

Giving Pakistan a Chance

By Joe Cochrane

To observers outside Pakistan, recent developments in the country have elicited alarmist predictions about the future. While much uncertainty remains, there are also some signs that things could turn out better than expected. American reporter Joe Cochrane provides a look at why that might be so.

TO THE CASUAL OBSERVER, Pakistan is nothing short of a train wreck. A backward and uneducated nation, latched together against its will and traveling at high speed, flies off a dilapidated rail track that's been long neglected, or more likely, stolen for scrap metal by local thieves - those are just a few of the kinder analogies painted in the international press in recent months. But as is always the case, the realities are far more complex, less dire, and generally more promising than the sound bites of armchair analysts in London or Washington D.C. Pakistan can be a proverbial diamond in the rough; a country with industry and natural resources, ample labor, a mainstream Muslim population, clever middle class and forward-thinking business leaders. The country may yet have a chance to shake off its underachiever label and jump into the 21st century.

But let's not move toward optimism too quickly. Pakistan is a mess right now, mired in one of its biggest-ever political crises. Nonetheless, it is moving forward, which is clearly good news for its 160 million people, regional neighbors, and Western powers gravely concerned about resurgent Taliban and al-Qaeda militants along Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan. On February 18, tens of millions of rich, middle class and poor Pakistanis alike braved the threat of suicide bombings and voted for change. Embattled President Pervez Musharraf's ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid, a collection of political hacks and retired Army officers, finished a dismal third in the polls. Despite blatant attempts at pre-election rigging by the govern-

ment and bomb blasts at political rallies, the people cast their ballots and spoke in unison: “We’ve had enough of military rule and want to try democracy again.” All sides must now try to bring that sentiment to fruition.

The opposition parties that won the National Assembly elections and will dominate the new government face a daunting task. These so-called “pro-democracy” forces, led by the followers of assassinated political icon Benazir Bhutto and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, will face higher expectations to halt rising food prices for the poor, calm the turmoil hurting middle class traders and walk a tightrope in their relationship with the powerful Pakistani Army. Then there are the Islamic militants who have killed more than 1,100 people in a 14-month suicide bombing campaign, not to mention the fate of the weakened Musharraf. He is a key ally of the Bush administration in its “war on terror,” and because of this the US largely ignored his autocratic leanings and deteriorating popularity. Pakistan is not a failed state and it’s not on the verge of becoming one. But it needs assistance, sympathy and understanding from its allies, not to mention civility and accountability from its new civilian leaders. Will they put aside their petty tribal quarrels for the sake of a more stable Pakistan? That’s the biggest question for the country in the next 12 months.

It’s not easy to pinpoint where Pakistan’s latest troubles began. All of its crises seem to have run together since its partition from India in 1947 and subsequent independence from Britain. The nations’ three wars, mainly over territory such as Kashmir but always shadowed by religion, are well documented. Pakistan’s latest peek into the abyss has strictly been a domestic affair, however. It began in March 2007 when Musharraf suddenly suspended Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. The charge, corruption, was laughable given the Pakistan ruling elite’s thirst for greed and plunder. But the fall-out was no laughing matter. Chaudhry’s well-organized supporters within the judiciary and lawyers’ associations sent tens of thousands of protesters into the streets to denounce

Musharraf. The cause quickly was transformed from Chaudhry’s job and sullied reputation into a challenge to the legitimacy of Musharraf, who was also chief of the Army at the time. “The public felt that Musharraf had really crossed a line when he did that,” one long-time Western political observer told me. “He just went too far, and it was a bad mistake.”

Indeed, Musharraf is at his weakest point since seizing power in a bloodless coup in 1999. He was compelled to step down as Army chief in November 2007, during the height of the latest crisis, and now his chief political rivals are not only back from exile, but back in power. In the days after the February 18 elections, pundits were predicting the president would be forced out within days. That hasn’t happened, but a showdown is clearly looming with the new parliament, which in its opening days plans to strip away constitutional amendments that the president created to increase his power.

How did it fall apart so quickly for Musharraf? Quite simply, in early 2007 he was worried about legal challenges to his impending re-election as president while also being Army chief, and saw Chaudhry as an obstacle to five more years in power. Chaudhry had flexed his muscles against Musharraf’s government on several occasions, including blocking the controversial sale of a state-owned steel mill in 2006, and demanding information on hundreds of Pakistani men who disappeared after being arrested in government sweeps against alleged terrorists.

Musharraf put his personal political survival above the best interests of the nation on November 3, 2007 when he declared a state of emergency, sacked and jailed Chaudhry and dozens of other Supreme Court and High Court judges, arrested political opponents and suspended the Constitution. His explanation was that emergency measures were necessary to combat terrorism — but the next day he exchanged around two dozen arrested Islamic militants for 300 Pakistan military personnel who had been captured in the country’s lawless tribal areas. Only weeks later, Musharraf admitted during a television interview that he

had sacked Chaudhry for allegedly trying to “interfere” with the presidency. He didn’t once mention the corruption charge.

Musharraf’s hatred toward Chaudhry has not abated. The chief justice remains under house arrest and the president has vowed that he will never be allowed back on the bench. But the newly victorious politicians are planning to reinstate the judges soon after parliament convenes. If the judges are restored, among their

Is Musharraf that bad? After all, this was the man who rescued Pakistan from the bloody politics of revenge (not to mention mass corruption) of civilian rule in the 1990s. Bhutto and Sharif either appeased or co-opted radical Muslim leaders for their own political benefit. Pakistan’s economy was a mess, while rival India’s was preparing to boom. Hundreds of people were dying annually in sectarian violence between Sunni and minority Shiite clans, and Pakistan

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first orders of business will be to entertain legal motions to overturn Musharraf’s October 2007 re-election. The president might retaliate by dissolving parliament — if he can, as lawmakers plan to remove that power from the Constitution. Will Musharraf again put his survival above Pakistan’s stability? He may no longer be able to count on the Army, which under new chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani has vowed to stay out of politics. And the public? Their loathing of Musharraf is at its highest since he seized power, not to mention the fact that many Pakistanis believe rogue elements within his government were behind Bhutto’s assassination at a campaign rally last December 27. They also never signed onto Pakistan’s role in the US-led fight against Islamic extremism, calling the president a lackey of the US. And like Tony Blair and John Howard before him, Musharraf is just the latest friend of Bush to be blindsided by a backlash from voters. “This was an affront upon him, his friends, his allies,” said Asad Durrani, a retired army general and analyst. “I can’t think of very much that endeared him to people.”

was still foolishly backing armed militants in the hopeless cause of winning Kashmir. And the ideas of women’s rights and a free press were just that — ideas. Musharraf, the swaggering, charismatic Army general and ex-commando, strode in and promised to drag the country forward. And he did. The economy grew by 7 percent on average between 2002 and 2007, private television channels exploded, women and minority groups were given reserved seats in parliament, military aid to Kashmiri militants was halted, and war was waged against Taliban and al-Qaeda militants in the tribal areas.

In the end, it wasn’t enough. Musharraf kept his promises following his state of emergency last year to retire as Army chief and hold new elections, but even that was enough. The public simply grew tired of his rule, which no matter how he tried to package it, was still military rule. As a military man, he didn’t grasp the give and take of civilian politics.

There’s no guarantee that the incoming civilian parliament and government will provide immediate relief. Musharraf did his fair share to

emasculate not just the judiciary but other state institutions, which will take years to repair. The next US administration should take heed of the mistakes of the Bush White House which paid lip service to democratic development in Pakistan as it backed a military ruler with whom it could do business. The US and Pakistan's other friends in the international community must support and fund sincere democracy-building projects that are not subject to their own political or security interests. Of course, the country's "pro-democracy forces" must also step up. Their track records are not inspiring. In November 1997, a mob believed to have been ordered by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stormed the Supreme Court building in Islamabad to disrupt a hearing being held by Chief Justice Syed Sajjad. The hearing was a contempt of court charge against Sharif and had to be abandoned. Sharif later sacked Sajjad for trying to quash a constitutional amendment that increased the powers of the PM. While Bhutto, a two-time prime minister, is dead, Asif Ali Zardari, her husband and co-chairman of their election-winning Pakistan People's Party, spent years in prison on alleged corruption charges that earned him the nickname "Mister Ten Percent." The Bhutto and Sharif clans spent much of the 1990s scheming to bring down each other's governments, not to mention beating, jailing and torturing each other's party officials. How long the Zardari-Sharif partnership lasts is anyone's guess, but within Pakistan there's little alternative but to hope for the best. "The stakes for the political parties and the entire country are so high, and there are common interests among the political parties," says political analyst Talat Masood. "The electorate would never forgive them for not coming to an understanding."

Around 75 percent of Pakistanis are said to live on \$2 a day or less. The economy is slowing down, inflation is pushing the price of staple goods ever higher and forcing people to wait in long queues at government-run shops for subsidized flour and cooking oil. The new government will have to address this somehow, but equally as important is the near breakdown in

security. Islamic militants have unleashed more than 60 suicide attacks across the country in the past year, mostly aimed at security forces and political figures in the volatile Northwest Frontier Province, but also killing and maiming

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civilians in large cities such as Lahore, Karachi and Rawalpindi. The government blames Baitullah Mahsud, a Pakistani commander in the tribal area of South Waziristan who leads a pro-Taliban umbrella organization. Mehsud is blamed for ordering Bhutto's assassination and is also accused of providing safe havens for al-Qaeda militants. But the reality is murkier. There are also "pro-Taliban" commanders who side with the Islamabad government, and armed tribal leaders who may or may not like al-Qaeda but are more worried about rival armed clans in neighboring villages. There are also Afghan Taliban who use the lawless region as a safe haven from which to launch attacks on NATO forces in Afghanistan.

The official US view of the tribal regions is simplistic: Anyone under arms is either Taliban or al-Qaeda — or both — and is plotting another 9/11 attack. They continue to target al-Qaeda's leadership with Hellfire missiles from unmanned drones flying high above the tribal belt. Musharraf was also pressured by the Bush administration into taking a heavy hand against militancy in the tribal areas, and there are

around 100,000 Army and paramilitary forces there. Pakistani military and political analysts say this has only angered the local population, who like the Taliban are ethnic Pashtun, creating resentment toward Islamabad and the US, and allowing murderous local commanders and foreign fighters to terrorize local communities. Musharraf's government has been holding secret talks with some militant and tribal commanders to peel them away from al-Qaeda, and the new government must continue this route because military action is not working. "The army has not, whether willfully or not, protected civil society in the tribal areas," says Ahmed Rashid, author of the book *Taliban*. "The tiny educated elite, the tribal elders, have been targeted, threatened, killed, whatever." Rashid says the new government must launch a massive political and economic reform program in the tribal areas to pull the people out of a medieval existence and give them some kind of future aside from radical mosques and armed groups. The alternative is sobering. "I think their goal right now is to destabilize ... the government in Pakistan, demoralize the Army, and to try to seize as much territory as possible," Rashid says. "They are doing this to have a large area to have an al-Qaeda-Taliban free zone to live, train, recruit and host."

As harrowing as the tribal areas sound, they are only a fraction of the country. Perceptions of Pakistan among people who've never been there, in many cases, are simply wrong. Take a stroll through central Islamabad's F-6 Market and shop at the Western-style grocery store, try on some blue jeans or North Face hiking gear, buy Hollywood (and Bollywood) DVDs. Spend your evening in one of the French or Chinese restaurants, eating delicious meals served with beer or wine. Or stay in and order McDonald's or Pizza Hut by phone. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis crave modernity, higher education and good relations with the West and the United States. They don't want to live under the Taliban or Islamic law. But they also don't believe the US-led "war on terror" is their war to fight. Bush administration foreign policy and Musharraf's

rule have certainly contributed to that notion, but so has a misunderstanding of the outside world, and an often blind belief in endless conspiracies that the CIA is trying to take over the country. In addition, Pakistani Muslims are often unwilling to accept responsibility for their growing domestic problem with radical Islam and terrorism. Pakistan was the launching pad for the jihad against Soviet military forces that occupied Afghanistan in the 1980s. Now that jihad movement has turned on its own master. The international community owes Pakistan a debt and should pay up now, not with threats of sanctions by the US Congress but sustained economic support and assistance in education, private business investment, poverty alleviation and infrastructure development.

Who else believes in Pakistan's future? Meet Malik Riaz Hussain, a 60-year-old billionaire Pakistani contractor who creates art with diggers, backhoes and blasting caps as a painter would with a canvass and brush. He's currently half way through the masterpiece of a 40-year career with Bahria Town, a 45,000-acre planned residential community just outside of Islamabad. The largest private property development in Asia, Bahria Town's nine phases will one day mesh together into luxury houses, condos and apartments for half a million people. Each phase has its own schools, hospitals, retail shopping, restaurants and entertainment centers. Pakistani expatriates abroad, and middle and upper class Pakistanis from Islamabad and Rawalpindi are flocking to buy homes in the \$5-billion-dollar development, which is a counter-balance to news stories about Islamic militancy and fears of loose nukes. Hussain has passed up offers to build planned cities in Saudi Arabia and other countries, preferring to stay at home: "When I visit Malaysia, when I visit Germany, I think, why not Pakistan?"

Joe Cochrane is a veteran reporter for DPA and *Newsweek*. He has written on Asia, including Pakistan, for more than a decade.