

If Europe fails Pakistan, democracy and rights lose out

by Calin Trenkov-Wermuth*

For all the emphasis the EU places on promoting democracy and human rights as a fundamental objective of its foreign policy, it has done remarkably little to support them in Pakistan. The need for such support is not just about fair elections and good governance – it is about the very survival of a fragile democracy, and all the rights which would dissipate should the country return to military dictatorship, or worse, if it were to become a failed state. Human rights are significantly eroded in areas where the Taliban are strong, such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Northwest Frontier Province, and Baluchistan. The government might be forced to tolerate strict Sharia law there, and possibly even in the Pashtun areas of Karachi. The EU's aid to Pakistan has to reflect the impact that events in the country have on destabilising democracy and on the conflict in neighbouring Afghanistan. An increase in non-military aid thus goes to the very heart of what the EU's democracy and rights promotion efforts should be about.

EU officials have allocated €52 million in non-military aid for Pakistan for 2009, approximately the same amount as for Paraguay. For the period of 2009-2013, the figure stands at €435 million, which is in stark contrast to the US's recent tripling of its non-military aid to US\$ 1.5 billion per year over the next five years. This is less than the US\$ 50 billion Obama's envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, estimates the country needs. But it shows that the US recognises that the expanding Taliban insurgency, a failing economy, and political brinkmanship are all intensifying the turmoil and violence in that country, and establishing a growing sanctuary for al-Qaeda, and that Pakistan needs financial help.

The Pakistani lawyers' movement, which in 2008 led to the reinstatement of the country's chief justice, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, demonstrated that the country has the type of liberal democratic energy with the power to transform a country's legal and political landscape. With Musharraf's demise, there has been a genuine momentum towards democratic change in Pakistan, and civil society has proved its vibrancy and its key role in consolidating democracy. However, that momentum is fragile and democrats and civil society groups need urgent support if the country is to stay on a democratic path and if human rights are to be protected.

Pakistan presents a unique case where EU interests converge with European ideals. Firstly, stabilising Pakistan matters for Europe's security. Numerous terror plots against Europe originate in the country's tribal regions, and the recent threat by al-Qaeda against Germany indicates that such threats from the region are not subsiding. An increased non-military financial commitment to Pakistan would directly benefit European security as it would help the government to fill various gaps in the country's social fabric currently occupied by extremists.

The EU can also demonstrate that it is a genuine partner to the US on the global stage, and thus a greater commitment to Pakistan would enhance the block's credibility as a global actor. Crucially, a more substantial financial package for the country would greatly benefit civil society, and would bolster Pakistan's democracy by shoring up the credibility of its government. While lowest-common-denominator politics might cause the EU to shy away from security sector reform, the EU must not shy away from a greater financial commitment.

It can begin by increasing its non-military aid at a minimum to €1 billion per year to 2013. The money can be used to implement some of the 80 recommendations the EU's own Election Observation Mission made in 2008 regarding the improvement of future elections. It also needs to be used to support lawyers' organisations, pro-democracy NGOs, human rights activists, women's rights groups, civilian infrastructure projects, legal and judicial training, and to bolster Pakistan's boisterous media. Through its experience in the Balkans, the EU has established a civilian capacity for managing war-torn territories, which can also be utilised by dispatching experts in various areas, from aid management to rule-of-law.

Most importantly, aid needs to be used to improve the democratic government's standing in its own country. A special fund for developing insurgency affected regions would go a long way in doing so. But support for democracy should not entail supporting individuals who may be corrupt today and gone tomorrow, but rather a long term commitment to reinforcing democratic offices and institutions. Finally, the EU needs to continue to restore trade relations with Pakistan, and consider how it can include it in its Generalised System of Preference Plus scheme. If democratisation and support for human rights are indeed as central to EU foreign policy as it claims, and if it wishes to leverage its 'soft-power' in the future, then it needs to show that it can truly make a difference where it counts.

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