The apparent inability or unwillingness of our political leadership in the immediate past to rein in a handful of religious bigots led the Western press to paint us with the same brush of extremism as Pakistan. To me, the only way to rid us permanently of this image is to let people speak and choose our future leadership in a free and fair environment.

Rout of the religious right in Pakistan

ZIAUDDIN CHOUDHURY

HE anxious wait of western watchers over elections is finally over, disproving the forecast of gloom and doom and mayhem by many. Barring reports of a few incidents of Assembly seats. violence here and there, the elections have been smooth and must go the people.

To me, the most telling result of Territories. this election is the rout of the religious parties and their cohorts several years, both in the West and who had given the most damaging local, we were informed how the reputation to Pakistan in recent entire area was being engulfed by years in the West.

world that hirsute men carrying bombs under their arms, and detonating them at their free will by flinging themselves under cars Pakistan's general do not dominate politics in Pakistan. The religious combine in Pakistan was not allowed even three percent of the National

The story of this victory is most outstanding in that part of orderly, credit for much of which Pakistan which for the last several years had been portrayed as the But it is not simply the smooth most dangerous part of the world elections that are worth com- * - the North West Frontier. The mending; not even the ringing Frontier has several components, the current government that was laws of the country apply, the already predicted in the US press. Tribal Areas, and the Northern

religious extremists. We were

militants held captive a contingent of Pakistani soldiers for a considerable time, and later released them at their own will.

In Swat, a settled area, a mullah declared war on the government and held a part of the territory under religious dictate until he was overpowered by the army. To add to it all, the government of NWFP was ruled by a coalition of them. religious parties that happily endorsed incendiary actions of religious extremists that included burning of stores selling music CDs and film DVDs.

mounting pressure from the religious rights, people of the Frontier have chosen most representatives From press accounts of last from the National Awami Party -the most secular among political parties in Pakistan, the party that has its origin in the then East Pakistan. For the National People of Pakistan have finally informed of gun battles in North Assembly, this party has captured spoken. They have shown the Waziristan, a tribal area, where ten seats, and for the Provincial

Assembly twenty-nine seats.

With most of the remaining seats in the Provincial Assembly going to either to independents or to the Pakistan People's Party, people of NWFP have ensured that the religious coalition will not return to govern them. So much for the dire forecast of impending Talibinasation of a people who were never understood by the Western press.

This is a happy event for not only the people of Pakistan, but followers of democracy everywhere as well. The choice of a people, when unfettered, always gives rise to policies and a system of governance that are best for

It is not a surprise that people in Pakistan would vote out of power a party that was imposed from above. The surprise is the choice that they have exercised in reject-In a telling answer to this ing outright the religion-based parties, particularly in a region that was deemed to be headed inexorably to extremist leader-

> But then, it should not have been a surprise as our knowledge of this propensity of the people of the Frontier province was given gratuitously by media based on isolated evidences of extremism

that in all probability did not have grass-roots support.

Mark Twain once commented that in religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from others. Nothing could illustrate this observation better than the election results of Pakistan.

The media's second guessing and speculations on people's choice created an image about a region and people that perhaps would have continued for more years to come had the people not been allowed to speak their mind. For this, credit goes to the people of Pakistan for their courage and determination, and, despite its flaws, to the current government for allowing this free expression of

In all this, there is a lesson to be learnt for us democracy-lovers elsewhere. For the past several ruption. years Bangladesh's image has suffered in two fronts: endemic corruption and a growing threat of religious extremism. Our reputation as a country, and as a nation,

unwillingness of our political leadership in the immediate past to rein in a handful of religious bigots led the Western press to

was tarnished as we had failed to paint us with the same brush of contain the festering vice of cor- extremism as Pakistan. To me, the only way to rid us permanently of The apparent inability or this image is to let people speak and choose our future leadership in a free and fair environment.

Given the right assistance, and unfettered by any threat or manip-

ulation, our people can and will throw out the corrupt leaders and those with any semblance of extremist political ideology. Let our people speak.

Ziauddin Choudhury is a freelance contributor to

Bird flu and mass hysteria

As of today, there is no confirmed case of human to human transmission. Even in the case of bird to human transmissions, they happened only to people with extensive physical contact with infected birds, i.e. poultry farm workers. To put the risk in perspective you're thousands of times more likely to die by: Getting struck by lightning; falling in your bathroom; drowning getting shot by a jilted lover.

SAIF AHMED

"Ihadabird His name was Enza I opened my window And in-flew-enza."

O goes the nursery rhyme from 1918 inspired by the flu pandemic. Today we have arrived at a level of hysteria that might motivate poets to compose again. This isn't the hysteria causing little girls to faint. (My conspiratorial mind says that's some kind of experiment too). This is the real thing. Manufactured by the media, this hysteria is changing behaviour patterns world-wide.

In the pantheon of mass murderers, the avian influenza (AI) or bird flu virus stands out today in people's consciousness. However this "awareness" has little correlation to the facts. Fear mongering by the media who selectively chose the right sound-bites from the right scientists have created terror beyond logic or reason.

Mass hysteria is also driving people to make irrational decisions. A section of the populace has decided that deshi chicken was "safer." And that duck eggs are flu situation today? Even when it

just as well be AI infected. What totally gets overlooked is that cooking meats and eggs completely kills the virus.

Let us look at cases of mass

killings in the 20th century. We all know about the Nazi Holocaust, the Rape of Nanking, the Armenian Genocide, and more and Kosovo. Today we all know about the Spanish flu epidemic of 1918 and we all know there is a link to bird flu of today. We hardly hear of the numbers dead in Vietnam or Iraq in the mass media. While the Nazi Holocaust is prominent in peoples consciousness, the deaths of 9 million Russians at the hands of the Nazis is relatively unknown. And totally absent from the mass media is the 3 million Bengalis killed by the British in a manmade famine in the same period. It seems that what is bad news is determined by whoever controls the media.

How is that related to the bird

better than chicken eggs. Facts comes to disease, the media don't stand in the way of hysteria. decides what constitutes news. Most so-called deshi chicken are And in most cases only diseases either layer males or coloured that have an impact on rich counfarm chickens. Or that ducks can tries get coverage. According to WHO the total number of deaths from bird flu since 2003 is 225 as of February 16. Compare that to

these numbers: • Diarrheal diseases kill over 2 million children a year (225+ per hour)

• Malaria kills over 3 million a

recently the genocides in Rwanda Yet SARS which killed less than 300 people and AI which killed 225 got more media coverage in their panic years than the two big killers did in the last decade. The reasons for this appear to be the same as the reasons for the lack of media coverage of the Bengal famine. The victims of diarrhea and malaria have no control of the media.

> In the case of avian influenza or bird flu, every article seems to have a note about the 1918 flu pandemic that killed almost 20 million and to have linked that flu strain to an avian flu. International organisations have expressed fears that this virus may mutate into a lethal strain similar to the 1918 strain. This argument

does not derive its strength from real facts.

In 2005 scientists found a body of a 1918 pandemic victim buried and preserved in the Alaskan permafrost and have isolated what is possibly the virus responsible for the pandemic. What they found and what has been reported in the media is that it is "similar" to the bird flu virus of today. The g genome of the 1918 virus indicates that it was avian in origin. However there were no reports of disease outbreaks among birds at the time. The avian origin of the virus doesn't contribute to its deadliness. However, that virus had the ability to jump to humans without needing to borrow gene sequences from human viruses. The fear is that H5N1 will acquire the same ability.

Is there a risk? Of course! Is the • Getting struck by lightning. risk the same as it was in 1918? Not by a long shot. Even if the H5N1 acquired the ability to mutate to human form, the realities on the ground are very different. In 1918, the First World War was going on. Most medical resources were diverted to war. The world's knowledge of viruses was virtually nonexistent. Shortage of resources made people and communities vulnerable to disease anyways. None of that is true today.

As of today, there is no confirmed case of human to human transmission. Even in the case of bird to human transmissions, they happened only to people with extensive physical contact with



infected birds, i.e. poultry farm

To put the risk in perspective you're thousands of times more likely to die by:

Falling in your bathroom.

 Getting shot by a jilted lover. The role played by the media in hyping diseases like SARS and AI is not only irresponsible but dangerous. Because of the media coverage, governments prefer to act on the issues in the public eye, thus diverting essential but limited funds from other issues, directly causing loss of lives. It is also destroying a vital industry for our country and depriving people of what has recently become the

cheapest form of protein. Lets look at the issue from another perspective. Tamiflu is the only drug known to be effective

against bird flu. Since 2003, 3 billion dollars worth of Tamiflu was sold for bird flu treatment. Less than a thousand dollars worth of it was used. 3 billion dollars buys a lot of treated mosquito nets and oral saline. 3 billion dollars is also a good incentive to promote mass hysteria through

the media. Avian influenza today is an economic problem, not a public health one. Millions of farmers will be impoverished by it. In the future is could mutate into a lethal human virus. However today there are other diseases and sicknesses, Aids malaria, and diarrhea, for example, that will probably take many more lives than AI ever will. Existing diseases should get priority over a potential but non-existent one.

Saif Ahmed is a freelance contributor to The Daily

Seize the day

The United States is in a unique position to help Pakistan accomplish these goals. It should, at the outset, sever its lingering ties to Musharraf, who through arrogance, authoritarianism and incompetence, brought his country to its present pass. It needs to distance itself forthrightly from a failed dictator.

SUMIT GANGULY

MERICA'S fears of an Islamist victory in A Pakistan have turned out to be unfounded. Despite widespread concerns about compromised balloting, electoral violence and low voter turnout in Monday's elections, Pakistan is now enjoying a moment of democracy and optimism -- an exceedingly rare event in its troubled history.

Of the 191 seats open in Pakistan's 272-seat parliament, the Pakistan People's Party (the party of Benazir Bhutto) won 87 and the Pakistan Muslim League (the party of opposition leader Nawaz Sharif) won 66. General Pervez Musharraf's party, the Pakistan Muslim League, captured only 38 seats. The principal Islamist party, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which had fared well in the last election, has taken a severe battering.

It is now all but inevitable that sometime in the next few weeks Pakistan will be governed by a coalition regime with the People's Party as the senior partner.

If the country is to tackle its myriad problems of social injustice, political and religious terror and economic inequity, any coalition regime will have to eschew partisan political bickering, set aside any desire, however understandable, to seek revenge against Musharraf and move with dispatch to the tasks of governance.

A failure to act in this fashion will leave the country vulnerable to the machinations of the Islamic zealots. It will dissipate the good will of the citizenry dash their hopes for democracy and contribute to Pakistan's continued political turmoil.

The United States is in a unique position to help Pakistan accomplish these goals. It should, at the outset, sever its lingering ties to Musharraf, who through arrogance, authoritarianism and incompetence, brought his country to its present pass. It needs to distance itself forthrightly from a failed dictator. Any last attempts to bolster Musharraf out of a misplaced sense of loyalty would be both morally flawed and politi-

cally imprudent. It would be morally wrong because he stands discredited before the Pakistani electorate. It would be politically inexpedient because a lingering embrace of Musharraf would provide fodder to the forces of anti-

Americanism in Pakistan. Consequently, if Musharraf Reprinted by arrangement.

wishes to avoid further embarrassment and humiliation, it is time for him to quietly step away from the political fray. His political future was looking murky in the run-up to the elections; it is now effectively at an end. Despite the Bush administration's long and uncritical support for him, he has abjectly failed to promote internal order and security, he has flouted the most basic tenets of democracy, and he has been at best a fitful ally in the "war on terror."

The Bush administration now has an important opportunity to genuinely make good on its long-professed commitment to democracy in the Muslim world.

The task that lies ahead for American policymakers is still daunting. Once the euphoria of the electoral surprise passes, the difficult task of governing a land riven with conflict will loom large. To ensure that the new regime does not lose its drive to deal with the many rifts in the political landscape, the Bush administration needs to assist it in setting critical priorities and pursuing them with vigour. Perhaps the most important of these is to reduce the overweening role of the Pakistani military.

Fortunately, the United States may have a viable partner in this endeavour. Gen. Ashfaq Pervez Kiyani, the current chief of staff, seems interested in refocusing the military's attention to its core task, the maintenance of the country's security. To that end the administration needs to work with him to restore the independence of the judiciary, allow the free functioning of political parties, lift the remaining curbs on the press, end the militarisation of civil administration and devote greater resources to addressing critical social needs such as health and education.

This agenda is ambitious, but anything less will remain mired in the politics of religious extremism, violence and continued political upheaval. Such conditions, which were becoming endemic in Musharraf's final days, had compromised the pursuit of vital American interests in Pakistan, most notably the efforts to suppress the neo-Taliban and eviscerate Al Qaeda. Given the opportunity that this election has provided, the administration can ill afford to fritter it away.

Ganguly is a professor of political science and the director of research at the Center on American and Global Security.

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NOTES FROM HISTORY

The withdrawal of the Agartala case

It was a plain conflagration that erupted in East Pakistan by February 1969. Angry crowds of Bengalis rushed the residential quarters of Justice S.A. Rehman, who briskly flew off to safety in his native West Pakistan. Politicians across the spectrum demanded that Mujib be freed and the case against him be lifted.

EDITORIAL DESK

February 22, 1969 Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the All-Pakistan Awami League, walked out of his prison cell in the Dhaka cantonment. He was escorted to his Dhanmondi residence for an emotional reunion with his family.

Having been in prison since May 8, 1966 under the Defence of Pakistan Rules, Mujib had gone through the rigours of a trial in which he, along with thirty-four other Bengalis (men in the armed forces and the civil administration), had been charged with conspiracy to have East Pakistan secede from the rest of Pakistan through armed revolt. It was argued by the government of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan that Mujib had earlier travelled to Agartala in India to solicit Indian support for his scheme of breaking up Pakistan.

News of the Pakistan government's plans regarding the case, which infamously came to be known as the Agartala conspiracy case, first appeared in the media

December 1967 spoke of the arrest of a group of individuals. It was not till early January 1968, however, Justice Mujibur Rahman Khan and that the regime formally spoke of Justice Maksumul Hakeem. A what it called a conspiracy that led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The reaction among Bengalis was one of disbelief and it was generally thought that the whole idea had been manufactured by the Ayub regime to discredit Mujib before his fellow Bengalis. Indeed, attention quickly focused on Ayub's remarks in 1966, soon after Mujib had announced his Six Point plan for regional autonomy within a federal Pakistan, to the effect that those who supported the plan would be dealt with in the language of weapons.

entrenched political classes nomic steps the regime had taken quickly seized upon the government's move to decry the attempt eignty of Pakistan.

the Dhaka cantonment in June ache.

when a sketchy press release late in 1968. It was presided over by Justice S.A. Rehman, a West Pakistani, who was assisted by two Bengali judges, phalanx of defence lawyers, including the Britain's Sir Thomas Williams QC, assisted Mujib and his co-defendants.

> As the trial got underway, Mujib told a foreign journalist present in court, "You know, they can't keep me here for more than six months." Meanwhile, all over East Pakistan and then in West Pakistan, political unrest began to upset normal life. And this despite the fact that the Ayub Khan government had launched yearlong celebrations relating to its decade in power.

Billed as a decade of progress, In West Pakistan, though, the the celebrations were meant to be a general mass of people and the recapitulation of the positive ecosince a coup d' etat had placed Ayub in power in October 1958. to 'undermine' the unity and sover- And yet not everything was as rosy as it was painted out to be, Ayub's The trial of Sheikh Mujibur former foreign minister Zulfikar Ali Rahman and his co-accused com- Bhutto was causing his former menced before a special tribunal in benefactor considerable head-

He had formed the Pakistan People's Party in November 1967 and had declared his intention to seek the presidency at the elections of 1970. In November 1968, Bhutto, together with the National Awami Party's Khan Abdul Wali Khan, would be arrested by the authori-

In East Pakistan, political agitation against Ayub Khan reached political groups began to voice the demand for its withdrawal and for

Mujib to be freed. forced Ayub Khan, in early 1969, to call a round table conference of political leaders in Rawalpindi. He made contact with Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, a leading opposition politician from the Punjab, who in turn passed on Ayub's invitation to other opposition figures. The opposition, united under the banner of the Democratic Action Committee, informed the government that Mujib needed to be allowed to take part in the RTC.

It was soon being suggested that Mujib, who according to the govin order for him to take part in the RTC. But such reports were quickly scotched in Dhaka and Bhashani warned that if Mujib were not freed without conditions, the people would march on the cantonment to liberate him.

Conditions had already taken a bad turn with the shooting of the young student Asaduzzaman. Motiur, a school student, also increasing heights with Moulana succumbed to police firing. In the Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani cantonment itself, Sergeant spearheading the movement Zahurul Haq, one of the accused in against President Ayub Khan. As the Agartala case, was killed by the Agartala case trial wore on, soldiers on the pretext that Haq increasing numbers of social and had tried to escape from custody. In Rajshahi, the academic Zoha was shot and killed.

It was a plain conflagration that A worsening political situation erupted in East Pakistan by February 1969. Angry crowds of Bengalis rushed the residential quarters of Justice S.A. Rehman, who briskly flew off to safety in his native West Pakistan. Politicians across the spectrum demanded that Mujib be freed and the case against him be lifted.

On February 22, 1969, Vice Admiral A.R. Khan, Pakistan's minister of defence, announced the withdrawal of the Agartala case and the unconditional release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and all his fellow accused. The next day, February 23, Mujib addressed a ernment had committed acts of million-strong crowd of Bengalis at treason against the state of the Race Course (now Suhrawardy Pakistan, would be freed on parole Udyan) in Dhaka. Student leader

Tofail Ahmed, today a prominent Awami League politician and former minister, extolled him as Bangabandhu, friend of Bengal. The new honour accorded to Mujib was accepted by acclamation. On February 24, Bangabandhu Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman flew to

Rawalpindi at the head of an Awami League team to participate at the round table conference.

Postscript

Five years to the day after Bangabandhu was freed from military custody on February 22, 1969, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan accorded diplomatic recognition to its former province of East Pakistan, by then the People's Republic of Bangladesh, on February 22, 1974. The next day, Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman travelled to Lahore to attend the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC).

At Lahore airport, Bangabandhu was welcomed by Pakistan's President Chaudhry Fazle Elahi and Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. As a band of the Pakistan army played Amar Shonar Bangla, General Tikka Khan, then Pakistans army chief of staff and in March 1971 the man who had initiated the genocide of Bengalis in Dhaka and ordered Bangabandhu's arrest, saluted Bangladesh's founding