Pakistan struggles to restore democracy and end terrorism

President Zardari seeks accommodation with border provinces, victory over insurgents

BY ISMAIL KHAN

Taliban driving captured Humvees near the Khyber Pass in Pakistan in mid-November painted a grim picture of the strains on Pakistan’s armed forces.

These strains, plus intense pressure on its economy will make the year 2009 extremely crucial for the country’s somewhat shaky civilian government. Late in the summer of 2008 a balance-of-payments crisis hit the country’s cash-strapped government – months before the global economic crisis.

Pakistan’s army is once again engaged in battles with a local Taliban group near the border with Afghanistan – battles which began after members of the group bombed a hospital in August. The subsequent fighting signalled the breakdown of a truce that had been signed with the group in May 2008.

In November, when 75 per cent of all of NATO’s supplies for Afghanistan were coming up from Pakistan and through the Khyber Pass, attacks on convoys of food and fuel by Pakistani Taliban have made conditions critical.

The situation looks much worse than it did in the glory days of February 2008 following the victory of the liberal and secular Pakistan People’s Party over the forces of General Pervez Musharraf.

The convincing win in the nationwide elections allowed the party to form a national government in Islamabad in a coalition with the other major secular party.

Some analysts attributed their win, following the assassination of the party’s leader Benazir Bhutto in December, 2007, to a sympathy vote.

Coalition government breaks down

The coalition finally broke down only months after it had come into being, over the pledges it had made in March 2008. The coalition had pledged to restore true democracy, do away with dictatorship and to restore the 1973 constitution as it existed on Oct. 12, 1999, before the military coup of Gen. Pervez Musharraf. The coalition also promised to abolish the concurrent list of powers in Pakistan’s constitution so as to grant more powers to the country’s four provinces. The coalition also wanted to increase the strength of the Senate, the upper house of parlia-
Border province votes out religious coalition

Recent Events in Pakistan’s North-West Frontier Province have proven to be a true echo of events nationwide. The secular Awami National Party, which swept the polls in the February 2008 elections, vowed to do away with armed militants and to restore peace.

During the six-year rule of the previous provincial government, a religious coalition called the Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal, there were several Taliban groups founded in Pakistan’s tribal backyard that borders Afghanistan.

The different Taliban groups later merged to form a united Pakistani organization called Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan in December 2007 and they not only rule the roost in most of the seven federally administered tribal areas but also pose a serious security threat to the province, and by extension to the whole of Pakistan.

It was during their rule in the province that suicide bombings, roadside bombings and bombings of girls’ schools became commonplace.

A peace agreement struck with armed militants in May 2008 proved to be short-lived.

The militants reneged on the agreement, accusing the government of backtracking on its promise to release prisoners and enforce Islamic laws in the region. The government hit back, accusing the Pakistani Taliban in Swat of bombing schools and target killings.

Swat is in flames again. The situation around Peshawar, capital of the North-West Frontier Province - is precarious. Surrounded by three tribal regions to the south, west and north, Peshawar has witnessed a surge in militant activities.

Elsewhere in Pakistan, the situation remains volatile in the southern part of the federally administered tribal areas, North and South Waziristan, which the U.S. government believes are Al-Qaeda’s safe-heavens.

Federalism is said to be a useful form of governance in countries populated by diverse elements. But federalism, or any other form of governance, can only take traction when it is backed by firm and unflinching political will. That is the question in Pakistan: do its diverse elements want the federation to function?
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In this region, heavy rains during the monsoon season cause considerable soil erosion in the rural areas upstream, mainly in the hills, and flash floods in the downstream in the plains, including major urban areas in the state of Assam. The winter months are marked by drought and subsequent lowering of ground water level, both upstream and downstream.

The violence of the monsoon and the winter calm both have negative consequences for cultivation in the Northeast. State governments have so far approached these problems individually and through their respective local governments. However, since the upstream and downstream are hydrologically related, integrated management practices have to be put in place.

The National Water Policy (2002) emphasizes the need for integrated basin-based master planning for flood control and water management; and increased implementation of non-structural measures such as flood forecasting and warning, zoning and flood-proofing to minimize losses.

This required bilateral arrangement is between Assam and its neighbors, especially with the state of Arunachal Pradesh, to manage water flow in individual river basins. However, agreements have been hard to reach since participant states are reluctant for political reasons to displace rural or urban populations through a process of zoning or construction of flood control infrastructure.

Further complicating the situation is the fact that in several northeastern states, management of water resources is vested not with the states but is under the jurisdiction of traditional institutions (rural local councils).

Empowering local government

After the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments in 1992, a third tier of government has come into being. Under the Eleventh and Twelfth Schedules of the Constitution, over two dozen subjects have been devolved to the village pan-chayats or local councils, and municipalities. These include drinking water, water management, watershed development, minor irrigation, sanitation, culverts, bridges, ferries, waterways and other means of communication.

The empowerment of local government institutions has added a new dimension to Indian federalism. The advent of this new order of government, the panchayati raj, has further weakened the central government’s powers. Governance is today a far more federal enterprise than hitherto. What form or shape the conflict dimensions will take with respect to water and water resources is impossible to predict.

In view of the increasingly difficult-to-resolve water disputes, some experts have suggested that rivers should be joined by means of canals. The BJP government pushed the idea.

The nationalization of major inter-state rivers to avoid water disputes is constitutionally permissible, but is likely to be avoided by any central government that wants peace with the states. A more viable option could be water conservation and demand management.

The Sarkaria Commission on Centre-State Relations of 1988 recommended that the central government set up a tribunal within one year of receiving a complaint. In this regard, the Inter-State Water Disputes Act should be amended to ensure that the award of a tribunal becomes effective within five years and the awards should have the same force and sanctions as an order of the Supreme Court.

All said, Indian federalism has learned to live with water disputes. For the smooth functioning of federalism there is need to find ways to ensure that states don’t abuse their powers over rivers. Federalism should not be a ploy for states to function as independent republics. At the same time, the federal government must play the role of a trustee for all natural resources, including rivers.

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Within Pakistan, the coalition government led by Bhutto’s widower’s PPP party is reaching out to smaller provinces as part of a policy of what it calls “national reconciliation.” Supporting the demand to rename the North-West Frontier Province and the withdrawal of prosecutions against Baloch nationalist leaders are part of that strategy of redressing grievances. Already, the signs are as encouraging as they are in Balochistan.

A committee is being set up to look into demands for more provincial autonomy and to give the Senate certain financial and oversight powers over nominations to key offices. Another committee is already looking into introducing political, judicial and administrative reforms in Pakistan’s tribal regions.

But barely hours after Zardari’s maiden speech to parliament, just when Muslims were about to break their fast in the holy month of Ramadan in late September, a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden truck into Islamabad’s landmark Marriott Hotel, killing nearly sixty people and wounding many more.

Military campaign against militants

The devastating bombing in the heart of the federal capital shook the entire country. There are many more vociferous calls now for a full debate in the national parliament on the “war on terror” to discuss its pros and cons and to evolve a national consensus.

Mr. Zardari and his hand-picked Prime Minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani, have promised to hold a behind-closed-doors briefing for parliamentarians on the issue, in an effort to begin building a much-needed consensus on dealing with the war on terror.

Since then, there has been no national consensus. The army has continued fighting insurgents in the tribal areas bordering the North-West Frontier Province, and in the Swat valley inside the province. But heavy government losses and the past policies of truces with Taliban and other armed militants followed by fighting, has diminished hopes for peace.

More recently, Mr. Zardari found himself scrambling to placate an outraged India, which blamed rogue Pakistani elements for the Nov. 26 terrorist attack of Mumbai that saw more than 180 innocent Indians and international tourists gunned down in the heart of India’s financial capital.

With such grievous troubles erupting internally and externally, realigning the Pakistani federation is dropping lower on Mr. Zardari’s to-do list.