

The Process of Undermining Pakistan's Military Hegemony May Have Begun

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There is a political transition taking place in Pakistan. Although the dominance of the army has not diminished, in the last two decades there has been a noticeable deepening of democratisation processes. The writer argues that in the future, if there is another attempt to impose military rule, there could be greater opposition and processes to undermine the military's hegemony are already evident.

The conventional wisdom in Pakistan is that General Raheel Sharif, chief of the army staff, is the most popular man in the country, far more than any elected politician or celebrity. In fact, Raheel Sharif is Pakistan's new celebrity, seen by most Pakistanis as a saviour against various forms of terrorism and external aggression.

Some months ago, placards appeared across 13 major cities in Pakistan asking him to - rescind his public statement that he would not seek an extension of his term when he comes up for retirement at the end of November 2016. More recently, the same group that displayed those earlier placards and now calls itself Move on Pakistan replaced them with ones urging the general to take over Pakistan's government. The "Khuda ke liye, jaane ki baat jane do" banners (For god's sake, forget about leaving/retiring) were replaced by "Jane ki batain hui purani, khuda ke liye, ab aajao" (The retirement decision is past, for god's sake, now come and take over).

It is not surprising that there was much chatter and some discussion about these banners and about the Move on Pakistan group in the media. But what was surprising, was that the chairman of the group was arrested on grounds of criminal conspiracy, sedition, and "statements conducing to public mischief" and remanded in police custody awaiting a hearing and trial.

The media, both public and private television channels, have gone out of their way to praise General Raheel for all that he has done to rid Pakistan of terrorism of the Islamic militant kind, in the guise of the various "Talibans" and their morphed groups. One seldom, if ever,

hears any criticism about the man, or about the military, for he is supposed to be a clean, “professional soldier” without any so-called political ambitions.

In fact, when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was away in London for his heart surgery for seven weeks in May–June 2016, General Raheel’s public presence became even more reassuring to the Pakistani public, with the media reporting his each and every public meeting and presence. From meeting his own troops in battle on the border with Afghanistan, to visiting families of those affected by terrorism, his visibility was pronounced. He was even present at the funeral of the social worker Sattar Edhi who died in July, while Nawaz Sharif was unable to attend. The twitter hashtag *#ThankyouRaheelSharif* reappears on social media whenever he does or says anything worth mentioning.

Whether it is on account of him sending the Rangers—a paramilitary agency—to confront issues of militancy in Karachi, or leading the National Action Plan to counter terrorism, or even him meeting Amir Khan the British boxer, or the cricketer Azhar Ali doing push-ups after scoring a century at Edgbaston, Raheel Sharif receives virtual thanks. The general is also the main protector and defender of Pakistan’s biggest investment project, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), supposedly a “fate changer” for Pakistan, bringing in untold and unheard of riches to Pakistan, in which the Pakistani army also reaps many rewards. One does not criticise Raheel Sharif in Pakistan. But then, even the gods are fallible.

Following the 8 August suicide attack in Quetta, Balochistan, killing 70 lawyers, Lt Gen Asim Bajwa, public relations chief of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), used Pakistan military’s new weapon, Twitter, to say that General Raheel “was of the view that the attack was an attempt to undermine improved security and target the CPEC in the province”. For someone who is so reticent about his public statements, this came across as an absurd pronouncement, and for once, there was reaction against the army chief.

Many found this statement callous, exposing the failure of the military to protect Pakistan’s citizens. Journalist and novelist Mohammad Hanif was quoted on social media as saying that “to stand over the slain bodies of the best sons of the city and proclaim that it is an attack on CPEC, is an insult to the martyrs. We died for our country, we died for our religion, now are we expected to die for a road network”.

And while Hanif was not the only one who condemned such insensitiveness, the electronic and print media largely overlooked this folly and gave it a different spin. In parliament, Nawaz Sharif also echoed the army chief’s words, saying that “the country’s enemies were unhappy over the scale of development of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor”. He even defended the military and its intelligence agencies against the criticism made by a leading Pakhtun nationalist parliamentarian from Balochistan, Mehmood Khan Achakzai, an ally of the Nawaz Sharif government. The opposition parties, however, asked the government to “summon” the military leadership to brief parliament on the security situation in the

country.

Civilian and Democratic Spaces

While the government has had to defend the military making the claim that both were on the “same page” regarding the actions against terrorism, there have been notable counter-narratives from pro-democracy voices as well who, while not openly criticising the military, have emphasised the need for continued and further democratisation. For example, the Move on Pakistan banners mentioned above were widely criticised by the media and by civil and political organisations to the extent that some of the leaders of the group denied any claim calling for the imposition of martial law and a military takeover. And the government got its moment too by coming out in full force against the failed coup in Turkey in July and in support for President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkey situation allowed both government in Pakistan and members of civil society institutions to use the media to celebrate what was being called the “triumph of democracy” in Turkey over the military. There was no attempt to hide the resentment of the unconstitutional, failed, military adventure. And although no parallels were drawn with the Pakistani military, the symbolism was intended and understood.

Similarly, the Quetta suicide bombing allowed some sections of the Urdu and English press to raise questions even though all discussion on Balochistan in the media is taboo and Pakistan’s military has strangled any mention of the numerous disappeared in the province and not permitted any public discussion on the injustices perpetrated by state - actors on those fighting for greater rights and autonomy in the province. Some in the media obliquely mocked the state and military’s official verdict on the Quetta blasts in which India’s Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) had been implicated and named as the perpetrator of the attack on the lawyers. Khurram Husain writing in *Dawn* (Husain 2016) stated that “the official narrative ... makes little sense.

First of all, how do they know that this act was perpetrated by RAW with the intention to derail CPEC?” and “how does targeting lawyers destabilise the country and contribute to the derailment of CPEC? Given how calculated the strike was, whoever carried it out would naturally also have calculated the impact it was going to have. And it’s hard to see how the impact could in any way contribute to the derailment of CPEC.” The well-known television journalist Hamid Mir, already a survivor of an assassination attempt which his brother claimed was undertaken by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) on account of his television enquiries into what was happening in Balochistan, was even more unambiguous in his analysis in the Urdu newspaper *Jang*, and said much more without naming the military.

The Fractured State

Pakistan, not without reason, has been seen as a military-dominated state. Decades of direct martial law and military rule and also dominance by the military over key areas of political concern—such as foreign policy, dealing with Pakistan’s neighbours, its nuclear control, and

even at times with regard to Pakistan's ideological moorings—has allowed the military to be the hegemonic institution amongst competing ones even at times when elected representatives are supposed to govern and make key decisions. Moreover, each of the three decades of military rule have been different from each other, reflecting global and regional particularities and also the social and structural political economy at home. Ayub Khan's more autocratic rule contrasts with Pervez Musharraf's middle class, neo-liberal, dispensation, which was more inclusive of lifestyle liberal elites. While both were developmentalist, Ayub's was state-led development while Musharraf's was more a reflection of a corporatised, globalised, neo-liberal economic order which dominates the world today. Social classes in Pakistan have also evolved over the last 60 years, with middle class consumerist and ideological values being more representative of the last two decades than of the 1960s, when the class divisions between the owners of capital and the working classes were more pronounced. As a consequence of these factors, each leader dealt with the Constitution differently, with General Zia asking and answering the question, "What is a constitution? It is just a fourteen page document that I can tear away and trash" (Malik 2016) while General Musharraf had to adhere to many of its interpretations even by a compliant superior judiciary.

Around early 2007, the dominance of the Pakistani military was dislodged, challenged by other, competing, institutions, all wanting to share in the power over the state. The judiciary, the media, and political parties and groups, became contenders to mould state and society in Pakistan, as did elements broadly defined under the rubric of political Islam. The hegemony of the military was seriously compromised in the last 20 months of General Musharraf's rule, and for some months after, it seemed that civilian, political and non-military institutions were in a position to make claims on both governing and ruling over the state. This is something that had not happened since December 1971 when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became Pakistan's president. While the dominance of the civilian-political lasted for perhaps two to three years under Bhutto, his successors in 2007 and 2008 may have gained the upper hand for about five years, after which the military began to re-emerge as the hegemonic power. A critical difference from the early 1970s compared to the 2010s with regard to the military re-emphasising its hold was, that in the 1970s it was primarily domestic, internal, and civilian failure that was the cause. In the 2010s, it was the consequences of the war on terror and all that it articulated, domestically, regionally and globally.

While one can make the argument that the military has started dominating Pakistan's political landscape once again, this is different from the past. There is a noticeable civilian-political and civic presence in how Pakistan functions today. This is different from the 1990s, in between the Zia-ul-Haq and Musharraf eras, when civilian-political actors—Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto—were elected, but were unable to govern, leave alone rule. The military today still dominates key areas of political consequence—such as relations with India and Afghanistan, domestic militancy in Karachi, Balochistan and FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and elsewhere—but not as actively in other spheres. It stays out

of more quotidian issues of governance, of the economy (with the exception of the CPEC), and issues related to the passage of laws by parliament. Parliament is certainly not completely sovereign, but is much more so than it has ever been. The government has passed numerous laws without, apparently, having any military oversight or interference, not that it is the military's business anyway. This was certainly not the case in the past.

Pakistan's state is fractured, with power unevenly distributed between contending social groups and institutions, undermining the centralised nature of the state of some decades ago. This is on account of the social and structural transformation that has taken place in Pakistan, as well as a consequence of trends of global capital in all its manifestations. The military, which ruled Pakistan with suffocating control, has been forced to accommodate new institutions and relinquish complete control in order to effectively dominate in some areas. Unlike the past, the Pakistani military cannot do everything it used to, from running government, to managing the economy, to providing education and health, to fighting wars of its own creation. Nor does it delegate power and responsibility, nor outsource it. Other social groups that have emerged want to make their own claims on the state and how power is articulated, as well as in the reproduction of capital, which for many years was the prerogative of the hegemonic military. Hesitantly, but visibly, in many areas, civilians and politicians test the self-imposed limits of what they can do. They often trample on heavy military boots, and are at times squashed under them. But with growing confidence, they are learning to chip away at what was once perceived to be the sole privilege of the military.

Unsettled Politics

While the state remains fragmented, politics in Pakistan is equally factitious. Perhaps that is how politics is supposed to be everywhere, but with the dark shadows of oppressive military intervention and military rule hanging over Pakistan's past, the game of unseating elected representatives by any means, plays into the hand of the military, perhaps even unwittingly and unwillingly. By including the military in resolving civic and political issues, some political parties continue to strengthen the military's role. Not for nothing does Imran Khan liken the military's power to intervene as that of the "umpire's finger." However, it must be emphasised that unlike the 1990s, when Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were both playing this dirty game, politics in this new era has matured and become far more conscious of its role and responsibility.

The judicial process has also strengthened, and much of the agitational politics has shifted to the courts, with cases registered against the Prime Minister and other individuals from his party (as well as from the opposition) on grounds ranging from corruption, incompetence to their moral inability to lead and govern. The Election Commission of Pakistan has issued notices to the Prime Minister and numerous senior officials on account of charges levelled against them by the opposition. Nevertheless, despite the dharnas and the numerous court cases against him, Nawaz Sharif and some of his ministers have addressed issues of development and governance, especially in the Punjab, delivering on some of their many

promises made in the 2013 elections. This has held his party, the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz, in good stead, winning numerous by-elections and completely whitewashing the opposition in Azad Jammu and Kashmir. Perhaps the voter too has matured, and responds to material incentives rather than false slogans by the opposition that raises the endemic issue of “corruption” and of the need for the “rule of law”. While both these issues are important, they matter less to those who vote on different criteria.

Clearly, since the political transitions of 2007 and 2008, Pakistan has moved on towards furthering and deepening its democratisation processes. The democratic discourse has gained far greater acceptance in the general public, as well as amongst detractors in the influential media. While highly critical of what Pakistani-style democracy offers, they are still embarrassed to ask the military to overthrow the political system. Even the ISPR’s public relations chief often placates the Pakistani public through his tweets, stating that the army “believes in democracy”. He even took the trouble to tweet that the Pakistan army or any of its affiliated organisations have no connection to the banners that appeared across Pakistan urging the chief of the army staff to take over. But such statements should also not make one immune to the actual existing power of the military or its distaste for the elected - political system.

There is some pressure and criticism on the military itself, since it monopolises all issues related to what is called the “national security paradigm,” whether this be related to India, Balochistan, Karachi or FATA. While there seems to be some success in the military’s strategy of wiping out some of the numerous Talibans, questions continue to be raised about other domestic jihadi groups, some ostensibly supported and protected by the military, often as “our strategic assets”. The inability to deal with issues of terrorism in Pakistan, such as the Quetta blasts, is a clear failure of the military’s strategy as political parties play no role in such issues.

The political transition underway in Pakistan is reversible. Yet, if for any reason it ever came to a putsch, it is probable that for once there will be far greater opposition to such military adventurism than there has been in the past, and the failures of military governance will continue to be highlighted. This political transition is no mirage of the “Arab Spring” variety. With far greater investment in Pakistani-style democracy despite its many flaws, conceding some areas to the military for the moment, political actors may have begun the long process of undermining the Pakistani military’s hegemony. The military will also need to accept and accommodate itself to a new future.

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