorts itself out. Indeed, a hasty treaty with insurgents—distressingly similar to one that failed two years ago—already conflates motion with progress. And familiar worries will continue to plague the government: no one knows what the army—thus far unusually cooperative—will do if a new political compact doesn't show immediate progress. The whims of a truculent president who refuses to step down are unknown, too. If parliament can't survive the enormous pressures of this transition to civilian government, these policies, if not the parliament itself, may be short-lived.

Pakistanis need civilian leaders to defy their own, and the world's low expectations for its success. For now, however, the government must first demonstrate that after decades of living with coercion, all Pakistani citizens have claims on the state that the state can and will honor. To begin this process might just transform the way that Pakistan acts in the world, and thinks of itself.



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