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PAKISTAN UNDER CIVILIAN GOVERNMENT

After a hiatus of 13 years, Pakistan again has a civilian government that allows for an organized opposition. In this new situation, President Bhutto and opposition leaders have had to work out their respective roles in the governmental process. This paper examines the major issues they have had to confront, the procedures that have evolved in dealing with these problems, and the implications of this system for the short- and long-term stability of Pakistan.

ABSTRACT

Since the restoration of civilian government, the political process in Pakistan has been characterized by a continual succession of crises. President Bhutto is anxious to maintain all political power in his own hands, but has been forced to compromise with opposition parties because his strength is concentrated in only two of Pakistan's four provinces. Moreover, during the process of drafting and ratifying a new constitution acceptable to all of the various political elements, the confrontations have been acute and frequent.

Through complicated exchanges, President Bhutto and opposition leaders have been able to hammer out various compromises. Although lack of trust and personal antagonisms have often

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resulted in the early collapse of these agreements, both Bhutto and opposition leaders appear to be learning their own limitations through this process and may be developing procedures to deal with one another so as to reduce the risk of violent confrontations.

But the prospects for long-term stability in Pakistan remain uncertain. By maintaining the initiative and by using repressive measures against non-PPP (Pakistan Peoples Party) politicians and the press, President Bhutto has forced the opposition to accept compromises on his own terms. An adroit use of carrot-and-stick tactics has strengthened his position, but it has also intensified regional antagonisms. The present political process, based on the continuing ability of President Bhutto to outmaneuver the opposition, is not likely to provide for the integration of conflicting groups required for stability over the longer term.

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A Process of Education

President Bhutto and the leaders of the various opposition parties have faced the necessity of working out their respective roles in the new political situation created by the restoration of civilian government in Pakistan. The country had been under military rule for 13 years and during this period no effective opposition had been allowed. Thus Pakistan has been handicapped by lack of experience in the operation of a representative political system. This problem is compounded by the fact that in Pakistan the concept of a "loyal opposition" has never been fully accepted. Moreover, because political parties lack solid cadre organization and are often little more than coalitions clustered around individuals, conflicts of personalities between party leaders pose additional hurdles to the orderly conduct of party politics. These conflicts have been especially intense between Bhutto and Wali Khan of the National Awami Party (NAP) and between Wali and Bhutto's Interior Minister Qayyum Khan.

Therefore, the political process in Pakistan over the past 18 months has been characterized by a continual succession of crises. Bhutto's majority Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) faces a number of smaller parties which mostly center around regional or religious interests. All parties are fond of hurling excessive and unsubstantiated charges against others, leading to vocal and abusive exchanges. While most seem to accept this as an integral feature of Pakistani politics, these exchanges, nevertheless, intensify mistrust and personal antagonisms.

President Bhutto has proved himself especially adroit at maneuvering within this political system. He maintains the initiative by allowing situations to approach the crisis point, maximizes pressure on the opposition, and then unexpectedly offers a compromise which the opposition cannot afford to reject. Thus, Bhutto has repeatedly maneuvered the opposition into the position of having to choose between accepting his terms of compromise or else forfeiting its chance of sharing in the political process.

On the other hand, Bhutto has discovered his inability either by suasion or strong-arm tactics to fragment and curb the opposition sufficiently to give him a free hand -- especially in the provinces. Consequently, both Bhutto and the opposition appear to be learning the limits of their strengths and may be better able to avoid violent confrontations.

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Bhutto's Major Problem

Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto became President of Pakistan on December 20, 1971, while the nation was still stunned by the shock of military defeat and the loss of the East Wing. General Yahya Khan had been forced by his military associates to resign and Bhutto, as leader of the majority party in the National Assembly, was called upon to succeed him as President and Chief Martial Law Administrator.

From the outset of his regime, President Bhutto has been handicapped by lack of political support in two of Pakistan's four provinces. In winning large majorities from the more populous provinces of Punjab and Sind, Bhutto's PPP had an overall majority in the National Assembly, but had won only one seat from the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) and none from Baluchistan. While the PPP controlled majorities in the Provincial Assemblies of Punjab and Sind, it had only very limited strength in the Assemblies of NWFP and Baluchistan. Thus, much of the political conflict in Pakistan has revolved around President Bhutto's attempt to assert his control in these two provinces where he is politically weakest.

Bhutto's main opposition has been the National Awami Party headed by Khan Abdul Wali Khan. The NAP lacks national standing, but, together with its ally, the Jami'at-Ulema-i-Islam (JUI), initially mustered a majority in the Assemblies of the NWFP and Baluchistan and thus claimed the right to form provincial governments. These two parties concede Bhutto's right to rule at the center, but have vehemently fought all of his attempts to establish PPP authority in their two provinces. Thus when Bhutto announced in January 1972 that he would not convene the Assemblies until March, that he intended to maintain martial law for the indefinite future, and that he was appointing his loyal lieutenants as governors of all the four provinces, he was bitterly assailed by the opposition parties.

Confrontation and Compromise

In early 1972 both Bhutto and Wali Khan essentially were attempting to consolidate their position before the other could act. Wali demanded the immediate convening of the provincial assemblies and the lifting of martial law, citing Bhutto's election campaign assertion that Pakistan's problems could be solved if only the government would transfer power to the elected representatives of the people. Bhutto, realizing that he lacked a majority in the provinces, was reluctant to yield power to the opposition-controlled assemblies and claimed that the continuation

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of martial law was necessary if effective social and economic reforms were to be implemented.

Heated rhetoric intensified the dispute and it appeared possible that Pakistan, having just emerged from a civil war, might face the prospect of further regional violence. Bhutto faced other serious challenges at the same time: police strikes in large cities, labor unrest, and murmurs of discontent from top military leaders. But Bhutto managed to survive these challenges and defused the political crisis by meeting with Wali Khan and agreeing to a compromise settlement on March 6. Bhutto consented to call the provincial assemblies into session and to allow the NAP-JUI coalition to form governments; new governors having NAP-JUI support would be appointed; the National Assembly would be convened to write an "interim Constitution"; and in exchange, Wali Khan agreed to the continuation of martial law for another five months.

This agreement soon began to unravel due to conflicting interpretations. But President Bhutto was able to patch together an equally dramatic compromise on April 14 during the National Assembly session called to ratify an interim constitution. Bhutto proposed to abolish martial law immediately if the opposition would approve the government's draft. In spite of its dislike of the strong presidency called for in the draft, the opposition agreed to the deal -- if only to avoid the onus for continuation of martial law. Moreover, a committee composed of representatives of all the major parties was formed to draft the permanent constitution. Again, Bhutto had engineered a compromise settlement from a seemingly intractable situation.

The Return to Pressure Tactics

The temporary respite afforded by the April 14 agreement led to a short period of relative tranquility. The provincial assemblies met on May 2, but relations between the central government and the NAP-JUI coalitions in Baluchistan and the NWFP remained tense, primarily because of deep personal antagonisms between party leaders. During the summer of 1972, the PPP, through its control of the central government and the provincial governments of Punjab and Sind, intensified its pressure on opposition parties. Lower-level opposition party officials were arrested as a warning of greater restrictions to come if the opposition did not limit its activities. At the same time the government began a campaign to harass the opposition press. By withdrawing its advertising from these papers, the government deprived them of a vital source of income and, by restricting the distribution of newsprint, it forced them to limit the size and frequency of their editions.

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The government-controlled National Press Trust played up a number of anti-opposition themes, notably that of the alleged "London Conspiracy" in which Wali Khan and other NAP leaders had purportedly met in London to plan secessionist activities in the NWFP and Baluchistan. This continuous propaganda barrage was designed to prevent the NAP from obtaining any national status by pinning on it the label of regional separatism and treason. Clearly frustrated by its failure to undermine the two non-PPP provincial governments, the government resorted to tactics often used before in Pakistan -- false arrests and unsubstantiated accusations.

Another Attempt at Compromise

The political system in Pakistan allows for this type of public vituperation and, in spite of the public sparring between the PPP and the opposition, all-party negotiations continued over the general outline of a permanent constitution. An agreement was reached on October 20 which outlined the division of power between the central and provincial governments and which provided for a parliamentary system of government, albeit one which provided special advantages for the government in power. These two issues had been the major points of contention between Bhutto and the opposition, and political observers were encouraged when this agreement was reached. Within a month, however, the opposition parties began to have second thoughts and began to backtrack from certain points of the agreement.

Increased Pressure and Another Crisis

The government insisted that the opposition parties adhere to the draft that they had signed, while the opposition wanted, inter alia, to remove provisions requiring a two-thirds majority for passage of a vote of no-confidence. The PPP, already in control, was unwilling to dilute its power beyond the minimum necessary to win agreement on a constitution, while the opposition sought to increase the leverage it could utilize in working against the government.

As the deadlock continued the PPP mounted an intensified campaign to discredit the NAP and other opposition parties. The government accused the Baluchistan government of not maintaining law and order in the province and sought to manipulate tribal rivalries to its advantage. Moreover, the government accused NAP leaders in both the NWFP and Baluchistan of quietly aiding the secessionist elements in those provinces.

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Central government exasperation with its inability to control events in these two provinces culminated in President Bhutto's use of the opportunity provided by the February 15 discovery of arms in the Iraqi Embassy in Islamabad to move against the provincial governments. Citing the alleged breakdown of law and order and the danger of subversion, he called for the resignation of the two NAP governors and dismissed the provincial ministry in Baluchistan. The consequent resignation of the NWFP ministry put both provinces once again under central government control.

A Dangerous Move

Although Bhutto had the stronger hand, his move against the NAP-JUI governments was nevertheless a calculated risk. The NAP, deprived of its political power in the provinces, might well have resorted to violence to protest Bhutto's action and, in any case, the move was certain to inflame regional antagonisms. In fact, however, while the NAP and other parties vehemently protested this violation of the 1972 agreements, they confined their protests to nonviolent means. Again, Bhutto had caught the opposition off balance.

Having taken the initiative, Bhutto maintained his momentum. The government arrested more opposition politicians and banned several opposition newspapers. At the same time, virtually all the opposition parties closed ranks in forming the United Democratic Front (UDF) and undertook a series of coordinated, well-organized opposition rallies. The crisis reached its peak when shooting broke out at a UDF rally held on March 23 in Rawalpindi.* While both sides accused the other of instigating the trouble, it appears that PPP supporters were the first to start shooting. Wali Khan accused Bhutto of setting Punjabis against his own Pathan supporters -- thus exacerbating regional conflict. When the UDF began a boycott of the National Assembly, Bhutto threatened to proceed with ratification of the constitution without their participation. Wali Khan replied that any constitution not receiving the support of all of the provinces would be invalid. Pakistan seemed once again at the breaking point.

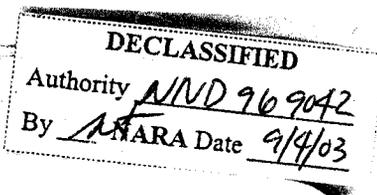
*In the exchange of fire, 9 people -- mostly supporters of the UDF -- were killed. The incident had a particularly dramatic and sobering impact throughout Pakistan because it took place in Liaquat Gardens where Liaquat Ali Khan, Pakistan's last effective civilian political leader, had been assassinated in 1951.

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Back From the Brink

However, the March 23 incident seems to have indicated to Bhutto that he had reached the limit to which he could push the opposition. Having shown the iron fist, he now called for compromise. He offered to meet with the opposition, but the meeting failed to produce an acceptable compromise. Then, in an eleventh-hour maneuver, his law minister once again called for talks on the evening of April 9, with the final Assembly vote scheduled for the 10th. The next morning, while the Assembly waited, Bhutto and the opposition leaders hammered out a final compromise. Bhutto made concessions on some points, such as certain religious provisions and constitutional safeguards. While he refused to accept a restoration of opposition government in the NWFP and Baluchistan, he promised some flexibility. The UDF leadership left the final decision on accepting the constitution to each individual opposition party, and although one party abstained, all others accepted the settlement. In the general euphoria following passage of the constitution, the government dropped many of the cases it had lodged against opposition politicians and journalists.

Prospects

The constitutional settlement did not, however, institute a lasting truce. Both Bhutto and Wali Khan soon returned to hurling recriminations. The NAP-JUI coalition, still out of power, continues to demand that its provincial governments be reconstituted; Bhutto continues to resist.

President Bhutto is today stronger and more secure than at any previous time, but he has not yet integrated other political parties into the governmental process or given them a stake in the continued stability of Pakistan. His efforts to maintain the concentration of power in his own hands have left the opposition with no other option than to oppose the government simply for the sake of opposition. Moreover, his efforts to label the NAP as a regional and secessionist party have reinforced its tendency to rely on divisive regional sentiments at a time when Pakistan's greatest need is to create a sense of national identity following the disastrous events of 1971.

To be sure, a permanent constitution has been ratified which provides a role for the opposition, but the constitution will be meaningful only if the major opposition parties feel that the constitutional process will offer them the chance of sharing in political power. This, in turn, will depend on the extent to which both Bhutto and the opposition are willing to accept a role for the other commensurate to its political support.

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Thus, Pakistan's prospects for stable constitutional government remain uncertain. From his present secure power base, it is unlikely that President Bhutto perceives any need to exceed past actions in order to limit the effectiveness of the opposition. His skillful use of carrot-and-stick tactics has so far enabled him to achieve his major objectives without driving the other political parties into violent reaction. Yet, in the long run, continued stability in Pakistan will depend on further integration of the various regional and economic groups through a greater accommodation of their interests. The present political process, based on the continued ability of President Bhutto to outmaneuver the opposition, is not likely to provide for such integration or for stability over the long term.

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