

# Pakistan's Slide Into Misery

Exploring a Half-Century of Misrule

*Sumit Ganguly*

*The United States and Pakistan, 1947–2000:*

*Disenchanted Allies.* BY DENNIS KUX.

Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2001, 470 pp. \$22.95 (paper).

*Pakistan: In the Shadow of Jihad and*

*Afghanistan.* BY MARY ANNE WEAVER.

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2002, 284 pp. \$24.00.

*Pakistan: Eye of the Storm.* BY OWEN

BENNETT JONES. New Haven: Yale

University Press, 2002, 316 pp. \$29.95.

Late this summer, General Pervez Musharraf—Pakistan's self-appointed president and chief executive—delivered yet another devastating blow to the country's democratic prospects. At an August 21 press conference, Musharraf announced 29 new amendments to the constitution that vastly strengthened the powers of the military and the executive.

Among other prerogatives, these amendments gave the president (who will be Musharraf for at least the next five years, thanks to the fraud-ridden “referendum” held in April) the power to dismiss Pakistan's legislature—effectively making all of parliament's actions subject to his approval. Another innovation, the National Security Council, formally institutionalized the already pervasive role of the military in the country's politics.

Musharraf's fiats were just the latest in a 45-year-long saga of military assaults on Pakistan's body politic. For most of its history, the country's military—often with the complicity of other key elements of the Pakistani state, such as the civilian bureaucracy and even, on occasion, the judiciary—has seemed intent only on maintaining its own prospects and prerogatives. This single-minded determination

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has brought the country several coups, ill-considered alliances, and disastrous military operations against India.

Musharraf himself came to power in one such coup, in October 1999. The general took office promising to restore order, instill probity in public life, and promote social justice. But his dictatorial predecessors had made similar pledges, and Pakistan's military regimes have never delivered long-term economic prosperity or political stability. Instead, they have consistently skewed the distribution of wealth and income, made the development of honest and effective political parties nearly impossible, undermined the independence of the judiciary, and exacerbated the underlying weaknesses of the Pakistani state. And so far Musharraf's rule has offered no exception to this depressing trend.

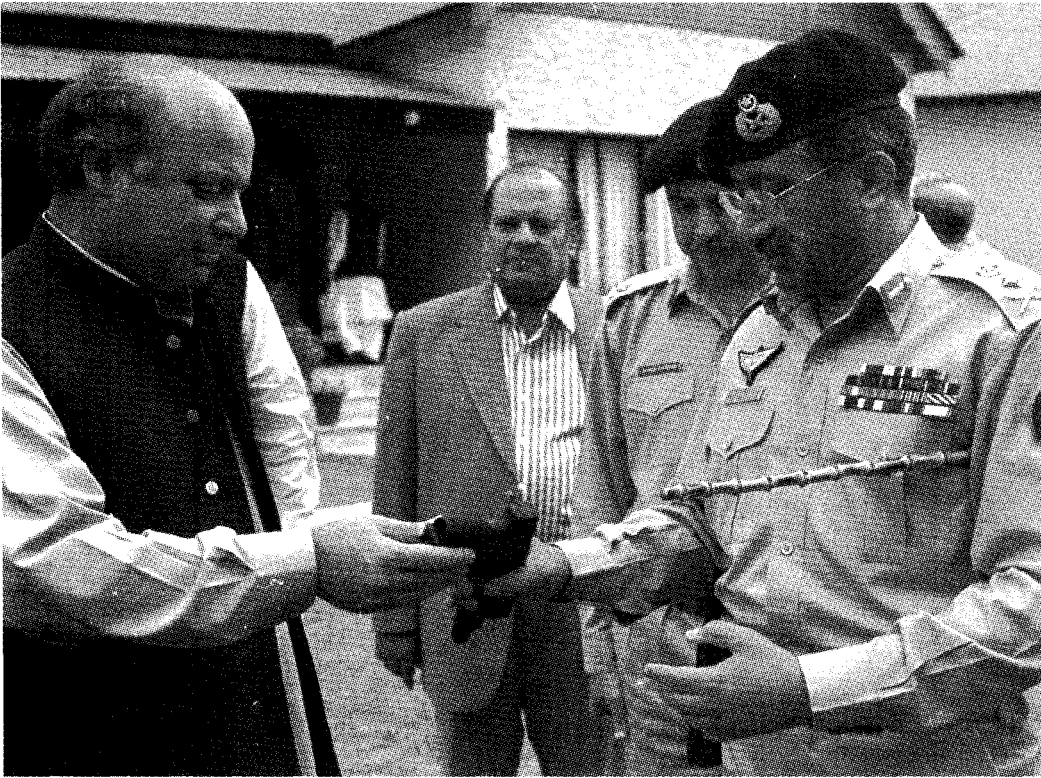
This time, however, Washington cannot afford to ignore the mismanagement in Islamabad. Pakistan's sorry status quo and uncertain future are of critical significance. As the United States seeks to uproot the remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban, it remains acutely dependent on Pakistan's stability and well-being, not to mention its cooperation. Moreover, the long-running tensions between India and Pakistan now have significance far beyond the subcontinent, thanks to the acquisition of nuclear weapons by both sides. The United States is thus very concerned indeed to ensure that their recurrent tiffs do not spiral into full-scale war. And if the world hopes to stanch the growth of fundamentalist Islam, turning Pakistan toward democracy and away from venal, autocratic rule will be imperative.

Key to that effort will be learning how Pakistan got to where it is today, and

how to leverage U.S.-Pakistani ties to improve governance from Islamabad. Fortunately, three authors who have spent significant periods of time in Pakistan have recently produced books that should be useful to the process. In his comprehensive account of U.S.-Pakistan relations, Dennis Kux, a former U.S. diplomat, touches on many of the central developments in the latter country's coup-ridden history. Journalist Mary Anne Weaver's new book focuses on the interplay between Pakistani politics and society. And Owen Bennett Jones, another journalist, seeks to uncover the deep sources of Pakistan's critical ailments. Each book has its merits, but Jones' work is far more analytically probing than the other two and gives a clearer picture of how Pakistan has arrived at such a parlous state.

#### **WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE**

The root causes of Pakistan's economic and political woes lie in its feudal society and the winner-take-all approach to governing that has been practiced by successive civilian and military leaders. The party that brought Pakistan independence, the Muslim League, lacked internal democracy. Once partition and statehood had been achieved, the league, dominated by upper-class landed gentry from the former United Provinces of British India, displayed scant interest in forging a state that would promote popular participation and equity. Although they sought to free the Muslims of South Asia from Hindu domination, Pakistan's leaders failed to address the new state's own ethnic diversity. This was a critical shortcoming, for contrary to the political rhetoric of Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the region's Muslims never



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*I'll take that: Pervez Musharraf receives a pistol from then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Skardu, Pakistan, September 1999*

constituted an inchoate, monolithic nation. Instead, a variety of Muslim communities existed throughout British India, and these communities were riven by sectarian, ethnic, and class cleavages.

After the creation of Pakistan, these ethnic differences quickly came to the fore. The new country's leaders showed scant regard for representative institutions, accommodative policies, or pluralism. And when this neglect resulted in serious political disorder less than ten years later, the military stepped in, inaugurating what would become a long tradition of seizing power. In fact, since this initial coup in 1958, Pakistan has been ruled by its military for more than half of its history. Even when civilian governments have managed to assume power, they have for the most

part been hamstrung by pressures and demands from the military—the best-organized entity in the country.

In forging Pakistan's foreign policy, successive regimes have made matters worse by further bolstering the military's prerogatives. To do so, both civilian and military rulers have exaggerated the threat from India (asserting, for example, that India seeks to repossess the entire territory of Pakistan), single-mindedly fastened on the unresolved Kashmir dispute, and assiduously courted the United States as a strategic ally.

The military alliance with the United States has been the subject of considerable polemic but little dispassionate examination from Pakistani, as well as Indian, writers. Pakistani scholars, most notably

the historian Ayesha Jalal, have sought to blame the U.S.-Pakistan nexus and India's putative aggressive posture for Pakistan's pervasive militarism. For their part, Indian academics, particularly the historian Mannakal Venkataramani, have argued that Pakistan's hostility toward India was largely fueled by the former's military relationship with the United States. Kux's book, *The United States and Pakistan, 1947-2000: Disenchanted Allies*, provides a more disinterested account of the creation and development of the strategic relationship between Washington and Islamabad. By thoroughly examining the U.S. documentary record and interviewing both American and Pakistani decision-makers, Kux has revealed that Washington's interest in such a relationship was actually scant at first. It was only Pakistan's adroit and sedulous diplomacy, combined with India's refusal to align with the United States during the early Cold War, that led to the formation of this bond. Kux also shows that, far from encouraging Pakistani adventurism against India, key individuals in various American administrations have repeatedly sought to thwart Islamabad's attempts to inveigle the United States into adopting an uncritically pro-Pakistani posture on Kashmir.

All the same, the U.S. friendship has translated into substantial military and economic assistance for Pakistan. And such aid has further bolstered the prerogatives of Pakistan's military, thanks in part to the weaknesses of the country's civilian institutions. During the Cold War, the United States agreed to ignore Pakistan's internal arrangements as long as its ally remained staunchly anticommunist. Free from any American pressure

to pursue domestic political reform, Pakistan's military and its conservative civil service skewed the nation's developmental priorities, privileged the military's own position, and did little to dismantle the country's feudalistic, inegalitarian social structures. Unlike neighboring India, for example, Pakistan never undertook even a modest program of land reform.

The debility of Pakistan's institutions and its failure to modernize politically is vividly portrayed in Weaver's *Pakistan: In the Shadow of Jihad and Afghanistan*. In some of the book's more striking vignettes, she shows just how utterly unable Islamabad has been to control vast swaths of territory in tribal Baluchistan and feudal Sindh. In Baluchistan, tribal lords still dispense justice based on local customs and practices—in many cases simply ignoring the laws of the Pakistani state. And Islamabad, for its part, has done little to bring economic development to this vast, trackless region where violent secessionism remains prevalent. Despite devoting much of her book to Sindh, however, Weaver does not discuss one of the most critical fault lines that cleaves the province: the recrudescence of violence between locals and *mohajirs* (Muslims who immigrated from India during and after partition).

Still, the anecdotes that Weaver uses to paint her portrait of Pakistan provide carefully crafted glimpses of its many pathologies. Through an extended tale of illegal falconry, for example, she shows how sybaritic sheiks from the Persian Gulf (most prominently from Saudi Arabia) flagrantly violate Pakistan's laws governing the hunting of endangered wildlife. Such tales reveal the endemic corruption that invariably emerges as state authority and institutional order corrode.

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Many of Weaver's accounts, unfortunately, have a breezy, chatty tenor that entertains more than it informs. And despite its current-events title, many of the essays she includes were written several years ago (in many cases for *The New Yorker*) and are thus quite dated. Although she has sought to update the book to take account of more recent events, Weaver's efforts feel a bit contrived. For example, her long conversations with Benazir Bhutto do illuminate the myriad problems and challenges that a young, Western-educated woman encountered as the first female prime minister of a deeply conservative and patriarchal country. Yet these interviews offer few insights into Pakistan's contemporary political realities, in which Bhutto's political relevance is limited. Although Bhutto continues to command some support from her Pakistan People's Party and segments of the electorate, her husband (a former cabinet minister) languishes in a Pakistani prison on corruption charges, and she herself faces arrest if she returns from exile. Bhutto's attempt to register as a candidate for the October parliamentary elections was quashed by the election tribunal of the Sindh High Court. Under these conditions, any political comeback appears unlikely.

### **A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL**

A more compelling analysis of Pakistan's institutional weaknesses and the capricious behavior of most of its leaders can be found in Jones' *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm*. This work leavens the historical record with investigative reportage and thoughtful judgments about Pakistan's likely future. Jones relies less on anecdotes than does Weaver, as he seeks to unravel

the key historical and political strands that have brought the country to its current plight.

His deft summary of the historical forces that have contributed to the current disaster will sound familiar to South Asia specialists. But Jones is good at connecting historical evidence to contemporary developments. For example, in a superb and unsparing chapter on the army's role, he shows how Pakistan's military rulers have not only usurped political power but have distorted the country's priorities and sustained unremitting hostility toward India. These dictators have also managed to siphon off substantial economic resources, even while accusing Pakistan's civilian politicians of being the ones who have raided the treasury. (Look at the country's annual budgets, more than a third of which goes to the military, and it should become clear who has done the bulk of the raiding.) Shielded from most criticism and scrutiny, furthermore, the army has pursued flawed strategies to wrest Kashmir from India. To this end, it has repeatedly made overly optimistic assessments of its own prowess, uncritically assumed the reliability of potential allies, and routinely underestimated India's military tenacity and political resolve. These decision-making pathologies have cost Pakistan dearly in both blood and treasure while bringing it no closer to dislodging its enemy from Kashmir.

The flaws in Pakistan's leadership have not been confined solely to the realm of foreign policy. Military rulers (and, on occasion, civilian regimes) have exacerbated the country's ethnic and sectarian cleavages. The greatest debacle, the secession of Bangladesh in 1971 (which Jones describes and assesses in some detail), stemmed

from the overweening ambitions of a civilian politician, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Benazir's father), and the callousness of an inept military dictator, Yahya Khan. General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, another military ruler, made Pakistan's ethnic and sectarian tensions still worse. Zia, in attempts to bolster the legitimacy of his own regime, actively courted religious zealots within the country. During his decade-long reign (from 1977 to 1988), he instituted a separate Islamic court system, encouraged the formation of *madrassas* (religious schools, many of which were funded by Saudi Arabia), and promoted Islamist officers within the army. These policies unleashed pernicious social forces on Pakistan: most notably, Wahhabism, a form of virulently intolerant Islam that now threatens the cohesion of the Pakistani state.

With the tacit consent of the CIA, Zia directed the bulk of American aid dollars to Islamist Afghan mujahideen. Benazir Bhutto, his civilian successor, followed essentially the same course under the tutelage of her interior minister, General Naseerullah Babar. In their quest for "strategic depth" in the event of a war with India, Bhutto and Babar connived to foist the brutal (and, they hoped, pliant) Taliban regime on Afghanistan—much to the later detriment of that country, the region, and the world.

Not content with promoting the interests of religious zealots at home and in Afghanistan, General Zia directed many of these condottieri toward the already-troubled Indian-controlled portion of Kashmir. Their heirs, most prominently the militant groups Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-i-Taiba, have engaged in murder, mayhem, and rape in that region

while ostensibly seeking to free it from Delhi's misrule. It was Pakistan's support of these terrorists that led to yet another confrontation with India earlier this year—and brought the two countries to the brink of full-scale war in June. It took extraordinary intercessions from the United States and other countries to prevent such a conflict.

#### CRASH COURSE

Fourteen years after Zia's demise, the strategic culture of Pakistan's military has not changed, and it continues to pursue foolhardy operations. The most recent misadventure, the Kargil crisis of 1999, came about a year after the Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. Jones provides the most cogent and revealing account of this crisis to date. He suggests that Pakistan's military can be held almost solely responsible for this singularly ill-conceived adventure, which also brought the countries to the brink of war. The army high command, Jones reveals, had started planning the operation in about 1994 in an attempt to disrupt India's ability to supply its troops on the disputed Siachen Glacier. Indian artillery barrages that year interdicted Pakistani troop movements and thwarted the original invasion plans. But Pakistan's generals were undeterred and decided to await a more propitious moment. This came after the 1998 nuclear tests; the army assumed that India would not expand its military operations for fear of provoking a nuclear exchange. The generals were also concerned that, after a decade, the Kashmir insurgency—the *raison d'être* of their high military budgets—was starting to taper off. Finally, they calculated that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, distracted

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by his efforts to improve relations with India, would blithely approve what then looked like a small tactical operation. As Jones reveals, however, even the military brass gave only scant thought to how to actually secure the salients they planned to capture—and this lack of foresight doomed the operation from the start.

Sharif's willingness to seek a diplomatic resolution to the crisis after it erupted contributed to his overthrow in October 1999. Unlike during much of the Cold War—when Washington overlooked the many shortcomings of Islamabad's military rulers—this time the United States sharply upbraided Musharraf for his coup and imposed new sanctions on Pakistan. Indeed, the White House came close to labeling Pakistan a state supporter of terrorism due to its close links with the Taliban. It was only after September 11 that American policy toward Pakistan underwent a fundamental shift, and Islamabad once again became a close military ally of Washington. Sadly, the U.S. zeal in the war on terror seems to have propelled it to adopt a deafening silence toward Musharraf's abuses.

The unwillingness of Pakistan's elite to induce political reform has ill-served American interests, however. As Jones depicts, military rule in Pakistan, particularly under Zia, spawned many of the groups that the United States now so ardently seeks to eliminate. The effect of uncritical U.S. aid has been to extend and strengthen the violent grip of the Pakistani military.

This error is all the more tragic because only the United States can force Pakistan to reorder its domestic and external priorities. In the absence of substantial American economic assistance, diplomatic support,

and multilateral loans, Pakistan would plunge into economic distress and social dislocation. Washington's clout is therefore enormous, and it could demand meaningful and long-lasting changes to address Pakistan's myriad woes. Whether the United States will prod Musharraf into changing the course he is so carefully plotting—a route toward ever increasing military dominance and ever more limited democracy—remains uncertain, however. Meanwhile, the fate of Pakistan's 140 million citizens hangs in the balance. 🌐