



# PROJECT *on* Middle East Democracy

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## **Pakistan: Judicial Crisis and the Future of Democratic Reform**

The Heritage Foundation, Lehrman Auditorium  
Tuesday, May 29, 2007, 12:00 to 2:00 pm

This panel discussion featured **Najam Sethi**, editor of the Pakistani weekly *The Friday Times*, **Shuja Nawaz**, Pakistani journalist and author of the forthcoming *Crossed Swords: Pakistan and Its Army*, and **Hassan Abbas**, author and Research Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. The three analyzed the ongoing political crisis in Pakistan, the stability of the Musharraf presidency, and implications for the Pakistan's political future.

**Lisa Curtis**, a Senior Research Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, introduced the panel and led with a brief characterization of the current judicial crisis in Pakistan, noting that **President Pervez Musharraf is growing increasingly desperate to maintain power, becoming more autocratic in the process**. She added that the United States would do well to encourage Musharraf to cooperate with secular democratic movements already present in Pakistan.

**Shuja Nawaz** declared that **Pakistan has sacrificed democratic development in the interest of stability and with the approval of the United States**. He agreed with Curtis' description of Musharraf as an autocratic leader with liberal pretensions struggling to stay in power. Nawaz added that although both U.S. and Pakistani public opinion are turning against Musharraf, he is not likely to leave office soon or quietly.

Nawaz gave an historical account of the internal power dynamics in Pakistan, including the key role of the U.S. in strengthening the Pakistani military. What should be a three-legged stool of power complete with checks and balances has become a one-legged stool – or, as he quoted an unnamed colleague – a pogo stick. But in recent years the military has changed demographically, becoming more urban and conservative. These changes may impact how the current government is perceived and supported by both its military and the population at large.

**Hassan Abbas** declared that **President Musharraf has become a liability to Pakistan and to the United States, due to his lack of credibility and the perception that he singularly controls the Pakistani political system**. Abbas asserted that this now-evident credibility gap has been growing quietly for some time – indeed, he says that a rumor earlier this year of a coup was greeted with jubilation by many Pakistanis.

Abbas also pointed out that the **Islamist groups have followed suit in criticizing Musharraf but have lost power as secular society became identified as the true force for change**. Abbas advised that if Musharraf were to be replaced, there should be no apprehension about Pakistani nuclear weapons, which are under tight control of the nuclear establishment. In all, he was optimistic about the future, drawing hope from the show of strength by liberal elements.

**Najam Sethhi** concluded the panel, addressing Musharraf’s challenges and political miscalculations over the last six months. Last fall when President Musharraf began to contemplate his political future, **it became clear that he would need the support of the Supreme Court in order to continue serving as both President and Chief of the Armed Forces. Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry was seen as unreliable** in this regard, so Musharraf assembled a heavyweight team of political players (including the Prime Minister, another high-ranking judge and the military intelligence) to pressure Chaudhry to step down. This strategy backfired when Chaudhry resisted and, through a number of strategic and tactical missteps, has escalated into a political firestorm that threatens Musharraf’s political survival.

Sethhi noted the unprecedented visibility of Pakistani civil society, the “coming of age” of the Pakistani media, and growth of a more independent judiciary as important democratic milestones. But he warns that all is not sunny for short term U.S. interests – greater democracy will likely lead to a less organized political system, as the involvement of more groups results in more debate and argument. Also, because popular sentiment in Pakistan is pushing for diminished involvement on the Global War on Terror, democratization would likely bring less cooperation on that front. But Sethhi asserted that **there is no real way forward for Pakistan but that of democracy** – otherwise Pakistan will become more like Egypt, driving opposition groups underground where they become more radicalized and pose a greater threat in the future.