

Questions

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PAKISTAN: It can go any way

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With some 180 million people, Pakistan is the sixth most populated country in the world. It occupies a position of great geostrategic importance, bordered by Iran on the west, Afghanistan on the northwest, China on the northeast, India on the east, and the Arabian Sea on the south, and maintains an endemic, at times violent territorial dispute with India over Kashmir. Among its assets, the possession of the atomic bomb.

Today Pakistan finds itself in the thick of it: the war in Afghanistan not only spills over an ill-defined border and spreads collateral damage into its northern tribal regions, but it affects its economy, permeates its politics, and alters the day-to-day life of its citizens. To the West, Pakistan is an ally, but one that has to be handled with as much care as an explosive device.

Just about to start a research mission to Islamabad, as part of CIDOB's Policy Research Project "Sources of Tension in Afghanistan & Pakistan: Regional Perspectives", Emma Hooper thinks Pakistan's future depends very much on a series of factors that could turn both in favour or against the country's progress and stability affecting the whole region, and beyond.

How insecure a state is Pakistan? How unstable is it, politically and economically?

There are different answers, depending on where you stand. If you look at it from inside, it is stable. It has difficulties, but it is stable. There is a certain amount of research (by Joel Migdal) which comes to prove that you can have states whose weakness is offset by a strong society. This is the case of Pakistan: it shows some of the characteristics of weak states, but its social structures are very strong. By social structures, I mean the network of caste, kinship (biraderi), family, friends, relatives, and neighbours. This is what prevents the country from disintegrating. However, if you look at it from the outside ---from the West---, Pakistan is on the brink of becoming a failed state, because it has many of the characteristics of one, such as the presence of civil conflict (like in the province of Balochistan), an underdeveloped taxation system, and relatively easy access to justice, irrespective of social status.

Is the upcoming withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan an added source of tension and instability?

From any point of view, 2014 is both a challenge and an opportunity. An opportunity because the impact of having the US and NATO out will certainly have a positive effect in the minds of the people of Pakistan, that cannot be underestimated. The West does not realize the depth of the resentment the average Pakistani citizen experiences in the present situation, where each US drone attack, and the civilian victims these attacks regularly cause, are experienced as incomprehensible and unworthy acts of aggression against his country's honour, as well as an encroachment on its national sovereignty. It can also be an opportunity for Balochistan and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) which have been affected by the spillover of the conflict in Afghanistan into Pakistan. Currently, there are positive moves by the Pakistani government to begin to address the nationalist insurgency in Balochistan and to bring FATA more firmly and soundly into the federal structure by way of re-allocating resources which were essentially de-routed by the Afghan war. There is also some room for optimism, finally, because there are some signs that politicians are growing increasingly uncomfortable with the present military-civilian imbalance. Were this imbalance to be corrected, the resulting power situation would be likely to be positive for Pakistan's relations with India.

Is there a possibility of a military coup?

A coup was widely expected, and widely rumoured in recent weeks, but it did not happen. Against all expectations and despite the dismal failure of the present government, it did not happen. This is very important. Pending specific research on this matter, however, it does seem that the military were restrained by a conjunction of forces: the judiciary (the Supreme Court has opened three cases against the military) and civil society, both tired of the traditional way of running things and demanding change.

What are the prospects for this year's elections?

Imran Khan, the all-time cricketing great (he used to be the captain of Pakistan's national team), could win –at any rate, this is what he himself predicts, and so do the polls, which show a 60% backing. But he lacks a proper organization: his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), is tiny. He also lacks a proper programme, beyond the cry for change and against corruption, though this certainly has a mass appeal to those disillusioned by the experience of past governments. Recently, however, he has had a string of successes –at least in public relations terms: big rallies, defections from other parties by leading politicians, and the encouraging polls. His party's rise coincides with a slump for the ruling Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which pollsters now say barely commands 10% support, and the collapse of a rival in Punjab, Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (Quaid-i-Azam). To Mr. Khan, the reasons are obvious: voters are mobilizing against incompetent and "criminal" politicians who pursue abject policies and pay no taxes. And since all other parties hold office somewhere, nationally or at provincial level, "We are the only opposition." He believes this popular feeling will translate into votes that send those crooked leaders packing. Mr. Khan himself is a big question mark, sending personal mixed signals of religious conservatism and a westernized lifestyle. So is the PPP which, despite the polls, has a strong party machine and benefits from the Bhutto legacy. The Muslim League –in its various incarnations–, it is now a discredited option for its frequent splintering and its historical support for military solutions. As for the religious Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal Pakistan (MMA), though regionally strong, polls foresee a poor showing at a national level. In fact, this coming election is quite open: it could go any way. If the results were to produce a power vacuum, there is the distinct possibility that the Pakistan Taliban could move in to fill it –much as the Taliban might do in Afghanistan after the US and NATO troops leave the country in 2014.

Can there be an end to the Afghan war without Pakistan having a say in it?

Definitely not. The key players in Afghanistan are: first, the actors within Afghanistan; second, Pakistan, the US, and Iran; and third, India, China, Russia, and others (Central Asian republics, the Gulf countries). Possible post-2014 scenarios range from the optimistic to the pessimistic: at one end, a balance-of-power situation between Pakistan-China and the US-India, where Iran must be included to some extent, considering its importance as a player and as an energy producer; at the other end, a civil war situation, in which the US maintains a presence (for war-on-terror reasons), international investments are lost, and the country splits North-South. And there are three sub-scenarios: Managed Violence, in which there is no war but the country is under different regional authorities, and Pakistan experiences continuing problems with its own extremists; Relative Peace, in which there is a certain degree of reconciliation, China uses its economic leverage to prevent Pakistan from getting further involved and, as a consequence, there is an improvement in India-Pakistan relations; and Things as They Stand, in which reconciliation talks with the Taliban look doomed, a weak government sits in Kabul, and the fighting continues and probably worsens. Any of those could happen, depending on the interests of the key players. Of course, a number of additional factors could alter the outcome: if real government reform could be carried out—in terms of decentralisation, transparency, accountability, public-service efficiency—some issues could be addressed (regional breakaway tendencies, protection of fundamental human, gender, and ethnic rights), and this would certainly make a difference in the eyes of a population accustomed to misgovernment; also, depending on how global/regional economic developments unfold, the country's future and social stability—quite fragile due to the overwhelming presence of the illicit economy (primarily drugs)—can vary greatly. But much depends really on the key players.

Let's go through these key players, then: India...

There are positive signs indicating an improvement of the India-Pakistan relations. For instance: neither side sent troops to the Kashmir border (a traditional, inbred reaction to most disputes between the two countries) after the 2008 Mumbai bombings. Both India and Pakistan historically have had a tendency to use Kabul as a stage for playing out their regional strategies, but if relations (including trade) improve, India would probably work towards avoiding the worst scenarios described just now.

Iran...

Iran is a key player, but an enigmatic one—difficult to read. Basically, Iran is looking for international recognition of its regional importance, is perfectly aware of the weight it carries, both regionally and internationally, as an energy producer, and defends the nuclear option as a matter of national pride. In the Afghan context, Iran is a potential stabilizing agent: it wants to put an end to the flow of immigrants and the drug-trafficking routes, to preserve its cultural sphere of influence which includes Afghanistan and certainly has no interest whatsoever in seeing a Taliban emirate in Kabul.

China...

The interest of China is primarily economic, but also military, though limited to the border region with Afghanistan. At the same time, there is at present a very clear rapprochement between Pakistan and the PRC—so much so, that Pakistan is thinking of leasing the region of Gilgit-Baltistan (where China has military interests in preventing the spread of Islamist insurgency to its province of Xinjiang) to China. Its economic interest entails some degree of competition with India, but China does not—at present—appear to look for further political influence. Its mere presence in

Afghanistan, however, can act as a counterbalance to that of the US from the Pakistani point of view, which sees the Americans as “Fair weather friends”, whereas the Chinese are seen as “All weather friends”.

And Russia...

Although further research is needed, there are preliminary indications that Russians will have a more active role once the US and NATO troops are out of Afghanistan. Their main interest here is to limit the drug flow into Russia, to contain the Taliban and, specifically, to block their influence in Chechnya.

A similar situation of that of Pakistan, which has a very severe extremist problem of his own?

Yes. There are different extremist groups operating in Pakistan at present: those who are predominantly foreign and those who are predominantly Pakistani. Within both sets of groups, some want to defeat the state, others are waging a Jihad. They are broadly composed of the “hardliners”, those who feel that successive governments consistently have failed them and are therefore anti-state establishment; and anti-social, opportunistic elements. Motivations range between anti Pakistan, sectarian (Sunni-Shi’a), anti US/NATO, and anti-India. The US and NATO forces are pounding those established along the Afghan border, but the Pakistani Taliban are now present in the whole country, in all its cities. The containment measures adopted by the Pakistani government have had a measure of success in drying up their sources of finance, but this has meant that the Taliban have now resorted to fund raising through kidnapping and extortion. So now, in addition to the targeted killing of people who dare to speak against the Taliban, Pakistan faces a surge in Taliban-related criminality.

What future, then, for Pakistan?

It depends very much on the outcome of the next elections but also on what happens in Afghanistan. If a democratic change of government is achieved, with the present government completing its term, that will mean progress. If the Taliban are back in Kabul, this will certainly mean trouble in terms of increased internal violence spilling over into Pakistan. But very much depends also on the economy, of course. Pakistan’s economic situation is very difficult indeed: prices constantly rising, power cuts in the summer and in winter, factories closing. Not to speak of national debt and financing issues. Right now, the basic necessities of daily life are out of reach for many: suicides are on the increase –and so are suicide bombers. There is a lot of despair in the streets. However, fortunately, Pakistan’s strong social bonds and patronage system still manage to hold society together together and prevent the fragmentation of the country along provincial lines. But the urban middle classes are deeply disenchanted with the political establishment, see no future in the present actors, and are looking for a change that could deliver a place in the sun for their country. They –in common with Muslims across the world– want to be heard and above all understood on issues that are close to their hearts –and also to that of the Muslim world: Afghanistan, Kashmir, Palestine.

Palestine?

The importance of Palestine for the Muslim world has never been fully understood in the West. This is a serious under-estimation, and until this question is adequately addressed, the achievement of genuine progress on other issues that place the West and the East in confrontation, will continue to be a difficult - if not unachievable - task.