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POST-MUSHARRAF PAKISTAN

Can the coalition stick together?

By Saifullah Khan Mahsud

PAKISTAN'S coalition government has finally had its way and has ended the nine-year rule of president Pervez Musharraf. On Monday, he resigned in the face of impeachment threats by Parliament. His departure, hailed as a 'triumph of democracy over dictatorship', has been welcomed by the majority of Pakistanis.

Where does the country go from here? What impact will his resignation have on the ongoing war on terror? Can the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) - traditional rivals and now the main parties in the coalition - remain unified? And what would be the nature of the civil-military relationship in the wake of Mr Musharraf's resignation?

The most important challenge for the coalition government is to root out Al-Qaeda and the Taleban from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Pakistan's 'war on terror' was not the sole preserve of one individual. In principle, the present government can be expected to continue with the fight. However, in doing so, it has to strike a balance between domestic concerns about Pakistan's role in the war and international scepticism over Pakistan's sincerity. This is easier said than done.

Civilian leaders, with the exception of the late Benazir Bhutto, have never come out openly in support of the 'war on terror' because of political expediency or a simple lack of courage.

That 'war' has never been popular among Pakistanis and will remain so in the absence of a viable response to the problem of extremism. For many Pakistanis - especially those living away from FATA and NWFP - the Taleban are 'holy warriors' fighting for the glory of Islam, while coalition troops operating in Afghanistan are 'infidels'. According to this worldview, the Pakistani Taleban have a religious duty to liberate their fellow Muslims across the border in Afghanistan. Anyone trying to stop them is doing the West's bidding and not worthy of support.

It is no wonder then that Mr Musharraf was unpopular. He was accused of having compromised the 'sovereignty' and 'honour' of the country by conducting military operations against fellow Pakistani at the behest of the West, and allowing the US to carry out air strikes within Pakistani territory.

Coming out openly in support of military operations against the militants would require enormous courage. The once disparate factions of the Pakistani Taleban, which emerged in the South Waziristan and Bajaur tribal areas in 2002, have united to form the formidable Tehrik-e-Taleban Pakistan (the Taleban movement of Pakistan). Last year, it carried out more than 1,500 attacks in Pakistan, including 60 suicide bombings, killing more than 3,500 people. Ms Bhutto was killed by these people last year, and a former interior minister barely escaped two attempts on his life.

Pakistan's allies and neighbours see the Pakistani Taleban as the backbone of Taleban insurgency in Afghanistan, and have repeatedly demanded that the Pakistani government do more. With Mr Musharraf at the helm, the present government could blame him for the conduct of war and thus avoid responsibility for it. It does not have that luxury any more. With his departure, the ruling coalition has to take decisive steps to defeat extremist elements in the country.

At the same time, it has to address a myriad of economic problems: an inflation rate of 25 per cent; foreign reserves of only US\$9 billion (S\$12.6 billion) and dwindling fast; the worst energy crisis in the country's history; and a food crisis that is getting worse by the day. To tackle these problems, the coalition needs to stick together and avoid the confrontational politics of the past.

The PPP and the PML-N will probably hang together in the near term, but it is uncertain if they would do so for long. Their common opposition to Mr Musharraf brought them together; it would be a tall order to keep them together now that he is gone.

Differences have already emerged between the two on restoring the judges who had been removed by Mr Musharraf and on the choice of the next president. They diverge too on how to deal with the militants: The PPP's support for military operations is lukewarm, while the PML-N is hostile to the idea.

The leadership of both parties should demonstrate statesmanship and place the national interest ahead of partisan advantage.

They need to own the war against militancy and educate the people about the dangers that the Taliban pose to their way of life. If they fail, it would leave the army no choice but to step in as the ultimate defender of national interests.

The army has remained neutral in the current political drama for two very practical reasons:

First, Pakistan's multiple security threats - militancy in FATA and NWFP, insurgency in Balochistan, growing uneasiness on its eastern borders with India - all require its full attention.

Second, the army's recent involvement in politics has made it highly unpopular among the masses whose support is vital for an effective counter-insurgency campaign.

For the army to stay permanently away from politics, the present coalition would have to demonstrate political maturity and carry out good governance. The need of the hour is a national unity government, backed by the army and supported by Pakistan's allies and neighbours. If the country were to revert back to confrontation between the two major political parties, the 'triumph of democracy over dictatorship' would come to naught.

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