

ISAS Brief

No. 16 – Date: 15 August 2007

469A Tower Block, #07-01
Bukit Timah Road, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isasijie@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan at Sixty: It's Time to Give Democracy a Chance

Ishtiaq Ahmed¹

On 14 August 2007, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan celebrated its 60th anniversary. It was founded as a result of the partition of British India on a religious basis – the north-western and north-eastern zones of the subcontinent in which the Muslims were in a majority were separated from the rest of India and awarded to Pakistan.

In the last six decades of independence, what have been the main achievements of Pakistan?

There is no easy answer to this rather simple question simply because the founding of Pakistan was a very different, if not unique, occurrence in modern history. Pakistan did not emerge on the world map as the usual type of territorial state with consolidated territory and integrated population. West Pakistan and East Pakistan were separated from each other by more than a thousand kilometres of Indian territory. Therefore, not only nation building but also state building required extraordinary effort and skill.

The political system was poorly developed to take upon itself such huge tasks. Pakistan came into being in the very last months and weeks of the colonial rule in India when negotiations between the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress mediated by the British failed to find a power-sharing formula that could keep India united.

An immediate problem faced was whether Pakistan would be a normal constitutional democracy with equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their caste, creed or colour or would it be an Islamic state based on traditional Islamic law, the Sharia.

There is no doubt that the father of the nation, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, wanted to establish a secular democracy. Unfortunately, he died only a little more than a year after Pakistan came into being. His successors proved to be incompetent and without a vision to lead the nation forward. They found the exploitation of Islamic slogans useful ploys to gain cheap popularity and this practice became a regular feature of successive governments.

Such difficulties were compounded further by the fact that neither in the West Pakistani provinces (Baluchistan, North-West Frontier Province, Punjab and Sindh) nor in East

¹ Professor Ishtiaq Ahmed is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies, an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at isasia@nus.edu.sg.

Pakistan any industry worth the name was to be found. Moreover, the level of education was very low and the overall social development was poor. Therefore, a middle-class that could help provide a social base for democracy was missing. The Pakistani society consisted of rich landlords, a small intelligentsia and vast millions of peasants, artisans and other poor.

Under the circumstances, the civil service and the military had to step in to lead development in all sectors of society. This proved to be both a blessing and a curse. The blessing was that both these institutions were competent and capable of providing a functioning administration and a credible defence against external aggression. Without them doing their duty properly the integrity and unity of Pakistan could easily have been undermined.

However, in the long run, it created a pattern of governance in which these two services, especially the military, began to believe that they alone could guarantee the survival of Pakistan. Consequently, instead of institutions and procedures establishing a viable political system based on the wishes of the public a paternalistic authoritarian type of government became entrenched in Pakistan.

A political culture evolved that demeaned the politicians, and although lip service was rendered to the ritual that ultimately democracy and civilian, elected government would be restored, this, in practice, was never meant seriously.

On the other hand, up to 1965, Pakistan did very well in the economic sphere. Through close collaboration with the United States and economic grants and loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, Pakistan achieved very impressive growth rates so much so that, in the early 1960s, it was considered a model of development that other third world countries should emulate. South Korea sent its experts to study the Pakistan case.

However, in 1965 Pakistan went to war with India and from that time onwards the ills of the country began to mount. The dramatic growth of industry nearly halted, inflation and recession set in and the mood of the people began to turn to pessimism. Pakistan never regained the sharp upward economic growth trend it enjoyed between 1960 and 1965 although spurts of economic development continued to occur later too.

Unfortunately, the first democratic elections in 1970 resulted in the break up of Pakistan because the West Pakistan-based power elite refused to hand over power to the majority party rooted entirely in East Pakistan. After a bitter and bloody civil war, in which India intervened, militarily East Pakistan broke away to become Bangladesh in 1971.

Truncated and defeated, West Pakistan which now alone constituted Pakistan became even more concerned about its security. The military began to radicalise along Islamist lines and the liberal laws from the colonial period were supplanted for some crimes with traditional Islamic laws.

In the early 1980s, Pakistan became a frontline state in a jihad sponsored by the United States and Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union. It only served to spread extremist Islam. However, September 11 meant that the jihad had been turned against the West and now Pakistan had to choose sides.

Pakistan's President, General Pervez Musharraf, wisely made an about-turn on jihad and joined the US-led war on terrorism, hoping once again that Pakistan will play the role of a

frontline state. However, such an approach has not been entirely successful. The Americans allege that Pakistan is not doing enough to root out terrorists and destroy their bases while the Islamists accuse General Musharraf of having compromised Pakistan's sovereignty and turning guns on its own people. Some separatist tendencies have also surfaced in recent times as the lack of democracy creates problems also over sharing of power and resources between the central government and the provinces.

In this regard, it is important to note that Pakistan received massive economic aid from the West and investments, domestic and foreign began to flow in after it joined the war in terror. Therefore, in economic terms, the current regime has been quite successful. However, a major source of economic gain throughout Pakistan's history has been the remittances of nearly four million Pakistanis working in the West, the Middle East and elsewhere in the more prosperous parts of the world. The distribution of national wealth is, however, highly skewed and unfair. The rich live in great comfort and luxury while the vast majority is afflicted by abject poverty.

Some improvement in the conditions of women has been noted during the time of General Musharraf when some misogynist Islamic laws were replaced with human rights-oriented ones. However, the culture is still heavily impregnated with feudal and tribal notions of honour that treat women as chattel. Moreover, religious and sectarian terrorism continues to take place every now and then.

After 60 years of independence, it seems Pakistan is still suffering the after effects of independence. Pakistan needs to break away from the past. It is now time for Pakistan to make some clear choices. Its identity as a major Muslim state with nuclear weapons to safeguard its security is not in doubt. It is high time now to give democracy a chance and to invest heavily in economic development and education so that the full benefits of sovereign statehood won in 1947 can be shared by the Pakistani masses too.

oooOOOooo