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Pakistan's Tangle: the Politics of Conflicting Security and Economic Interests

Ayesha Jalal

Tufts University

Assessing the prospects of democracy in a country that has recently crossed the nuclear threshold but is struggling to avoid defaulting on its international obligations calls for an understanding of the elemental fault line underlying the state structure in Pakistan. Unable to square its strategic perceptions with the narrow economic resource base it inherited at the time of the British withdrawal, Pakistan has paid a hefty price in both economic and political terms trying to keep India at bay. The early stifling of democracy flowed from the state's inability to meet the financial requirements of a military establishment whose strategic doctrines were influenced by the political leadership's stated intention of wresting Kashmir from Indian control. Starved of resources, the Pakistani centre had no qualms strapping the provinces of funds and, in the process, gagging all expressions of opposition. The press was curbed and the judiciary utterly compromised by its dependence on the executive. As early as the 1950s the political process was aborted in the regions and the centre, paving the way for military and bureaucratic dominance. Extended periods of military rule after 1958 only served to widen the gulf between a centralized authoritarian state and a regionally and economically differentiated society with dire consequences for democratic politics.

Reversing structural imbalances emanating from clashing security and economic considerations has proven extraordinarily difficult for successive Pakistani governments, irrespective of their ideological stripes or their elected or non-elected credentials. The return to parliamentary democracy since 1988, following the most extensive phase of military rule, aggravated the internal tensions which have made Pakistan's search for stability such a singularly elusive goal. Short of altering the state's security perceptions, an unlikely proposition given India's political and strategic compulsions, there is no prospect of a Pakistani government daring to repudiate the inheritance of a

political economy of defence and freeing resources badly needed for social sector and infrastructural development in the regions. Incapable of balancing its expenditure with its revenue resources, Pakistan has been under mounting pressures from international lending agencies. Policies of liberalization and privatization have bred a venal politics of self-interest, thwarting efforts to expand the state's revenue generating capacities. Proud of its newly acquired nuclear status, though not of its falling international credit ratings, Pakistan has been contending with a thick web of corruption enveloping all levels of state and society. Together with a veritable administrative collapse in certain regions, the state's financial woes have at each step threatened the democratic transition, irrespective of the political combination temporarily on top. Twenty five years of military rule were in a sense capped by the eighth amendment to the constitution in 1985 giving the then president and chief martial law administrator General Zia-ul-Haq powers to dismiss elected governments and dissolve parliament. With the personalization of power in key institutions of the state, the rules of politics changed dramatically. Between 1985 and 1996, the constitutional provision was deployed by three presidents to dismiss four elected governments and parliaments.

Twice a beneficiary and once its victim, Mian Nawaz Sharif lost no time establishing his government's democratic credentials by scrapping the eighth amendment within months of winning the February 1997 elections with a thumping two-thirds majority. Indication of the government's new found political confidence, it neutralized the president as well as the opposition led by Benazir Bhutto who had not only failed to strike down the amendment but had been dismissed under its provisions for a second time by her own handpicked president. Yet the legitimacy of the Sharif government's massive electoral mandate could be eroded all too easily by the expectations aroused by the size of its victory. The more so since these expectations were not confined to the electorate. Most salient for the political future of any democratic government were the expectations of the military high command, alarmed by the shrinking size of financial resources available to service the needs of the defence forces, but equally intent on upholding its strategic doctrine vis-a-vis India. Looking to the Sharif government for a transformation of the economy leading to a desperately needed revival of faltering industrial and agricultural production, the military establishment has been

prepared to accommodate the restoration of parliamentary democracy so long as it does not impair its capacity to raise the Pakistani standard against India. It was ultimately in keeping with these wishes, although not without an eye on the immediate political and electoral fallout, that the Sharif government took the decision to match India's five nuclear tests with half a dozen explosions of its own. Evidence of the supremacy of security over purely economic considerations, Pakistan's coming of nuclear age will doubtless influence the future course of democratic politics long after the charred dust has settled in the mountain ranges of Chagai.

The reasons are important enough to be spelt out clearly. Pakistan has an external debt of over thirty billion dollars and a paralysing domestic debt of approximately the same amount. This in large part reflects the costs of past defence expenditure, including the price of the nuclear programme.¹ A combination of factors have contributed to the bankruptcy of the Pakistani state. These underline the different ways in which the political economy of production and consumption has operated to the detriment of democratic politics, particularly since the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 and the rise of a parallel arms and drugs economy. Providing ample opportunities for profit, the traffic in arms and drugs has seen private coffers swelling overnight without any ensuing increase in state revenues. Given the selfishness of the few, the plight of the many has been worsened by forced cuts on developmental expenditure. Debt servicing which now outstrips defence expenditure is expected to climb by 24 percent during 1998-9. Recurring defence costs, declining production, massive misuse of government contracts as well as loans by unethical businessmen and a wholly ineffectual taxation structure have exposed the fragile anatomy of Pakistan's fiscal structure. Widespread business malpractices, aided and abetted by interested politicians and government officials, has taken a toll of the banking system and left the national exchequer depleted.

Carrying out far-reaching economic reforms and reserivicing a mounting national debt at a time of falling production and growing balance of payments difficulties is a daunting one for any government. For the Sharif government the problem is compounded by the legacies of military rule and the cold war era. As in the past these continue to shape the quantum of democracy and

authoritarianism in relations between state and society in Pakistan. But if the supremacy of the military establishment appears to have been blunted by the severity of the financial crunch - a ten per cent reduction in defence expenditure in real terms would have been unthinkable in the first four decades of independence - the qualitative changes wrought by the policies of General Zia-ul-Haq's regime have redefined the conditions under which democracy can survive in Pakistan.

Frequent recourse to the electorate has been an altogether salutary development in Pakistan. With elected governments at both the national and provincial levels since 1988, the tussle between democratic politics and an authoritarian state has undoubtedly entered a new phase. Yet the chances of democracy triumphing over authoritarianism depend in the first instance on balancing security and economic interests. As in the past, the imbalance serves to distort relations between centre and region, propelling the state to try and stretch its capacities well beyond the limits deemed reasonable by an economically disparate, politically frustrated and increasingly pulverised and violence-ridden society. Democracy and authoritarianism in the Pakistani context are so thoroughly imbricated as to foreclose the possibility of any straightforward resolution following a reasonably free and fair reference to the electorate.

This has been borne out by the priorities and preoccupations of Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League government during its first year and a half in office. Shaped by the imperatives of holding on to political power in a state structure that has only recently acquired its democratic trappings, Sharif's government with a huge electoral mandate cannot be said to have been wholly devoid of options. The fiscal crunch and the looming danger of an international default notwithstanding, Nawaz Sharif had emerged as potentially the most powerful prime minister in Pakistan's history. If he could cement ties with regional politicians, he might conceivably achieve that end in substance without having to rest content with the form. When Sharif assumed office in February 1997 the moment was propitious for a democratic challenge to the authoritarian tendencies inherent in the Pakistani state. Yet the prime minister chose not to launch a frontal assault on the National Finance Commission award which had been steamrolled by the bureaucracy during the

interim period, days before the reference to the electorate and the formation of a new government. The National Finance Commission's award was accepted by Sharif's government, allegedly for its pro-Punjab overtones.

Becoming the focal point of the structural contentions between the centre and the regions in Pakistan was not good insurance for any government wanting to complete its term in office. The goal is particularly significant in a country where despite four elections of varying degrees of democratic credibility in the last decade, no government has completed its term. But for a government committed to staying in office for five years, Sharif's has taken too casual a view of the Punjab's relationship with the other regions. What the prime minister of an overwhelmingly Punjabi party needed was a modicum of sensitivity to sentiments in the non-Punjabi provinces. The government's two-thirds majority in parliament was based on alliances with regionally based political parties - the Awami National Party of the North West Frontier Province, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement of urban Sind, the Baluchistan National and the Jamhuri Watan parties of Baluchistan. With a comfortable majority in the Punjab and his younger brother as provincial chief minister, Nawaz Sharif instead of strengthening alliances with regional parties fell victim to the temptation - ever present in the Pakistani context - of wanting to personalize his hold over power. Giving the politics of democratic federalism lower priority, the Punjabi prime minister of Pakistan has concentrated on enhancing his powers over parliament, the judiciary and the presidency. While his success rate might seem impressive, it is worth probing whether Nawaz Sharif's efforts to strengthen his own hands have contributed to the strengthening of democracy or only expedited the erosion of a delicately poised federation.

The ink was barely dry on the hurriedly rushed thirteenth amendment to the constitution, stripping the president of powers to dismiss elected governments and assemblies, that the prime minister moved to assert control over parliament. Though he managed to weather a potentially deadly wheat crisis during his early months in office, Nawaz Sharif was still basking in the glory of his electoral success when he decided to quickly push through the fourteenth amendment to the constitution. This debarred parliamentarians from disobeying the party whip on threat of

disqualification. The spectacle of Muslim Leaguers voting in tandem for such a provision is explicable only in terms of the very considerable strides Mian Nawaz Sharif had made since his political apprenticeship in the Zia era. A popular leader in his own right, he had outdone Benazir Bhutto in the game of political diplomacy through alliance building with key regional political configurations. However much a Muslim Leaguer might carp and complain, there was no denying his personal popularity, not to mention his family's financial empire in Pakistan.

Yet Nawaz Sharif's affluent background is not without its disadvantages. The family is known to be held together by the iron will of the prime minister's father, the master builder of the business and accustomed to command. An obedient son by all accounts, the prime minister's personalized search for power has been accompanied by deference to the wishes of the family patriarch. A laudable attitude in the Pakistani social context, it has seen the prime minister adopting some quite remarkable political postures. In what can only be described as further proof of institutional imbalances becoming the battleground for personalized politics in Pakistan, the prime minister allegedly stalled the appointment of three judges approved by the chief justice at the behest of his father.² With the president backing the chief justice and the prime minister banking on his good fortunes, the country was brought to a virtual standstill by the standoff between the executive and the judiciary. It required the resignation of the president, an unprecedented split in the judiciary resulting in the ousting of the chief justice by his judges to restore cordiality in relations between key institutions of the state.

Charged with contempt of court, Nawaz Sharif's stubborn refusal to proffer an apology for a stray remark against the judiciary provides an insight into his style of politics.

Although gracious and affable, the prime minister's personalized and almost clannish approach to politics has worried admirers and provoked lacerating abuse from his detractors. Evidently a believer in the merits of the arcane methods of family ecision-making, Nawaz Sharif surprised everyone in December 1997 with his choice of president. A relative non-entity, Rafiq Ahmad Tarar was a former judge of the supreme court with socially conservative leanings. There is no indication that the prime minister consulted anyone in his party outside a small and select circle. In fact the

name of his presidential nominee was not even on the lists initially issued for purposes of security clearance by the intelligence agencies. Tarar was immensely unpopular with human rights activists who recalled some of his bigoted statements and rulings against women and minorities. It required considerable effort on the part of the bearded president to assuage feelings by appearing to be liberal and a supporter of the rights of women and minorities.

With control over two of the three most important institutions, and a pliant judiciary willing to do his bidding, Nawaz Sharif was even more inclined to ignore the regions. Broken promises might damage the federal alliance but still leave the Muslim League with an overall majority in parliament guaranteed by the fourteenth amendment. Succumbing to the chauvinism of certain political quarters in the Punjab, Nawaz Sharif reneged on his solemn undertaking to the Awami National Party to rename the North West Frontier Province, Pukhtoonkhwa. Losing the support of a key regional ally in the Frontier Province as well as in the two houses of parliament was inconvenient. But it was not nearly as fraught with consequences for the federal equation as the prime minister's loss of face. After departing from established convention in selecting a fellow Punjabi rather than a Sindhi, Pathan or Baluchi as president, the last thing Nawaz Sharif needed were further accusations of political insularity and a lack of empathy with non-Punjabis.

As it was, his government's otherwise sensible decision to carry out a much delayed population census was under attack from opposition parties in Baluchistan and Sind. Suspicions ran deeply of a centrally backed Punjabi conspiracy to doctor the census results to justify the National Finance Commission's diversion of resources away from the non-Punjabi provinces. With an eye on the Muslim League's alliance with its main rival in Sind, Benazir Bhutto explicitly charged the Sharif government of wanting to reduce the Sindhi majority in the province. Facing a variety of charges in Pakistan and under investigation for corruption in Switzerland, the former prime minister has been only too eager to play the provincial card. Yet feelings were not very different in Baluchistan, demographically the most heterogeneous of Pakistan's provinces, where resident Pathans fear losing some of their privileges to other linguistic groups. If a census can be such a bone of contention between the Punjab, Sind and Baluchistan, the building of a dam at Kalabagh in the

absence of a national consensus could gravely upset the federal balance. A project which has been in the pipeline for several years, the Kalabagh dam is almost universally backed by Punjabis and bitterly opposed by several Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis. While Punjabi agriculturalists who form the backbone of the Pakistan Muslim League believe the dam to be necessary to offset the drying up of the Indus river expected in the near future, their non-Punjabi counterparts consider it an anathema. The extent to which building the Kalabagh dam will entail inundating large tracts of land in Sind, the Frontier Province and Baluchistan is a problem requiring technical solutions as well as political negotiations. Its status as a symbol of Punjabi prosperity and non-Punjabi ruin has for long blighted the debate surrounding the pros and cons of its construction. Instead of entering into discussions and striking bargains with provincial parties opposed to the dam, the prime minister startled everyone by unilaterally announcing the building of the dam as one of his government's priorities.

Stated in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear tests and international economic sanctions, the Kalabagh dam has provided a useful rallying point for the opposition in the non-Punjabi provinces. Exacerbating provincial feelings against a centre perceived to be dominated by the Punjab at a time when attentions were rivetted on national security and the future of the economy was a disastrous piece of diplomacy. Under fire for imposing an emergency and suspending fundamental rights in the wake of the nuclear tests, Nawaz Sharif's government has seen its political fortunes fluctuate wildly during the past few months. Rifts in the federation has stripped the Pakistan Muslim League of its two-thirds majority in the Senate and bolstered opposition to the government in the National Assembly. More seriously it has undermined regional coalitions in all the three non-Punjabi provinces. This has put a big question mark on the government's capacity to carry out its multi-pronged strategy to enhance revenue resources, implement desperately needed economic as well as administrative reforms, and address the growing law and order problems in many parts of the country.

Having made a fine start on the democratic front - curtailing presidential powers and taking the preliminary steps to stem the economic downturn - the Sharif government might have fared

much better than it has in handling Pakistan's multifaceted crises. If opening up fronts against state institutions such as the presidency and the judiciary was a product of the structural limitations on prime ministerial power, quibbling with key regional parties on matters, big and small, could almost certainly have been avoided. With regional leaders beholden to him and his style of politics, Nawaz Sharif may well have turned the nuclear moment with India into a political opportunity and perhaps realised his dream of becoming Pakistan's strongest ever prime minister. A forbidding vision for anyone familiar with the structural characteristics of state and society in Pakistan, it gives a measure of Nawaz Sharif, the individual determined to succeed in disquieting circumstances that are admittedly not of his making. Yet an overview of his eighteen months in office shows the prime minister making choices that were as often driven by personal as by national motivations. Despite some debilitating constraints, Sharif's government's policy decisions will have a critical bearing on the eventual denouement of democracy in Pakistan.

One vital choice that cannot be attributed to the prime minister alone was the decision to explode nuclear devices in response to the Indian tests. Without the backing of the military high command it would have been unthinkable for Sharif's government to sanction the tests. A businessman with his sights on rapid economic growth through regional trade, the prime minister is not known to be among the diehards in the federal cabinet calling for an immediate response to India's provocation. Very much the individual trying to cope with an unmanageable equation between security concerns and economic interests, Mian Nawaz Sharif had to carefully consider the available options. That in the end there was seen to be no option cannot distract from the agonizing process by which the government arrived at the decision. The issue was clinched once it seemed clear that India intended to breathe down its nuclear status over parts of Kashmir which are under Pakistani control. Any move by India to put a military arm around 'Azad' Kashmir would result in all out war for Pakistan with shattering effects on its economy.

So if there were strong economic arguments for Pakistan to seriously consider not going for the nuclear option, these ultimately dovetailed with those being put forward on grounds of security.

A war with India would be far worse than the impact of any economic sanctions. The nuclear option at least had the merit of removing Pakistan's conventional disadvantages in a military exchange with India. It was not just that the hawks won and the so-called 'Peace-niks' lost in the fortnight long nuclear debate in Pakistan. The fault line around which the structure of the state has been built and its imperatives defined had simply reasserted itself with extra vigour. Security preoccupations had dealt a hammer blow to Pakistan's sagging economy, leaving the state facing a financial crisis of monumental proportions.

Nawaz Sharif's government on assuming office had made a special play to get non-resident Pakistanis in North America, Britain, Europe and the Gulf to open dollar accounts in their home country. Dollar deposits worth eleven billion were maintained by both resident and non-resident Pakistanis. As the more astute among economists in the country quickly pointed out, the state bank's balance of payments figures did not show the dollar accounts as a liability. Making an asset out of a liability kept the veil on the full extent of the Pakistani state's economic misery. Needless to say the dollar deposits had been spent over the years to reservice the debt and pay the costs of international transactions. In what with the benefit of hindsight appears to be a case of bad judgement, the federal cabinet tried warding off an imagined run on the banks by freezing the dollar accounts. A panic stricken financial bureaucracy was reduced to issuing contradictory orders, alarming the citizenry and destroying whatever little investor confidence Pakistan still retained.

The melt down of the Karachi stock exchange was not nearly as significant as the stunned response to the government's decision to impose a blanket freeze on all foreign currency accounts. Confusing statements by key officials and the admission by the governor of the state bank that there were simply no dollars to give back to the depositors unnerved many who had reposed trust in the prime minister. Nothing has hurt the credibility of the Sharif government more than the clamp down on foreign currency accounts. The irony of exhorting non-resident and resident Pakistanis to open new dollar accounts from which they will be allowed to withdraw hard currency is lost on the government. In the age of the market economy, as a businessman prime minister must surely know, the nation is merely one point of reference in the enterprise of profit making. Expatriate Pakistanis

responded to the prime minister's debt retirement scheme for more than just patriotic reasons. Dismayed by the palace intrigues and corruption in high places, they saw Mian Nawaz Sharif as the successful businessman who could manage the structural inefficiencies of Pakistan better than his arch rival Benazir Bhutto. But there was also the attraction of profit. The government of Pakistan was offering considerably higher interest rates on the dollar deposits. In taking the risk associated with higher than market price interest rates, Pakistanis at home and abroad had not reckoned on the government breaking trust.

It is the government's loss of credibility which poses the greatest obstacle to any immediate regeneration of the economy. Without stage managing some sort of a process of economic recovery, it will be impossible for Nawaz Sharif to sustain his government. So long as the chilling prospect of a default continues to loom large, the political future of the Muslim League government will remain uncertain. Growing opposition to his emergency ordinance and the deepening fiscal crisis of the state has sharpened tensions between the centre and the regions. The perceived injustices of the National Finance Commission award in the non-Punjabi provinces and the controversy over the Kalabagh dam have seen a corresponding weakening in the government's hold on political power. Any threat to the federation may yet force the military high command to make another appearance as the ultimate arbiter of Pakistan's destiny.

The most important institution, and one on which Sharif's control has remained tenuous, is the Pakistan army. If he can appoint his own nominee to the position when the tenure of the present chief of army staff runs out, the government will undoubtedly prolong its stay in office. But even a compliant army chief, as the history of Pakistan demonstrates, has to keep the interests of the military foremost in mind. For the guardians of the realm, there can be no compromising on Pakistan's security concerns. As the main beneficiary of this strategic compulsion, the army has already had to settle for far less than it deems necessary or adequate. It is not for any lack of prodding that the army has remained in the barracks. Critics of democracy in the country have had no compunctions recommending overt authoritarian rule or, at the very least, a permanent role for the army in the constitutional set up. Yet eleven years of General Zia-ul-Haq's regime have laid bare

the limitations of martial rule. A chronic fiscal crisis of the state matched by the requirements of survival in the post-cold war era makes direct military intervention an unattractive proposition. With very high stakes in the future of the Pakistani state, the army high command has rested content with dictating the security and foreign policy agendas of political governments. And while it has not been disappointed so far on these crucial fronts, it realises that there will no real security or foreign policy to uphold if the federation crumbles.

This places the onus on the prime minister without giving him much room to mitigate the impact of security requirements or modify the thrust of the foreign policy. Most Pakistanis have been sceptical of the military's famous 'special relationship' with the United States of America. These attitudes had hardened after the nuclear tests and the imposition of the economic sanctions. The repatriation of its citizens days before Washington's decision to fire Tomahawk missiles over Pakistani territory in pursuit of the Saudi Arabian millionaire turned Islamic militant, Osama bin Laden, based in Afghanistan has exacerbated anti-American sentiments in Pakistan. The Sharif government denied any prior knowledge of the attack, insisting that it had not been consulted. Yet the presence of a senior ranking American military officer in the country at the time of the missile assault on Afghanistan cast doubts on the veracity of the government's accounts. Public opinion was further inflamed by the discovery of two unexploded missiles in Pakistan. Emphatic denials of complicity with America have only pulled the Sharif government further into the quagmire. An angry opposition, backed by a genuinely disturbed populace, has been demanding an explanation for the security lapse. If the government was not in collusion with Washington then it has to be seen as non-functioning or, worse still, non-existent.

Hugely embarrassed by the American action, the Sharif government is acutely vulnerable to the charge of undermining the sovereignty of Pakistan. Even the backing of a tight lipped army chief of staff and intelligence agencies, who tried blaming the non-detection to the country's relatively unsophisticated radar systems, has done nothing to shore up the government's political stocks. At the end of his tether resolving Pakistan's financial problems, the last thing Nawaz Sharif needed was a campaign led by a variegated opposition against his government's alleged concessions to American

imperialism. His government had been inching closer to signing the comprehensive treaty ban on nuclear testing in the hope of getting Washington's clearance for further releases of funds from the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and also the aid to Pakistan Consortium. While economic considerations will in all probability make the exercise of that option necessary, the prime minister and his cabinet had to find a way of parrying the expected opposition onslaught.

Apprehensive of the destabilizing potential of the religious parties, and at a loss of how to distance himself from the United States of America at a moment of dire financial need, Nawaz Sharif opted for the well worn course of taking political refuge in Islam. The people of Pakistan may have become accustomed to the prime minister's modus operandi - a spate of new laws to offset the inadequacy of old ones, not concerted steps to improve the existing machinery for implementation. But only a few had wagered their bets on the prime minister's sudden decision to don the mantle of religion with yet another amendment to the constitution. Under the fifteenth amendment to the constitution, Nawaz Sharif has undertaken to make the Quran and the Sunnah, or the traditions of the Holy Prophet of Islam, the supreme law of the land. This is begging the question. Various clauses in the constitution specifically prohibit the enactment of any law repugnant to the spirit of Islam. The proposed fifteenth amendment is different from laws on the statute books in three important respects. First, it amasses further powers in the hands of the prime minister by making all the functionaries of the state, including the army chief of staff and the chief justice, subject to the Quran and the Sunnah, however interpreted. Second, it seeks to alter the required two-third majority for amending the constitution with a simple majority vote in both houses of parliament. And finally, it puts the judiciary as well as parliament in the shade, leaving the prime minister and his appointed advisers on Islam as the would-be arbiters of Pakistan.

Blasting Nawaz Sharif for exploiting Islam and harbouring illusions of becoming the 'Amir-ul-Momineen' or the commander of the faith, opposition parties cutting across ideological leanings have vowed to resist the proposed fifteenth amendment. For once the discomfiture of the prime minister seems real enough to threaten the political survival of his government. Sharif's recourse to what is widely perceived as hollow symbolism aimed at distracting from Pakistan's economic ills

and security threats, internal as well as external, has resulted in the loss of whatever little confidence there was still remaining in his government. The run on the rupee which fell by over eight per cent points in his first year of office and has tumbled precariously ever since the nuclear blasts has left the citizenry demoralised beyond measure. Rising prices of essential commodities, the suspension of production in many sectors of the industry, to say nothing of the mounting debt burden and seemingly uncontrollable law and order problems is not conducive to either government stability or democracy.

Yet the supreme paradox for Pakistan is the absence of an alternative political combination. It is true that the military high command cannot rest content with sitting back and watching the country fall apart under the combined weight of its economic and political problems. And while a direct military intervention can never be ruled out in Pakistan, the more likely scenario may be a forced resignation of the prime minister on the advice of the army chief. This may lead to the formation of an interim government with a technocratic bent and the possible inclusion of certain political figures. In crying herself hoarse for a national government, Benazir Bhutto has been implicitly asking the army to intervene. Transitions from elected to non-elected governments orchestrated from behind the scenes by the army and the intelligence agencies are not unknown in the recent history of Pakistan. Yet with the removal of the president's discretionary powers under the thirteenth amendment, there are fewer chances of a constitutional coup of the sort that led to the dismissal of four governments in less than a decade.

Unless some miracle can help the Sharif government bring the economy from the brink of disaster, and restore its tarnished image, an unconstitutional coup is entirely on the cards. It will not be the military intervention of yesteryear, but a new form of authoritarianism interspersed with a veneer of democracy which may catapult the country into the next millennium. The tragedy of the Pakistani state and its political system will be the greater if the much vaunted Islamic Republic ends up abandoning its democratic pretensions in the process of trying to defeat an elected government's attempt to make the Quran and the Sunnah the supreme law of the land. Retracting from its stand on the fifteenth amendment and living to fight another day would seem to be the better option for the

Sharif government. Whatever the political costs of such a decision, they cannot be nearly as fatal as a dogged determination to pass an amendment in the name of creating an Islamic welfare state which is tantamount to placing the entire constitutional structure into cold storage.

Democratic, authoritarian or democratically authoritarian, Pakistan in the short run can sadly enough only look forward to brutal structural reforms and more economic hardships on its people. The time is long overdue for its political leaders and senior military and bureaucratic officials to accept the ground realities and learn to address, not try and circumvent, problems. Neither its nuclear nor for that matter its Islamic qualifications can guarantee the survival of the Pakistani state and the federal union. It is only by accommodating the aspirations for greater provincial autonomy in the different regions and correcting the logic of a political ethos mired in corruption and conflict that the country can rise to the occasion and meet the twin challenges of its defiant nuclearization and impending economic ruin. For a government that has at least tried reversing the structural imbalances between key institutions, albeit at the expense of personalizing power in prime ministerial hands, knowing the limits of state authority and the virtues of political compromise may be the better part of valour. A significant change of tune even at this stage in the game may save the country the ignominy of seeing another government fall. With a few concrete gains and many avoidable losses on the stony road to democracy, the choice is Mian Nawaz Sharif's even if the circumstances have never been of his own choosing.

Endnotes

¹Pakistan is reportedly facing a shortfall of Rs 70 billion in meeting its defence and debt reservicing needs. Aiming to reduce the budgetary deficit from 6.2 % to 5% during the 1998-9 fiscal year, the government of Pakistan's estimated revenue target is Rs 350 billion whereas a sum of Rs 420 billion is required to pay for Rs 145 billion worth of defence costs and Rs 275 billion for debt servicing.

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²The elder Sharif apparently disapproved of one of the judges because he had given an adverse ruling in a case involving the family business.