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## The Islamic Republic Of Pakistan: The World's Most Dangerous Nation Holds An Election

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Arriving at the airport in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, reminds one of the vast gulf between the First and Third World. Chaotic, frenetic, disorganized, dilapidated—when I visited a couple months ago I almost longed for New York's JFK airport, which I normally loathe. The government is building a new facility, but no matter how modern the buildings, the new airport is likely to end up much like the old one: chaotic, frenetic, and disorganized, if not quite so dilapidated.

Pakistan's recent election was much like the country's capital airport. Except violence and murder added to the chaos. Nawaz Sharif, of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz emerged as the likely new prime minister. The only unambiguous good news, beyond the generally free vote, is that the religious parties did not gain.

Sharif, a former prime minister who was ousted in 1999 by military chief Pervez Musharraf (whose recent attempt to return to politics was blocked by Pakistan's courts), has spent a lifetime seeking political power. However, the prize may be a poisoned chalice.

Pakistan is a tragic land, an Islamic state increasingly turned fundamentalist and violent. For the first time in the country's more than six decade life, a civilian government fulfilled its full five-year term. However, the unimpressive performance of the ruling Pakistan People's Party left it fighting outsider cricket star Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Party to avoid a third place finish. Moreover, President Asif Ali Zardari's term ends in September and he has no chance of being reappointed by the parliament.

The government's failure was sweeping. Observed Vali Nasr, author and former State Department adviser, Pakistan "is nuclear-armed, in near conflict with India, has a dangerous civil war with its own extremists, is now subject to one of the most brutal terrorism campaigns against its population, and is now coming apart along sectarian lines."

The state does not even rule its own territory. Much of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Balochistan are beyond Islamabad's control. At least 4,000 Pakistani soldiers have died since 2004 fighting the Pakistani Taliban.

Conflict crosses the Afghan border while extremists strike with bombings and assassinations elsewhere. Religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, and Shia Muslims, face constant private violence and official discrimination.

Indeed, in this election radicals waged a murderous campaign against democratic politicians, essentially shutting down campaigning in some areas. Federal ministers and state governors have been assassinated for their liberal views.

Islamabad remains relatively safe, but only because of the overwhelming security. Barricades and checkpoints dot the streets. I recently stayed at the Marriott, which was turned into a veritable fortress after a bombing a few years ago. The city is the kind of place where you can walk safely while not actually feeling safe.

Attempts by the Pakistani government to micro-manage the economy have failed. The latest Economic Freedom of the World report ranks Pakistan tied for 111-114 out of 144 countries. Islamabad sits below Bangladesh, another chaotic and violent land that once was part of Pakistan.

The ill consequences of government economic control have been exacerbated by political instability. Only brave or foolish outsiders enter the Pakistani economy. In fact, foreign investment has collapsed since 2008, dropping by more than four-fifths. Unemployment and inflation are high; economic infrastructure is decrepit; even Islamabad suffers routine power outages.

The practice of democracy has been consistently corrupt, incompetent, and disillusioning. The political system is essentially authoritarian with a democratic veneer. Despite the presence of an educated and talented elite, Pakistan lacks the lush civil society that characterizes most Western nations. The government is simultaneously ubiquitous and ineffective, discouraging individual and communal action.

Moreover, the elections are formally but not practically free. Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif sought power democratically but were essentially feudal lords in their home provinces who focused on dispensing patronage. Even sports hero Imran Khan has yet to break the political duopoly of the PPP and PML-N. Violent attacks on the PPP and other secular-minded parties, such as the Awami National Party and Muttahida Quami Movement, hindered their ability to compete. (In fact, one of former PPP Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani's sons was kidnapped at an election rally on the last day of the campaign.)

Even when civilian politicians formally ruled, they did not control the military and especially the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, which long aided the Taliban against the American-installed government in Kabul. Most previous democratic administrations ended badly, usually with military intervention.

During the Cold War Washington cheerfully supported whatever thug in uniform happened to rule, most ruinously Zia ul-Haq, who promoted Islamic fundamentalism to buttress his undemocratic rule. Five years ago General turned President Musharref relinquished power, but the murder of Benazir Bhutto left her less loved husband, Asif Ali Zardari, as president in 2008. Despite frequent predictions of military intervention, the armed services stayed out of politics, allowing the PPP government to finish its term. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kayani may not have wanted to be stuck attempting to govern the ungovernable.

Solving Pakistan's problems is made even more difficult with war in next door Afghanistan. The Afghan-Pakistani border is an artifact of history, artificially dividing what some people call Pashtunistan. So long as the U.S. supports a government in Kabul

viewed as hostile in Islamabad—even worse, which has warm relations with Pakistan’s hated adversary, India—Islamabad is going to meddle, often against American objectives. Moreover, incidents like the killing by NATO forces of 24 Pakistani soldiers in November 2011, which led Islamabad to shut down allied resupply columns for seven months, are inevitable.

Washington’s drone war may pose an even bigger problem. Islamabad cannot be trusted to confront the problem of terrorism. For instance, few analysts doubt that alerting the Zardari government to Osama bin Laden’s presence would have ensured his escape. Even if the civilian authorities are willing, the military has too many ties, both formal and informal, with extremists to inspire trust.

In contrast, drones work. They kill terrorists and there are terrorists in Pakistan to kill. It is widely assumed that Islamabad has acquiesced if not encouraged the drone campaign so long as the government can maintain plausible deniability. The Pakistan military has done the same thing, falsely but publicly claiming that it had ended drone flights from Shamsi Air Force Base, for instance. As a result, it is believed that extremists now are less likely to seek sanctuary in Pakistan.

However, promiscuous use of drones has made Washington hated in Pakistan. A February poll found that 92 percent of Pakistanis disapproved of American leadership while three-quarters of the population considered the U.S. to be their enemy. (Americans return the favor; the same month 81 percent of those polled professed an unfavorable view of Pakistan.)

No surprise, Khan and Sharif directed much of their campaign ire at the practice, which probably kills more innocents than terrorists, though an accurate accounting is impossible to make. Mistakes—wiping out those merely in proximity to terrorists—are morally horrid. They also are practically counterproductive. To the extent that the Obama administration has expanded its targets to enemies of Islamabad rather than Washington, the former has ended up creating even more enemies of Washington.

Finally, for those who worry about an Islamic Bomb in Tehran, one already exists in Islamabad. Pakistan has between 90 and 120 warheads, and is producing more plutonium than any other nation on earth. The result likely will be an expanded arsenal. Observed Tom Hundley of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting: “Pakistan could end up in third place, behind Russia and the United States, within a decade.” Yet the contest with India has left Islamabad officials “hobbled by fear, paranoia, and a deep sense of inferiority,” in Hundley’s words. At the same time, Pakistan has increasingly dispersed its warheads to frustrate any U.S. attempt to seize the weapons. The practice increases the possibility of radicals grabbing a warhead or fissile material.

Nine of ten Pakistanis say they are not satisfied with Pakistan’s direction. Into this imbroglio will step Prime Minister Sharif, whose last term as premier was highlighted by friendship with violent fundamentalists, arrest of critical journalists, and an unsuccessful attempt to prevent Musharraf, then army chief of staff, from returning to Pakistan from a foreign trip. That plan left Sharif out of power, under arrest, and eventually exiled abroad. Reported the *Washington Post*, Sharif “was power-obsessed, arrogant, impulsive, unwilling to collaborate—and that’s according to his friends and most loyal supporters.”

Obviously, Sharif’s return should fill no one with optimism. The basic question is: has he matured?

So far he has emphasized conciliation and appeared to take his presumptive duties seriously. For instance, he backs a freer economy, chose the fiscally responsible Ishaq Dar as finance minister, reached out to Imran Khan despite the latter's sharp campaign criticism, invited Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to his inauguration, supported negotiation with the Pakistani Taliban, and advocated good relations with Afghanistan.

Sharif also told the *Wall Street Journal*: "the relationship with the U.S. was quite good when I was in power. I'd like to take this relationship further. We need to strengthen the relationship." However, reconciliation with Washington will be difficult, given Sharif's criticism of U.S. drone policy and notable silence about Taliban violence. Noted Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "The initial indicators are the U.S.-Pakistani tensions won't get better and Pakistan's limited support of U.S. and Afghan efforts to deal with the Afghan Taliban will get worse."

Pakistan has great potential, but remains hobbled by artificial national boundaries, decades of conflict in Afghanistan, metastasizing home-grown radicalism, and persistent economic malfeasance. Washington should do what it can to help—particularly wrapping up its involvement in the Afghan war, deploying drones more sparingly, and reducing foreign aid which has encouraged creation of an over-politicized, spectacularly intrusive, and strikingly incompetent state.

However, ultimately the destiny of Pakistan is in the Pakistani people's hands. They, and we, must hope that Nawaz Sharif's third time as prime minister ends up being the charm. Much is at stake, for his nation, South Asia, and the world.