

Growing Consensus on
THE STEP DOWN OPTION

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There is an increasing consensus that President Pervez Musharraf should step down and facilitate the process of resolving the current political crisis in the country. The views of important political players, key stakeholders and a majority view at the popular level seems to converge on that position. In a recent survey, popular views were split two third to one third in favour of President Musharraf's stepping down. *(Poll carried out among over 1300 men and women in randomly selected cities, towns and villages of all four provinces of Pakistan, during January 6-7, 2008)*

There are several reasons why President Musharraf should pay serious attention to these views.

Firstly, just like in the preceding tenures, some good things happened during the period that General Pervez Musharraf governed Pakistan. If he does not step down soon, these gains will be reversed. The pride that he can take in his legacy is likely to deteriorate as days pass by. As for himself, he has more to gain than lose from stepping down. This may not be true for some of his companions in the metaphorical "King's party" including politicians and other beneficiaries. Their aims and aspirations are more transient than seeking pride in legacy. The continuity of Musharraf Presidency suits them. It does not suit Musharraf as a person. Thus, it is not surprising that according to media gossip, President Musharraf's immediate family, mother, wife and children had suggested that he step down. But one expects that a key leader would not be swayed by the

dictates of personal interest. Hence it can not be a sufficient reasons to step down.

Secondly, Pakistan's national interest is being vitally damaged by the current political crisis. In a very odd way the crisis produced two divergent outcomes in the short run. The reaction to Ms. Benazir Bhutto's assassination showed the unity of the nation on the one hand and the frailness of our governing structures on the other. The mourners who went to the tiny village in Sindh came from all parts of Pakistan and they represented almost all of its political shades. Ethnic differences and political polarization paled in the face of a common sense of community. It was a welcome departure from the reactions on the demise of two of Benazir's predecessors, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul Haq. Yet our governing structures were exposed in their weakness. They were unable to withhold criminals who exploited the days of grief and destroyed public and private property on a scale unknown to this country in the past. These past two weeks have brought to surface both our strengths and weaknesses. The irony is that if Pervez Musharraf fails to step down, the governing structures will persist in their weakness while the momentary sense of unity across regional parochialism and political polarization will begin to disappear. In fact many interested parties and groups will encourage that parochialism and political polarization should resurface. We are already witnessing such initiatives. There is never a shortage of people who trade on miseries and benefit from collective weaknesses.

Notwithstanding our current mood of despair, there is a new national sense of cohesion at the popular level and a common sense of direction among the elite civil society that is no longer polarized along earlier grooves. Countless pieces of opinion data point in that direction and I shall be happy to dilate on them on other occasions. President Pervez Musharraf can facilitate the nation to move

along a new and productive path. But he has to swallow the bitter pill and listen to the popular call to step down. It will be in the national interest which he says is so dear to him. Personally I would like to believe him on that count.

Thirdly, it is a losing battle. President Musharraf could perhaps have completed another term if the rather ingenious formula to pull together a team of PML(Q), PPP, MQM and JUI(F) under his own stewardship was to come to successful fruition. The formula was ruined early on the trail. The CJ crisis at the start of the year, the flawed execution of NRO during the middle and the tragic death of Benazir Bhutto at the end of the year demolished all possibilities of producing a meaningful third term Musharraf presidency. In the process all sources of his power have either disappeared or damaged severely. **Guns gangs and militia; legal claim; and popular appeal** are the three perennial sources to achieve or stay in power. In this case the first is not available, the second is believed to be questionable by a vast majority and there are no signs of popular appeal. That leaves external sources of power. But in today's world very few external powers can sustain a local player who loses his or her own promised strengths. Moreover, external players do not share a sense of community with their local allies. They are discourteous, if not ruthless, when the time for change comes. Al in all, it is not good to overstay the welcome from home or abroad.



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