

Violence will cost Pakistan dearly

Story by KARIM SAJADPOUR As the future of both Pakistan and its president, Pervez Musharraf, wallow in uncertainty in the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, parallels are being drawn to the 1979 fall of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Once again, a pro-American autocrat seems to be rapidly losing his grip on power, with his US ally only half-heartedly standing by him. The obvious lesson to be drawn from 1979 is that America unwisely rested its entire strategic relationship with Iran on the shoulders of an unpopular dictator. When his regime crumbled, so did America's ability to realise its interests there. BUT THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION holds another lesson for Pakistani liberals: obsessed with evicting the Shah, Iran's intelligentsia was delusional about their own society and their potential to emerge victorious via an abrupt political upheaval. Once the Shah left, the radical minority that was willing to fight and die for its cause devoured the moderate majority, establishing Islamist rule in short order. It would be wrong, however, to think that Pakistan is immune from the Muslim world's Islamist undercurrents. About 40 per cent of Pakistanis live below the poverty line, half the population is illiterate, and, among those who are literate. Various opinion polls consistently show that a sizeable minority of Pakistanis has a favourable view of Osama bin Laden, an unfavourable view of the US, and believe that implementing Islamic law (Sharia) should be a priority. The army has always been the strongest bulwark in assuring that Pakistan does not go the way of Iran. But while the officer corps may be steadfast defenders of secular rule, the rank and file reflects Pakistani society. In the event of an Islamist political awakening, the army's allegiances are not guaranteed. This is not to suggest that an Islamist awakening in Pakistan is on the horizon, or that Pakistanis must choose between an unpopular autocrat or a Taliban-style government. On the contrary, Pakistan's liberals are brave to agitate for democracy, the rule of law, and accountability for Musharraf, whose presidency appears beyond rehabilitation. Emotions are raw in the aftermath of Bhutto's death. More than 50 people have been killed in riots, and both her party and that of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif are contemplating mass demonstrations to bring down Musharraf's government. But the politics of rage, retribution, and rioting will not bring the kind of tranquil, pluralistic democracy that Bhutto envisioned. The desire to exact revenge on Musharraf for stifling democracy and failing to provide Bhutto with sufficient security will only inflame a political atmosphere that Pakistani liberals seek to de-radicalise. Not only in Iran, but also in Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, history has shown that Islamists thrive amid political chaos and violence. Similarly in Pakistan, it is dangerous to bet that the country's pro-democracy lawyers, intellectuals, and students will emerge victorious in the tumult and potential carnage of street politics. PAKISTANI LIBERALS MAY BE RIGHT that their country is invulnerable to an Islamist power grab. But the costs are too high to be impulsive, and the storms of political Islam are difficult to forecast. In 1978, Iran's liberals were bent on removing the Shah by any means. Instead of creating an atmosphere conducive to an Iranian Gandhi, they unwittingly helped usher into power Ayatollah Khomeini and a theocratic regime less tolerant than the one they helped unseat. Three decades later, millions of chastened Iranians wish they could relive those heady days differently; their Pakistani counterparts would be wise to heed their hindsight. Karim Sajadpour is an associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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