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## A Tale of Two Dictatorships

*by Kishore Mahbubani*

Myanmar and Pakistan are both Asian countries whose military rulers are in trouble. But they are heading in opposite directions, because, whereas Pakistan understands why Asia is rising, Myanmar does not.

Asia is rising because Asian countries are increasingly opening their doors to modernity. Starting with Japan, this modernizing wave has swept through the four “Asian Tigers” (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore), some ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam), and then to China and India. Now, it is moving into Pakistan and West Asia.

I was in Pakistan during one of its more exciting weeks. Exiled former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sought to return, but was promptly sent back into exile. The world expected a political eruption. Instead, the country carried on calmly.

Pakistan did not erupt because Pakistan’s elite is focused on modernization. Led by Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, who was formerly with Citibank, the country has carried out dramatic structural reforms, matching best practices in leading emerging-market economies. This explains high economic growth rates.

Pakistan has welcomed foreign trade and investment. And, just as the success of overseas Indians in America inspired Indians in India, Pakistan stands to similarly benefit from its own successful diaspora.

But this opening to modernity extends beyond economics and finance. Yes, thousands of madrasas remain open and Islamic fundamentalism is strong. But this has not completely changed the fundamental texture of Pakistan’s society.

One sight at LUMS, a leading private university in Lahore, heartened me: how women were dressed. When I visited Malaysian campuses as a young man in the 1960’s, few Malay Muslim women wore the hijab . Today, on the same campuses, almost all do. By contrast, at LUMS (which has the look and feel of Harvard Business School), only about 5% of female students wore the hijab , a remarkable expression of social freedom.

There has also been an explosion of free media in Pakistan. An astonishing number of Pakistani TV stations openly discuss the activities of Sharif and the other exiled former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto. Indeed, many elements of an open society are in place, including – as the world learned in March – an independent judiciary.

Myanmar, by contrast, broadcasts no information on the dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, and would never allow the reinstatement of a Chief Justice fired by its generals, as Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf did in March, let alone demonstrations in the streets in the Chief Justice's favor.

Of course, there is much silent resentment about the enormous political and economic space occupied by the Pakistan military, and a danger of a backlash if the military does not learn to share more space with civil society. I met many retired army generals occupying key posts. Fortunately, they seemed to have a temperament closer to Colin Powell's than to either Than Shwe or Maung Aye, the two closed military minds who have cut off Myanmar from the world.

America's decision to engage, rather than isolate, Pakistan has also helped. I have no doubt that closer American re-engagement helped to nudge Pakistan in the right direction. Many members of Pakistan's elite have been educated in American universities – another leading indicator of a country's orientation. Just imagine how different international relations would be if American leaders could visit Myanmar (or even Iran) with equal ease and have friendly discussions about agreements and disagreements.

Myanmar's generals deserve to be condemned for their brutal crackdown on civilian protestors and Buddhist monks. The Western world will rush to demand more sanctions and more isolation. But to what avail? Myanmar has effectively isolated itself for more than 50 years. What can even more isolation achieve?

A courageous Western leader might confront Myanmar's leaders with a threat that would really frighten them: deeper engagement. Myanmar's generals genuinely believe that they are protecting Burmese "purity" by shutting out the world. Imagine the impact if as many Myanmar generals visited America as Pakistani generals do. A brave young Myanmar intellectual, Thant Myint-U (the grandson of former United Nations Secretary General U Thant) asks, "What outside pressure can bring about democratic change? And why, after nearly two decades of boycotts, aid cutoffs, trade bans, and diplomatic condemnation, are Myanmar's generals apparently more in charge than ever before?"

I was in Pakistan as a state guest. But my real mission was to reconnect with my ethnic Sindhi roots, as I had never visited the country where my parents were born. Only those who understand the pain of the partition of British India in 1947 will appreciate the powerful symbolism of a child of Hindu parents being welcomed back warmly to Muslim Pakistan. Those cultural ties helped me understand the Urdu and Sindhi being spoken, and also to feel the deep urge to modernize in the Pakistani soul – an urge that exists alongside the urge to reconnect with Pakistan's rich cultural past.

I left Pakistan feeling hopeful, because I saw the strong desire to join today's rising Asia. If a similar impulse could be implanted into Myanmar, both its people and the world would benefit.

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