

# ISAS Brief

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## **Pakistan's Struggle for Democracy – How should India Respond?**

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Pakistan is going through a difficult period. It has vacillated between democracy and military throughout its history and entered the 21<sup>st</sup> century under military rule. At present moment, it is at the epicentre of a tumultuous geo-political climate and is besieged by domestic crises that have strained Pakistani politics to its limits. Pakistan's embattled President General Musharraf has been forced into negotiating a power-sharing agreement with former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in a desperate attempt to survive. Yet, this deal, even if politically possible, is shrouded in legal clouds. There is a Supreme Court challenge to the legitimacy of General Musharraf's presidency; it remains unclear if Bhutto, who has returned to Pakistan after eight years of self imposed exile, will be able to contest elections as Prime Minister for the third time due to constitutional amendments limiting prime ministership to two terms and, most importantly, the future of Article 58(2) (b) which empowers the President to dismiss the Prime Minister hangs in limbo. The declaration of emergency rule over the weekend, the suspension of the Constitution and the deployment of troops across the capital have thrown Pakistan into further turmoil.

Pakistan's problems are by no means small. Fundamentalism poses a serious challenge to its integrity, with the recent attacks against Benazir a chilling reminder of the extent to which the extremists can go to establish their version of an Islamic society. Musharraf's credibility is at an all-time low and his support base of both secular progressive and religious conservative elements is rapidly shrinking. His association with the United States in its war on terror has come at the expense of his own domestic support. Ironically, with the United States displaying signs of impatience with Pakistan for not doing enough to curb militancy along the border areas and now openly expressing regret and grave concern over the current turn of events in the country, Musharraf finds himself walking a very tight rope.

The recent power sharing negotiation between Bhutto and Musharraf has to be seen in the light of Musharraf's political survival. Significantly, it could serve two important objectives: one, bringing democracy to the country through Benazir Bhutto; and two, of ensuring the continuity of the Pakistan-US alliance by ensuring that President Musharraf remains as one of the key political players in Pakistan. Political expediency will be the primary driver of this power sharing agreement. However, with the declaration of emergency rule, a move aimed at

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putting off parliamentary elections which are due in January 2008, the power sharing negotiation appear to be in limbo. Benazir has openly criticised Musharraf for his current actions and waits to see her own fate – would she be arrested or deported again?

Whilst events have been unfolding in Pakistan over recent times, one key question that perhaps needs to be asked is what should India make of all this and how should it react to the situation in Pakistan. India and Pakistan have been locked in an antagonistic relationship for much of the post-independence years but the desire for peace is palpable on both sides and relations are widely acclaimed to be at their best today. India has so far desisted from making any inflammatory statements on the present turmoil in Pakistan, describing the developments as an “internal matter” and reiterating its desire for a “peaceful, prosperous and stable neighbour”. But should India be content with being an outside observer of Pakistan’s unfolding political drama or should it use this moment to consolidate ties and move expeditiously on areas where cooperation is feasible?

Strategically, the atmospherics are conducive for India to take pro-active steps to improve relations with Pakistan. Pakistan’s energies are presently diverted towards fighting the Al-Qaeda and Taliban in its border areas and an ongoing insurgency in Baluchistan. It would not be in Pakistan’s interests to have a hostile India. India on the other hand needs a stable Pakistan to maintain peace and stability in South Asia. India realises that it cannot aspire for global status by alienating its neighbours. The geo-strategic location of Pakistan, interconnectedness of oil and gas pipelines as well as trade make regional stability a matter of paramount importance. Fundamentalism remains a serious threat within the region, and cooperation and goodwill are vital to combating the threats posed by radical elements

The leadership on both sides have shown a commitment to working towards an improvement in relations. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s suggestion of a ‘Treaty of Peace, Security and Friendship’ with Pakistan and President Musharraf’s proposals of self-governance and the demilitarisation of Kashmir are important gestures that could translate into much more if there is genuine will to put the past behind for a deeper and mutually beneficial engagement. This engagement can be sought in myriad ways. Economic cooperation offers tremendous benefits to both sides. For all its political problems, Pakistan’s economy has maintained a seven percent growth rate in recent years. The South Asian Free Trade Area agreement and the opening of rail and road links, including movement of trucks across the border, have set a positive momentum which should be capitalised upon to boost bilateral trade which has the potential of reaching US\$10 billion by 2010.

There are so many synergies for Pakistan and India to capitalise on. They can collaborate in the agricultural area by sharing technology, materials and marketing strategies. For example, the two countries could join forces to patent Basmati rice and prevent foreigners from doing so. There are opportunities in the manufacturing sector, particularly in the steel and chemical industries. The Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline would be another project that could bring manifold benefits to the two countries and alleviate the energy crisis in the region.

Most importantly, there is the potential of tourism if the two countries worked together. Apart from drawing in foreign tourists, there would be huge cross border tourism if visa restrictions were eased. Ordinary Pakistanis and Indians have tremendous family, religious and cultural ties across the borders, and the sheer numbers within the region will itself provided an unimaginable economic boost to tourism and related industries. The existing linguistic and cultural similarities between the people in both countries can be harnessed to

promote greater people-to-people contact and facilitate ties in the most apposite manner. Bollywood movies are a real draw in Pakistan and there can be collaborations in movies and television shows and increased cultural interactions.

While a democratic government in Pakistan would provide a better foundation for a sustainable relationship in the future, India may have to pragmatically engage with whoever is in power to continue the peace initiative and the Composite dialogue talks. India's foreign policy, as with that of any nation, will be based on its own interests but there is a chance that now India has recognised that its own interests need not be at the expense of Pakistan. This is an opportune time for India to prove to Pakistan that the two countries can work together for a better common future.

It goes without saying that India must act with great tact and sensitivity to avoid alienating Pakistanis who may view India as interfering or being opportunistic at Pakistan's expense. The fact that India has been noticeably quiet in calling for greater democracy in Pakistan suggests that the Indian government has chosen not to take advantage of the political crisis in Pakistan, but may be genuinely hoping to work with its neighbour through thick and thin. Unlike justice, which must be seen to be done; in politics, sometimes the unseen may be more effective.

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