

# Moment of Truth for Pakistan's Elected Government

HARIS GAZDAR

To the disadvantage of the elected government in Pakistan, Mumbai has brought forward the moment of truth for the country's tentative transition to democracy. We may not have long to wait to see which way the matter settles.

India too has a role to play. A diplomatic, legal and institutional approach can help pin down the culprits, and may even help the transition in Pakistan.

**N**ot falling in love with Mumbai betrays a character flaw in my book. Visiting harm upon the queen of cities cannot bring good to anyone, no matter how just the cause or urgent its remit. She sustains millions, keeps hope alive among tens of millions others, nurtures a freedom of the spirit, and retains an original urban charm through the fastest rat-race in Asia. For all this and much more she is to be cherished, not brutalised.

I do not wish to speculate about the authors of the attack or their motives. But it is fitting that it has fallen upon the bruised Mumbai of Jinnah to ask if the State that he helped create is willing to pass its sternest test yet. Politically it matters little if Pakistan, its government, its military, rogue elements within the secret apparatus, or jihadi militant groups based there had a hand in the carnage or not. Whether there were ships or boats, satellite phone calls, Punjabi accents, Deccan Mujahideen, a Lashkar-e-Toiba trademark, Al Qaida links, or home-grown Indian insurgents are also details. The deed is already done. What matters now is what happens next. Crises are pregnant with opportunities for survivors and this one is no exception.

## Mumbai Will Have Her Answers

Pakistan's tentative transition to democracy has been constantly under fire from all sides. The focus is on the elected government – not merely for its ability but also on its intent. This is as it ought to be in a democracy, except that the whole point of a transition is that democracy cannot be taken for granted. For the transition to work two other partners have to be fully and responsibly on board – not just in appearance but in action and in intent. First, the transition is premised on the willingness of the Pakistani military to hand

over office and to share power with elected civilians on a durable basis. For democrats this risky compromise becomes defensible only because revolution is not an option.

Second, the transition's prospects seem attainable because of the current configuration in regional politics. Foreign powers including the United States (us), but not only the us, are expected to play a helpful role because they currently and at long last share common ground with Pakistani democrats. This shared goal is that the State in Pakistan must become a genuine factor for ensuring regional stability rather than promoting instability. Elements in the Pakistani state that openly – and originally with us collaboration – exported terrorist violence abroad are the same ones that for decades conspired successfully against democracy at home.

But now Mumbai must have urgent answers to her questions. Will the Pakistani military actually share power with the civilians? Will the Pakistani state manifestly and demonstrably draw a line under jihadi militancy? Will foreign governments share some of the political cost of the transition with Pakistan's fledgling democrats? The queen will not be denied her answers, but her questions offer rare opportunities for the protagonists to credibly reveal their intent, courage and wisdom.

## Not Steady Yet

Pakistan's elected governments – federal and provincial – are constrained on several fronts. They exercise de jure authority, but are cautious about testing their actual authority with respect to the military and its multiple agencies. Constitutional changes that might restore parliamentary sovereignty will need to await the senate elections to be held in March after which the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and their various allies will secure the requisite majorities in both houses of the parliament.

An economic crisis inherited from the previous regime has left elected parties with no space at all to satisfy their constituents – many of whom have waited years for a little economic relief. Instead the government has had to pass on price rises to the consumers who had been artificially

Haris Gazdar ([gasht@yahoo.com](mailto:gasht@yahoo.com)) is a political economist who works with the Karachi based Collective for Social Science Research.

protected by the previous regime through unprecedented monetary expansion. Inflation and currency depreciation threatened to spiral out of control until stabilisation measures and signing up with an International Monetary Fund programme last week eased the crisis somewhat. There has been no cheer on the economic front from the civilian government thus far, but better news is expected in the next quarter as inflationary and depreciation pressures subside.

There is mixed news too on the war in the north against jihadi militants. The civilian leadership publicly praises the military for doing its bit, but party cadres remain privately sceptical. The Awami National Party (ANP) leads the coalition government in the North-West Frontier Province, and its leaders and local cadres, along with members of the PPP are under constant threat of assassination by Taliban, Al Qaida and other jihadi militants. Local ANP and PPP supporters in Swat and other places with militant activity suspect that the military is still in cahoots with the jihadis. Sketchy evidence from Bajaur suggests that the corner might have been turned with concerted military action and the mobilisation of tribal volunteers against the militants, but the murky recent past and the distrust on the ground makes it difficult to be sure.

### The Right Drones On

In the meanwhile unmanned us aircrafts called Drones routinely violate Pakistani airspace to target militants, but inevitably also kill civilians. There is a steady and rising chorus, led by the right but supported by others, that the elected government should stop the war against jihadi militants, confront the us frontally over the Drone attacks, or simply slink away to make room for more robust Pakistani and Islamic nationalists to take over.

Asif Ali Zardari's government presents an easy target for an educated elite that substitutes conspiracy theories for analysis. His conciliatory approaches to Afghanistan and India have become anathema to opinion-makers who see jihadi militants as legitimate resistance in Afghanistan, Kashmir and elsewhere. These jihadi sympathisers are joined by the likes of Tariq Ali from the left who amazingly believe that the

Taliban-Al Qaida will become a normal political party once the American troops go home. A web of right and left conspiracy theories – involving various combinations of us, Israel, and India – create a comfort zone that hard facts cannot penetrate. Talk-shows hosts on private television channels “prove” how India herself was responsible for the attack on Mumbai, with former generals urging people to gear up for war on the eastern front, which the jihadi brothers will join.

### Test of Intent

The rightist propaganda campaign is encouraged by the speculation that the military has no intention of going through with the transition, and that “patriotism” will prevail over Zardari's diplomatic overtures and antics. Whether and to what extent the military leadership itself is involved in the propaganda effort to undermine its potential power-sharer is unknown. But sooner or later the question of the military's willingness to share power was going to be put to the test. The skill with which the elected politicians handled Pervez Musharraf's departure in August should have alerted the top brass that a stable civilian government will not be a walkover. Senate elections in March will have contributed to consolidation, as would have the administration change-over in the us. Barack Obama and Joe Biden are famously committed to bifurcating military cooperation and assistance to the democratic process.

But the test has come sooner rather than later. There is no point speculating if the timing of the attack on Mumbai had anything to do with internal pushing and shoving within the Pakistani state, but it might be relevant that Kargil followed Atal Behari Vajpayee's bus yatra to Lahore.

Mumbai is relevant to Pakistan's transition because regardless of any evidence of Pakistani complicity, the policy of reconciliation with India requires that all assistance that is requested should be rendered. The civilian leadership was right to respond positively to India's request for high level representation of Pakistan's secret agencies, and it was wrong to wriggle out of its commitment. The rethink, possibly fatal in political terms, may have been forced by the military's defiance.

Nevertheless, the ball now is in the court of the military. By falling in line with the civilian government's diplomatic effort they will reveal their intention of being on board in the transition. Moreover, they will send out a credible signal that jihad is no longer an option they will support, even against India. If the opportunity is not grasped now, the transition is as good as over even if the civilian government is allowed to limp along for a while. Signals that the military receives from the outgoing George W Bush administration over the next few days will be critical in shaping its attitude to the current crisis, and to the transition in general.

For its part India might do well to resist the temptation of behaving like the us after 11 September 2001. Beating the war drums might detract attention from India's own security lapses and political failures, but it will certainly corner the civilian government in Pakistan into irrelevance, pending execution. A politicised response will allow the culprits off the hook, while a diplomatic, legal and institutional approach can help to pin them down, besides moving the transition along in Pakistan. Why should an angry India care either way? Because she may want to show the world how a responsible and confident power in Asia carries itself even when in pain.

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