

Pakistan's Uncertain Year Ahead

BBC NEWS - 04/01/2007

By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistan is moving into a new year that will be critical for the country's future political direction. The government says everything is on schedule for the re-election of President Pervez Musharraf and general elections by the end of 2007.

Yet Pakistanis are still gripped with severe bouts of uncertainty and few believe the government's assurances. The unpredictability of what will actually happen is already affecting business confidence, say economists.

Islamic extremist groups, the mainstream Islamic parties and exiled national leaders are more interested in a showdown with Gen Musharraf to curtail his powers, or remove him from office, than an election.

Fortunately for the military, the opposition parties are deeply divided among themselves. The reason for the uncertainty, that will last all of next year, is that the decision will be made by one man - Gen Musharraf himself - because in Pakistan there is no institutionalized, well-worn democratic succession process and the constitution is a mere piece of paper that can be altered by decree.

After seven years of Gen Musharraf and the military, people are tired of the army and looking for change. The government scenario elaborated to me by leading figures of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PML) says that next autumn Gen Musharraf will likely go for an endorsement from the present National Assembly and provincial assemblies as president for the next five years.

Rumors of a deal

He will then dissolve parliament, set up a three-month caretaker government that will hold free and fair elections and then go for a second endorsement as president in 2008.

Most PML politicians do not expect him to relinquish his role in the military, in which case he will remain as both army chief and president.

However the decisions all lie with Gen Musharraf and his handful of military advisers rather than the ruling party or the prime minister - hence so much uncertainty.

The key issue is what political alliances Gen Musharraf will broker for the election.

After his recent outbursts against extremism and the need for people to vote for moderates, rather than religious extremists, the long-running speculation that the army has struck a deal with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and its leader in self-imposed exile, Benazir Bhutto, are rife.

Both sides deny any deal, despite the political buzz.

However Gen Musharraf has made it clear that the return of Benazir Bhutto is out of the question. So too, he says, is the return of the prime minister he deposed, Nawaz Sharif, the exiled leader of another faction of the PML.

So why should the PPP cut a deal when its leader will not be allowed to campaign or stand for elections?

If there is a compromise and a deal with the PPP, it would mean the military breaking of its alliance with the Islamic parties that presently rule the provinces of Balochistan and the North West Frontier.

It is something that many in the US and western Europe are desperate to see happen and would clearly applaud.

The problem is that the PML and its leader Chaudry Shujjat Hussain, in particular, see the PPP as a major threat to their monopoly on power at the centre and in the largest province Punjab.

Concrete assurances

Moreover the logic of a deal with the PPP would mean that the military would also have to cast their lot with smaller secular Baloch and Pashtun nationalist parties in Balochistan and the NWFP - which the army is loathe to do because they oppose the continuation of military rule.

Again Gen Musharraf will have the last word and it is likely that he will only declare his political alliances at the last moment, thus fuelling continued uncertainty about the future.

The best option for a genuine step forward to democratization would be for Gen Musharraf to announce that he would stand as a civilian president, that genuinely free and fair elections would be held and the future government would be freely determined on the election outcome.

To gain public confidence he would also need to pledge that the elections would genuinely empower parliament and the next prime minister and that he and the army would take a back seat.

That would need concrete assurances such as a pledge to remove over 1,000 army officers who presently occupy key civilian posts in the government, economic institutions, media and the universities.

Thus the polls would be a transformative election moving the country slowly towards full and genuine civilian rule.

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Moreover only a genuine civilian government could begin the attempt to start a reconciliation process with all the alienated, angry elements of society such as the Baloch nationalists and the Pashtun extremists in the tribal agencies bordering Afghanistan.

Is such a transformative election likely?

Not really.

Gen Musharraf has repeatedly said in the past few months that that Pakistan would fall apart if he was not there to guide it, that a strong hand is needed and there can be only one centre of power - and by that he means the army.

So 2007 will be full of political noise and thunder, talk of deals and conspiracies, but when people do actually go to the polls, many will not be expecting anything much to change.