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The Crisis of Emerging Democracy in the Developing World

By Hilton L. Root *International Herald Tribune*

SANTA MONICA, California - The military coup in Pakistan will prompt a reconsideration of how to create democratic order throughout the developing world.

Just as the international community is recovering from the impact of the financial crisis that shook much of East Asia, Russia and parts of Latin America, it will now have to face an even deeper crisis. Democracy in many developing countries has resulted in a breakdown in the capacity of government to protect citizens' basic rights.

The transition that has seen some 40 countries move from authoritarian rule to democracy from 1974 to 1990 may be over. Pakistan was one of those newly born democracies.

Each of Pakistan's four democratically elected governments in the last 14 years was terminated by an outside order. The first three were annulled by constitutionally legal actions by the president. The government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was brought down by the army - Pakistan's last independent institution, and perhaps the only remaining island of integrity in a deeply corrupted country.

Until it was amended by Mr. Sharif last year, the constitution allowed the president to end the government and call for new elections - a crude mechanism, but one that was needed to prevent catastrophe.

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In his attempt to acquire total political control, Mr. Sharif tampered with every functioning institution, from local government to the court system. In the end it was his move to dominate the military that led to his fall.

The rubber-stamp Parliament did nothing to stop the destruction of the country's governing institutions. In fact, Parliament, composed primarily of feudal landlords and industrialists, many of whom bought their way into office, was less representative of Pakistan's people than the military.

Instead of using his majority in Parliament to promote effective economic policy reform, Mr. Sharif exploited it to consolidate his personal power. In the process, he helped a small minority plunder the country's economic resources.

Rich landlords and industrialists like himself were left free to default on taxes and loan repayments, and to steal electricity. Six months ago he had to turn over the collection and management of the country's electrical system to the military. He could not, however, compel wealthy landlords to pay taxes or stop the hemorrhaging of the banking system.

The more Mr. Sharif tried to tighten his grip, the more the country was veering out of control. Conflicts between Sunni and Shiite Muslims led to frequent violence and killings. While Pakistan was coming apart internally, it was exporting terrorism and violence to its neighbors as far away as Russia and the Philippines. Many people turned to fundamentalism as a last hope for law and order. The fall of Mr. Sharif's regime was unavoidable.

But military coups are not a sustainable solution. There are dozens of other failed democracies in which military intervention could be justified. Think of the implications of a military takeover in Indonesia or Russia. The military government in Pakistan cannot and must not receive international financial assistance.

Dependence on international assistance has allowed the survival of governments that provide few benefits to the population. It has turned a proud people into a beggar nation. It may be better for Pakistan to be cut off from such assistance.

It was pariah status and the loss of bilateral donor assistance that motivated strong rulers such as Chiang Kai Shek and Park Chung Hee to create viable economies in Taiwan and South Korea.

Forced to depend on its own resources, Pakistan will have to reform its economic policies and develop governance capabilities. This

process must begin by restoring the integrity of the civil service system, allowing local governments to function and the judiciary to become independent of political manipulation. Only then will Pakistan be able to prevent a privileged elite from defrauding their fellow citizens.

The writer is head of global studies at the Milken Institute, an economic think tank. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

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