Looking West

Farid Bakht explores what lessons might be learned from the Pakistan experience

THE ex-general, now president, is confident enough to leave the country for a European tour. He must feel he has averted his worst crisis and does not expect a coup or a civil uprising. The elections due for January have been conveniently postponed while the leading opposition party sings: "Bhutto is dead, long live the new Bhutto."

If this is how democratic parties operate, then is it any wonder that this form of democracy is so distrusted? In time-honoured South Asian dynastic politics, the Pakistan People's Party laid the Queen to rest, and inaugurated a 19 year old student as the heir. The worst (almost comical) element was the appointment of Mr. 10% as the "regent."

The global media was so feverish in its speculation about the end of Pakistan a few weeks ago. Now the cameras have moved on, should we conclude that the media got it wrong and that Pakistan has a long and glorious future this year?

Not so fast. Pakistan was never going to break up this decade and Bhutto was no more than an important figure, though certainly not decisive in the scenarios for the medium term. The questions about the country's future, in its present shape and size, are legitimate.

All that has happened is that the short term plans have unraveled. The Anglo-American embassies, agencies, and think tanks thought they could engage in Asian matchmaking. The forced marriage between Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto was meant to shore up a supposedly secular government, whatever secular means in Pakistani politics. Few people seem to remember how Benazir as PM supported the Taliban in Afghanistan in a calculated piece of political expediency.

So is Nawaz Sharif the favoured army candidate, along with assorted Islamic parties and cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan?

