

No Country For Armed Men.

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LAHORE - It was a sign of the misguided times in Pakistan that on June 5 -- a day when the country faced massive rolling electricity blackouts, a crashing economy, civil war in two out of four provinces, violence from the Himalayas to the Arabian Gulf, and a cratering relationship with the United States -- the Pakistani army decided it was the best moment to test fire a cruise missile capable of carrying nuclear warheads. It was the fifth such test since April, supposedly a morale booster for a wildly depressed public, a signal to India that Pakistan would not put its guard down despite its problems, and a message to U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, who had arrived in Delhi that morning, that Pakistan could not be bullied.

As Pakistanis baked in the sweltering heat without electricity or running water, facing an increasingly jobless future and little hope for improved education or health care, most people ignored the missile tests. India had been carrying out similar rocket tests, but has not faced anything close to Pakistan's economic malaise.

Then last week, in the most recent denouement of a long-running political crisis, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gailani was sacked by the Supreme Court -- raising all sorts of legal and constitutional problems. Many people termed the court's action a constitutional coup because parliament is the only body that has the power to dismiss a prime minister. Although a new prime minister belonging to the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) will soon be in place, the ongoing political uncertainty is only likely to further escalate Pakistan's institutional meltdown.

All of Pakistan's major institutions of state and governance are now at loggerheads. The Supreme Court, the PPP government led by President Asif Zardari, the opposition parties, and the media have spent the last weeks preoccupied with a flurry of corruption scandals while hurling accusations against one another. So far only the army has come out clean as a whistle -- although corruption charges hover over many retired generals.

For the Pakistani army -- the world's most experienced in creating just the right atmospherics before mounting a coup the country is in a perfect storm for what would be its fifth military takeover. All the institutions of the state are discredited. Pakistanis have no faith in the politicians and there are many public doubts about democracy. Economic collapse and relentless extremist violence have taken a huge toll in life and property, while the breakdown of relations with the West has isolated Pakistan internationally like never before.

Except that this time -- considering the mayhem it faces and the lack of solutions it can offer the nation (especially after having irked the United States and NATO) -- the army is unlikely to mount a coup. Instead, the army would like to see the present PPP government be ousted by the Supreme Court, to be followed by an interim government that would oversee general elections. In this scenario, both the Supreme Court and the army could join hands to bring corruption cases against large numbers of politicians while the tough economic reforms demanded by the IMF, which the current civilian government has refused to carry out, can be implemented. This could mean an indefinite extension of the interim government and delayed general elections.

The ruling elites' failure to carry out reforms is at the root of Pakistan's troubles. The army and successive governments have long lacked the courage or will to make the necessary tough decisions, from making peace with India to blocking the growth of extremism to raising sufficient revenues from the landed gentry. In the 1990s, when the rest of the world was enjoying the peace dividend at the end of the Cold War, along with the spread of global markets and traded goods, Pakistan's economy remained stubbornly feudal. Indian cities like Bangalore and Mumbai raced to build call centers, car companies, and software giants, while Pakistanis struggled to provide electricity for their aging textile mills. Even Bangladesh and Sri Lanka surged ahead, opening their economies to policies building trade and investment and introducing new industries and

agricultural crops as Pakistan fought its covert wars.

Meanwhile, the army immersed itself in conflict, first in Afghanistan supporting the mujahideen in the 1980s, then the Taliban in the 1990s, and then the jihadists in Indian-held Kashmir -- many of whom were actually Pakistani militants from Punjab. The idea of improving relations with its neighbors was as anathema to the army as carrying out basic economic reforms was to the political elite, from increasing taxes to ending subsidies to state-owned institutions that have bankrupted the country.

Pakistan was thus thoroughly undermined from within even before it made the unwise decision to shelter escaping Afghan Taliban in 2001 -- the army's bid to maintain its options in the face of the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. Using Islamic extremists as a tool of foreign policy was shown as a bankrupt policy after 9/11, but Pakistan continued to pursue it both in Afghanistan and Kashmir, blindly refusing to see that the world had fundamentally changed.

Pakistan is now paying the full price. Some 35,000 Pakistani citizens have been killed by the Pakistani Taliban, by related militant groups, or in bitter sectarian warfare that has gone unchecked. Extremists have targeted Hindus and Christians but also Muslim groups like the Ahmedis, Ismailis, Memons, and Shia. In Quetta, the capital of strife-torn Baluchistan, ethnic insurgents are blowing up buses; in Karachi, the breakdown of law and order is fueling the growth of armed militias in the slums based on ethnic, criminal, or political loyalty.

Unfortunately, the Obama administration's misguided handling of Pakistan over the past year has only convinced Pakistani hardliners that they were right. In their eyes, Washington's provocative cozying up to New Delhi, the peace talks it started with the Taliban without including Pakistan, and the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan it planned without adequate consultations with Islamabad have all served notice that America's hostility toward Pakistan is unrelenting. They believe it's the Americans who have got it all wrong and now face a military debacle in Afghanistan. The irony is that Pakistan has always wanted a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and a U.S.-Taliban dialogue it could dominate. Now that all it wished for is actually coming true, Pakistan is sitting on the wrong side of the fence, estranged from the United States as neighbors like Iran maneuver to take advantage of the U.S. withdrawal and Pakistan's absence from the scene.

Of course, the United States has its own hardliners. The most dangerous step some in the U.S. Congress and the administration are now advising President Obama to take is declaring the Afghan Taliban network led by Jalaluddin Haqqani a terrorist group. That could lead to Pakistan being declared a state sponsor of terrorism because of Haqqani's safe havens there. Such a designation would turn many more Pakistanis into anti-American extremists. By taking such a step and refusing to apologize for the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers by U.S. helicopters last November, the United States would only be setting the scene for further meltdown in Pakistan. Ending the Haqqani presence in Pakistan requires political dialogue from Washington and Kabul, not threats.

The rock-bottom relations with the United States distract Pakistan from its real problem: its spiraling domestic crises. Pakistan desperately needs leaders who can bring a new narrative to the debate, who can effectively criticize the military for plunging us into this ideological backwater for the past 30 years. Pakistan needs inspirational figures who can expose the corruption and ineptness of the politicians and demand economic and fiscal reform so that we can rebuild our country.

Any new narrative requires us as Pakistanis to take ownership of our problems rather than blaming the usual suspects: the United States, India, and Israel. So far, at least, there are no such leaders on the horizon. The best hope for Pakistan may be the promising growth of a young people's movement led by poets, pop musicians, human rights groups, artists, bankers, and bureaucrats who communicate on social networks and talk constantly about the need for change.

Sixty percent of Pakistan's 180 million people are below the age of 25, so these young people have the majority on their side. The creaking political establishment has little knowledge of this class of people or their aspirations for a better future. It is these young people who need to develop a fresh narrative about Pakistan's history and where it is going -- a narrative that does not put the army and nuclear weapons at center stage but puts Pakistani citizens first, once and for all.

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