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The Zardari-Sharif Battle in Pakistan

By Robert Dreyfuss

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At Tuesday's State Department briefing, spokesman Robert Wood -- admittedly speaking quickly, and off the cuff -- said the following about Pakistan, when asked about the political tensions between President Asif Ali Zardari and his rival, Nawaz Sharif:

"It's a complex country. It's got a major problem that it's dealing with, and that's called terrorism."

I don't mean to criticize Wood, because I'm sure he knows better. But the fact is, Pakistan's "major problem" is not "terrorism." The real problem that Pakistan has is that its entire political system is broken: for nearly half a century, it's been ruled by the military; its political parties are utterly ineffective, having functioned for decades as fiefdoms for two families, the Bhuttos and the Sharifs; and the country is desperately poor, in fact, virtually bankrupt, and its population is being pushed to the brink of desperation. Yes, it's plagued by a terrorist movement, too, but the threat from the Pakistani Taliban and its Al Qaeda allies is nowhere close to existential -- that is, radical Muslims are not about to seize power in Islamabad.

The idea that Pakistan's "major problem" is "terrorism" is the chief shortcoming of US policy toward Pakistan. For nearly a decade, the United States has viewed Pakistan exclusively through the counterterrorism lens. Very few Pakistanis see terrorism as their chief problem, and they quite rightly criticize the United States for demanding that Pakistan make terrorism its first priority. For Pakistanis, the top priorities are economic development and political stability.

Take politics first. The political showdown pitting Zardari against the Sharif brothers is not new. They've been bitter rivals for decades. They represent two clans, both corrupt. As Tariq Ali writes in his book, *The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power*, politics in Pakistan is a "desert [and] not even an imaginary oasis is in sight." It will take a generation, at least, for Pakistan to develop the rudiments of democratic political institutions, including healthy, grassroots-based political parties with legitimate constituencies. At present, the

Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) -- the party of Zardari and the Bhuttos -- which once upon a time had the potential to become a real, democratic party representing Pakistani intellectuals, workers, and students, is a corrupt shell. And the Muslim League, an echo of the original party of Muslim nationalists that founded Pakistan in 1947, has split into pieces and its major chunk is a corrupted tool for Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif, two brothers.

There is a thriving political class in Pakistan, especially among the professions -- above all, the lawyers -- and among students, who could provide the seeds for rebuilding democracy in Pakistan. The powerful movement in favor of restoring the chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, to office is only one sign of the power of that movement. But for the pro-democracy movement in Pakistan to grow, for it to take over one or both of Pakistan's two dominant political parties -- or to create new ones -- will take a long time. And it will only occur if two conditions are met: first, the Pakistani military must stay out of politics and allows the political class to reassert itself; and, second, the crippling economic crisis in Pakistan must be eased. Pakistan was already wobbling when it was hit by the oil price increase of 2007-2008 and then by the worldwide economic crisis since last summer. It's now a basket case, and it will take a Marshall Plan -- with not only the United States, but China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other friends of Pakistan -- pitching in to help.

A year ago, Zardari -- the widower of Benazir Bhutto -- and Sharif agreed to form a coalition to run Pakistan, but their accord was short-lived.

Since then Zardari has sought to rule as a despot, though his days seem numbered now.

In the late 1960s, Zardari's PPP -- led, then, by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto -- was the most promising political institution in Pakistan. Tariq Ali, who met Benazir Bhutto, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter, in 1969, recalls:

"She agreed that land reform, mass education programs, a health service, and an independent foreign policy were constructive aims and crucial if the country was to be saved from the vultures in and out of uniform. Her constituency was the poor, and she was proud of that."

Over the years, however, the promise of the PPP deteriorated. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who ruled in the 1970s, was overthrown in 1977 by a coup d'etat and hanged in 1979. Radicalized by her father's hanging at the hands of General Zia ul-Haq, the Pakistani dictator who waged the American-funded anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Benazir Bhutto battled Zia and, with her brothers, established Al-Zulfikar, an armed movement, to fight him. But Benazir Bhutto never realized her potential, and perhaps her biggest mistake was to marry Zardari, a wealthy and corrupt polo-playing womanizer. When Zia died in a plane crash in 1988, Bhutto and Sharif took turns serving as prime minister -- with the Pakistani army hovering in the background. Both Bhutto and Sharif used their positions to accumulate vast wealth. (Tariq Ali estimates that Bhutto and Zardari stole \$1.5 billion and that the Sharifs, probably \$3 billion.) By the late 1990s, the Bhutto-Sharif tag team had exhausted Pakistan, and even many liberal Pakistani's greeted General Pervez Musharraf's coup d'etat in 1999 with relief, hoping that the military at least would restore stability to the country.

Both Bhutto and Sharif fled into exile in the Arab Gulf. Musharraf? Well, that didn't work out so well. And the PPP and the Muslim League didn't exactly thrive during Musharraf's military dictatorship, deteriorating even further. As Tariq Ali writes:

"The Peoples Party needed to be refounded as a modern and democratic organization, open to serious debate and discussion, defending social and human rights, uniting the many disparate groups and individuals in Pakistan desperate for any halfway decent alternative. ... [But] the Peoples Party had now formally become a family heirloom, a property to be disposed of at the will of its proprietor."

That "heirloom" was passed on, when Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, to her husband.

With Zardari's rule today collapsing, thanks to his mishandling of the popular demand to restore Chaudhry, the chief justice, it is looking more and more like Nawaz Sharif will return to power. That's not a surprise. During the year-long battle between Zardari and Sharif, many observers have believed that Sharif would eventually get the upper hand, and he deftly inserted himself at the front of the pro-Chaudhry movement. People I've spoken to in Washington have long believed that Sharif, ultimately, would prevail.

Now to the Sharifs. The Sharif family, prominent on its own, rose to great power because General Zia favored the Sharifs in the 1980s. They'd long been enemies of the Bhutto family, and their roots in industry were far less progressive than the Bhutto clan's roots in the PPP. As Ali writes:

"The day Zia ordered Bhutto's execution, Muhammad Sharif [father of Nawaz and Shahbaz] and his sons gave thanks to Allah for responding so rapidly to their prayers. The oldest son, Nawaz, became a protege of the general's and was made leader of the khaki Muslim League."

When Musharraf took power in 1999, Nawaz Sharif was arrested and charged with treason. He probably would have been executed, but his escape was facilitated by President Clinton, and he settled in Saudi Arabia in exile. To the extent that the Bhutto-Zardari axis, as corrupt as it is, can be considered "left leaning," the Sharif brothers ought to be considered "right leaning." The Sharifs are far closer both to Pakistan's Muslim fundamentalist establishment, including the Muslim Brotherhood-linked Jamaat-i Islam (JI) party, and to Pakistan's military. (Indeed, it's likely that the shadowy Pakistan army and its intelligence service, the ISI, are quietly backing Sharif now against Zardari.) As a Punjabi, Sharif represents the majority ethnic bloc in Pakistan, and as a devout Sunni Muslim, Sharif has had an edge over the Bhutto clan, which has Shiite Muslim ties.

In addition, Nawaz Sharif has been involved in recent, secret talks -- sponsored by Saudi Arabia -- with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia, which has tremendous clout in Pakistan, would be supporting Sharif over Zardari, too. During his last term as prime minister (1997-1999) Sharif took steps to introduce *sharia* laws to Pakistan.

The war between Zardari and Sharif is a battle between corrupt politicians with ugly histories. Unfortunately, they are the politicians that Pakistan has. And unless the military takes power once again -- and that's not impossible, although President Obama's team ought to be telling them in no uncertain terms to stay put in their barracks -- they are the politicians who will be running Pakistan for the foreseeable future. Sad, but true.