

**Interview with Sumantra Bose, Professor of International and Comparative Politics  
Government Department, LSE  
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00:00

**Justin Gest:**

Hi, this is Justin Gest, I'm a doctoral student in the Department of Government at the LSE. With us today on our edition of the Hot Seat is Professor Sumantra Bose, he is Professor of international and comparative politics here in the Department of Government and the author of his new book, called *Contested Lands*, to my right.

Well, let's get started. We're here today to talk about the ongoing conflict and chaos in Pakistan right now, and first question, Professor Bose:

History is said to repeat itself; does the current situation in Pakistan remind you of any previous dilemma in national politics?

00:35

**Sumantra Bose:**

Not in Pakistan itself, although Pakistan has faced several catastrophes in its history, the most notable being the disintegration of Pakistan as a state in 1971 and the creation of Bangladesh out of Eastern Pakistan. But there is another situation from about three decades ago that reminds me of the Pakistani situation currently and that is the situation in Iran in 1978, where the Shah of Iran had become about as unpopular personally as Musharraf has become right now.

01:18

**JG:**

Well, do you see this as sort of new Islamic revolution in Pakistan? similar to the type we saw in Iran?

01:27

**SB:**

No, for two reasons. There is a parallel in terms of the unpopularity of the leadership and the semi-meltdown that's taking place in the country, but there are also two significant differences. First of all, Pakistan still has its army which has a certain cohesion to it even today, so it's difficult to see Pakistan succumbing to any radical Islamist challenges, except in a localised way, as long as the Pakistani army is still basically intact and more or less cohesive. The second difference of course is that radical Islamism doesn't really command, even now, more than minority support within Pakistan and its influence within Pakistan is geographically patchy. So there are two significant differences; the Pakistan army is still around to fend off any radical Islamist challenge to the regime and secondly Islamism doesn't have the same kind of legitimacy and popularity in Pakistan today, no where near the level of Iran in 1978/1979.

02:45

**JG:**

Well of course the military in Pakistan has endured a few defeats lately on the outskirts of the country. Do you see the political implications and security implications of their weakening in the country, is this going to be a problem?

*03:00*

**SB:**

Well, the Pakistan army is facing the challenge of guerrilla war on the peripheries of the country, mainly in what's known as FATA, The Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and there of course the army is on the back foot, to use a cricketing metaphor. And it's not uncommon in any guerrilla war for a regular army to suffer tactical reverses at the hands of well-organised and ideologically motivated guerrilla forces. But at the same time that's not a challenge to the army beyond a certain level, so I wouldn't exaggerate the problem that the Pakistan army is facing. Then, of course, there's the other law and order problem which is the phenomenon of random suicide bombers roaming around in urban areas and blowing themselves up in the centre of major cities such as Islamabad and Lahore. But I wouldn't exaggerate the strategic difficulty that the Pakistan army is in. Of course, this is still a very difficult situation for the Pakistan army, the Pakistan army is used to commanding a great deal of prestige in Pakistani society and for the Pakistan army to be attacked in this way in certain parts of the country is in itself demeaning to the prestige that the Pakistan army has commanded in society.

*04:40*

**JG:**

Well, if the world were your Lego set and you could choose any first component of government or civil society to build to make the situation better, what would you construct to re-establish order to Pakistan, to set it on a path to a just and fair society?

*05:00*

**SB:**

Well, I think there needs to be a reasonably durable form of power sharing between Pakistan's civilian political elites and its military-led bureaucratic elites. Of course this was exactly what the United States was driving at for much of 2007, when it tried to get a weakening, increasingly discredited Musharraf to strike a pact with Benazir Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party. And we know how tragically that effort was aborted in the end. But at the moment the first step that really needs to be taken if there is to be even a superficial normalisation of the situation in Pakistan is the removal of Musharraf from the post of president. First of all his legitimacy as president is dubious to say the very least, but his removal in the coming months is absolutely essential, because Musharraf has put himself in a position where, like the Shah of Iran in 1978, he is tainted and compromised in the eyes of the vast majority of Pakistani society, ranging from urban liberals, westernised secularists on the one hand to religious fundamentalists on the other. So what I can say is the first step towards normalising the situation in Pakistan is that Musharraf's institution, the Army, and Musharraf's patrons, until now the American administration, find a way of easing him out of the presidency as soon as possible.

*06.55*

**JG:**

So, speaking of the US, how should this conflict be viewed in relation to the West? Is this building rejection of Musharraf? Is it a rebuke of the alliance with the United States and its European partners in the 'War on Terror'? Or is it a struggle for democracy in the model of the western state itself? Are they looking for the western state as a model here?

07:20

**SB:**

Well, there's so many elements to the crisis in Pakistan, really. Of those elements, the one that interests the United States and the West more generally in the most immediate way is the war on terror, especially on the Afghan-Pakistan border. Now, of course the Afghan-Pakistan border is highly porous. It's demarcated by something called the Durand Line, which was set up by the British in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but has never been recognised as a proper border by numerous inhabitants living on both sides in Pakistan and Afghanistan who are ethnic Pashtuns or Pathans. Of course, this is the area which is the epicentre of the war on terror. So that is the element, the aspect of the crisis in Pakistan that interests the West most immediately, but there are other elements. I've already referred to the untenability of Musharraf's position as president. So the first step is the removal of Musharraf. It is essential to remove Musharraf from the scene if the Pakistan army is to re-establish its credibility and its prestige at least in part, which has been lost under Musharraf in the past two or three years. And then comes the next step of working out a viable power sharing arrangement between whoever succeeds Musharraf as the military leader of Pakistan and what's left of the Pakistani civilian political elite after Bhutto's assassination. Of course the major player in Pakistani civilian politics among the large political parties after Bhutto's demise, is Nawaz Sharif, who was the prime minister who was deposed by Musharraf through his coup in October 1999. Now Nawaz Sharif's popularity, the base of his party, which is known as the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz, or PMLN, is located in the Punjab, which is Pakistan's largest and most populous province and contains about one half of its population and its electorate. So working out a power sharing arrangement which is viable and somewhat durable between M's successor, and of course the new army chief is General Ashfaq Kiyani .... Who was appointed by Musharraf a few months ago and between the people around him in the upper echelons of the Pakistan military and particularly, but not to the exclusion of others, Mian Nawaz Sharif the second most popular politician in Pakistan after Benazir Bhutto and now certainly the most popular one, is crucial to making progress towards some normalisation.

10:17

**JG:**

But in terms of political opinion, would the scenario which you've suggested be seen as a capitulation to the West?

10:25

**SB:**

I think one of the problems that dogged the efforts to reach a pact between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto during 2007, in terms of public opinion in Pakistan, was that the whole effort was seen as being masterminded by the American administration in Washington. Recall that when certain very radical Islamists issued statements after Benazir's assassination, they kind

of crowd over how they had liquidated the West's darling and the Americans' best friend. Now that's a good example of how any attempt at excessive American interference in Pakistan's affairs is likely to backfire. There is a very widespread feeling in Pakistan that Pakistan's sovereignty and more metaphysically speaking, Pakistan's dignity as a nation is being infringed by constant American interference and dictats. And that Musharraf has been reduced over the years to being a poodle and a lackey for American designs in the region. A lot of opinion surveys are repeatedly showing that anti-American feelings are running very high in Pakistan. So I think It's time for the United States, while not giving up its emphasis on the war on terror, particularly in the tribal areas and in the areas of Afghanistan bordering North-Western Pakistan, to take a step back and try and let Pakistan's civilian and military elites come to some kind of *modus vivendi* more or less on their own.

12.28

**JG:**

And finally, does this continued postponement of elections favour Musharraf's consolidating or reconsolidating opposition, or is it actually favouring the president himself and perhaps delaying his departure.

12.42

**SB:**

It's hard to give a direct answer to that one – I think Musharraf's time is really up. I would be very surprised if Musharraf lasts as president beyond the middle of 2008 at the very most. Beyond that, it's hard to predict who the postponement of elections is benefiting, if anybody. There is a lot of volatility in Pakistan's public opinion anyway and Bhutto's assassination has further muddied the picture. I have a feeling that when elections are held, which they will be, sometime in the coming months, it will once again be a case of the two major parties emerging with the largest number of seats. That is Nawaz Sharif's PLMN probably as the single largest party given that it's popular in the Punjab which contains half the electorate and the single largest number of seats of Pakistan's provinces. And with the PPP capitalising on its base in Sindh, another province, though not as large a population as the Punjab and some other parts of the country and likely benefiting from some sympathy wave following the Benazir assassination in urban areas of the country, emerging as the second largest party. I don't think that picture will really change, regardless of how soon or how late within the limit of several months elections are really held. Then of course the challenge will be to devise a power sharing arrangement between Pakistan's civilian and military elites.

A couple of minor points. The Pakistani military and especially its covert operations arm, the Inter-services Intelligence, the ISI, has been known to rig elections in the past and even for the elections which were scheduled earlier this month before being postponed by Benazir's assassination, there were rumours that the ISI were up to its old tricks again. That it would engineer an outcome, where the pro-Musharraf party, know as the King's Party or maybe the General's Party, the PML(QA), PML (Quaid-i-Azam), this is a pro-Musharraf party which is on its last legs along with M himself, that the ISI would engineer an outcome that would make this party the single largest party in the new parliament. So one can't rule out certain elements in the deep recesses of the Pakistani military bureaucratic state engineering some kind of an outcome like that. And of course the PPP, which stood to benefit a great deal from a sympathy wave following Benazir's assassination has, I fear, shot itself in the foot by anointing her teenage son, who writes very teenage things on facebook, for example, as her political heir apparent. I think it's a sign that the PPP doesn't have the maturity and sense of responsibility to deal with the situation of crisis. Otherwise, if it did have the maturity and the sense of responsibility, it would have appointed one of Benazir's senior colleagues, maybe

Aitzaz Ahsan, a very well respected PPP leader and a lawyer, who's from the Punjab, the largest and single most populous province as the leader of the PPP. Instead it's gone for the dynastic which I think is going to hurt the PPP in the long term.

16:39

**JG:**

Well thank you very much, Professor Bose.

With us today was Professor Sumantra Bose, on the hot seat – he is now off. If you are interested in more on these sorts of issues you should certainly pick up his book *Contested Lands*. It is available now in India and various other countries around the world, I think around 30 now, he's done book signings... Thank you very much and we'll see you next time on the Hot Seat.