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Musharraf's Resignation: Impact on Pakistan's role in the war on terror

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Musharraf's exit from the political scene is not going to make the campaign against religious extremism easier. The new leaders of Pakistan's fragile coalition have to deal with, among other issues, disunity in their ranks and a population hostile to military operations inside the country.

THE COALITION government in Pakistan finally had their way and ended the nine-year rule of President Pervez Musharraf. On 18 August 2008, he resigned in the face of an impending impeachment by Parliament. His departure, hailed as a 'triumph of democracy over dictatorship', has been welcomed by the majority of the people in the country. Where does the country go from here? What impact will his resignation have on the ongoing war on terror in which Pakistan remains actively engaged for external as well as internal security reasons?

Need for national unity

At issue is the need for political unity between the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) -- traditional rivals in Pakistani politics and the main parties in the coalition. This much needed unity is imperative for a common strategy for a successful anti-terrorism campaign. Also, the nature of civil-military relationship in the wake of Musharraf's resignation and its impact on the war on terror is worth pondering over.

The most important challenge for the coalition government is to root out Al-Qaeda and the Taliban from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Pakistan's 'war on terror' policy was not the sole preserve of one individual; in principle, the present government can be expected to continue with the policy. However, in doing so, it has to strike a balance between domestic concerns about Pakistan's role in the war and international scepticism about Pakistan's sincerity in this regard. At the same time, it has to keep the coalition together. It is easier said than done. Civilian leaders, with the exception of the late Benazir Bhutto who led the PPP, have never come out openly in support of the 'war on terror' for reasons of political expediency and lack of courage.

The 'war on terror' has never been popular among many people in Pakistan and will remain so in the absence of a viable strategic response to the problem of extremism. For such people, especially those who are living away from FATA and NWFP, the Taliban are 'holy warriors' fighting for the glory of Islam, while the US/NATO/ISAF coalition troops operating in Muslim Afghanistan are 'infidel occupation forces'. In this worldview, the Pakistani Taliban have a religious duty to liberate their fellow Muslim brothers in that country. Anyone stopping them is, therefore, doing the West's bidding and not worthy of their support. No wonder then, that Musharraf was highly unpopular among the people. He was accused of having compromised the 'sovereignty' and 'honour' of the country by conducting military operations against fellow Pakistani citizens (Taliban militants) at the behest of the West, and allowing the US to carry out air strikes inside Pakistani territory.

Taliban Movement of Pakistan

Coming out openly in support of military operations against the militants would require enormous courage. The once disparate factions of the Pakistani Taliban, which emerged in the South Waziristan and Bajaur tribal areas in 2002, have united to form the formidable Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP, the Taliban movement of Pakistan). In 2007 they carried out more than 1500 attacks in Pakistan, including 60 suicide bombings, killing more than 3500 people. They have attacked and continue to attack leaders who have spoken against them. Benazir Bhutto was killed by them last year, and a former interior minister barely escaped two attempts on his life.

Pakistan's allies and neighbours see the Pakistani Taliban as the backbone of Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, and have repeatedly demanded the Pakistani government do more as a partner in the 'war on terror'. With Musharraf at the helm, the present government had the luxury of blaming the conduct of war on him and thus avoid responsibility both domestically and internationally. Now, it does not have that luxury anymore.

With the departure of Musharraf, the ruling coalition has to take decisive steps to defeat the extremist elements in the country. At the same time they have to address a myriad of economic problems that the country is confronted with: a massive 25 %, inflation; foreign reserves of approximately US\$ 9 billion and dwindling fast; the country's worst energy crisis in its history; and the food crisis, which is getting worse by the day. To tackle these problems the coalition needs to stick together and avoid confrontational politics of the past.

Uncertain Future

The PPP and the PML-N are the biggest political parties in Pakistan and traditional rivals. While it cannot be expected that the coalition would fall apart in the near future, as both would have to weigh their options carefully before they decide to part, the future of their relationship remains uncertain. Common opposition to Musharraf was the binding factor in their relationship as he had sidelined both the parties in the past. Henceforth it would be a tall order for them to keep the coalition going. Differences have already emerged between the two on the issue of restoration of the judges who were removed by Musharraf and the choice of the next president. They diverge, but not significantly, on dealing with the militants; the PPP's support for military operations is lukewarm, while the PML-N is hostile to the idea.

At this critical juncture, the leadership of both the parties have to demonstrate statesmanship and place the national interest ahead of partisan advantage. The civilian leadership needs to publicly own the war against militancy and educate the people about the dangers that the Taliban pose to their way of life. Refusal to do so is not an option, as it would leave the army no choice but to step in as the ultimate defender of national interest.

The army has remained neutral in the current political drama for two very practical reasons. First,

Pakistan's multiple security threats, militancy in FATA and NWFP, insurgency in Balochistan, growing uneasiness on its eastern borders with India, and the presence of US/NATO forces on its Western borders, all require its full attention. The army's recent involvement in politics has made it highly unpopular among the masses whose support is vital for an effective counter-insurgency campaign. For the army to stay permanently out of politics, the present coalition would have to demonstrate political maturity and the ability to carry out good governance.

The need of the hour is a national unity government in Pakistan that is backed by the army and supported by its allies and neighbours. If the country were to revert back to confrontation between the two major political parties, the 'triumph of democracy over dictatorship' would come to naught.

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