

Pakistan's enduring tryst with democracy.

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The 'long march' in Pakistan, which brought a coalition of lawyers, social organisations and political activists to the streets in protest against President Asif Ali Zardari's attempts to stifle the judiciary's independence, has projected Nawaz Sharif as a champion of democracy.

At the start of the 'long march', Sharif, the leader of the opposition and Zardari's bitter political rival, had declared that the march would rewrite the history of Pakistan. While the march has not led to Zardari's fall, as Sharif might have hoped, it may open a new chapter in Pakistan's tryst with democracy.

The 'long march', despite how it has been reported in much of the media, was not led by Sharif. It was a civil society movement spearheaded by lawyers and activists calling for a free judiciary and drawing support from a wide range of individuals and groups.

Recognising Zardari's discomfort at the restoration of judges who could reinstate charges of corruption levelled against him, Sharif, who has himself shown scant respect for the judiciary when in power, linked his political fortunes to what was essentially a civil society movement.

The countrywide agitation has once again brought to the limelight the vibrancy of Pakistan's civil society.

Indeed, the 'long march' was also about holding the government accountable for its promises and ensuring that the foundations of democracy were not impeded. Together a vibrant civil society and independent judiciary hold out the promise of greater democratisation.

The 'long march' has publicly weakened Zardari by forcing Zardari to backtrack. More importantly, it has called into question the excessive powers held by the president.

Under Musharraf's rule, power was diluted from the parliament and vested in the hands of the president. When Zardari's party won the elections, he had promised to usher in constitutional changes which would remove the sweeping powers. Over the past year, however, Zardari has made no attempt to redress the issue.

The post-long march scenario in Pakistan may provide the best opportunity for the resolution of the president versus parliament issue.

Another encouraging sign is the 'positive role' played by the military in the affair. While one may justifiably be concerned over the influence of the military over the government, there is something positive to glean from the fact that the military has supported the reinstatement of a free judiciary.

The shape of Pakistan's political structure will be largely determined by the political clash between Sharif and Zardari. While Zardari has been weakened, he is by no means a spent force. In addition to his domestic constituency, he continues to enjoy the support of the United States.

Uncomfortable with Sharif, who has cultivated support amongst the religious circles, the

West had previously looked to Benazir Bhutto and now Zardari as its ally in the 'war against terror' in post-Musharraf Pakistan.

While the Obama administration has stated that it supports the democratisation of Pakistan and has indicated to Zardari that it has concerns over his actions and even shown a willingness to speak to Sharif, its willingness to move beyond the view that its interests lie in supporting a 'strong man' remains to be seen.

It is also worth noting that Chief Justice Chaudhary has pushed for an investigation into the cases of hundreds of 'missing' individuals suspected of having been arrested by the security forces in the fight against terrorism.

How keen both the Pakistani military and the United States will be on the reopening of these cases remains to be seen.

On his part, Sharif is positioning himself as the democratic candidate which the West should deal with.

It is notable that he began his involvement in the 'long march' not from his own political constituency, but from the North West Frontier Province, a region which is fiercely opposed to Zardari's pro-West policies. Sharif has however been astute in not criticising Zardari's pro-west stance himself.

On the electoral front, the success of the 'long march' has put Sharif in a quandary.

Instead of an ex-prime minister riled with corruption charges, he is seen as a champion of democracy. But as a champion of democracy he must be seen to adhere to the rules of the democratic process and wait for the next elections to stake a claim to power.

This could give Zardari time to resurrect his tarnished image. Sharif's next move may well be determined by what happens in his powerbase - the Punjab - the wealthiest and most influential province in Pakistan.

Zardari has been busy trying to cobble together a coalition government in Punjab which could keep Sharif out of power in his own powerbase. This could force Sharif to stake a claim for power even earlier.

Indications are that the international community will push both Zardari and Sharif towards cooperation. On its part, the military has shown its unwillingness to be directly involved in politics.

The onus is on the politicians now.

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