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Pakistan Prepares for the Polls: A Caretaker Government takes charge

Pakistan has named a caretaker prime minister, Nasir ul-Mulk (the former justice), to head a temporary government for three months. Such an arrangement will also be made in the provinces, as the country heads towards the national elections, now scheduled for 25 July 2018. This paper analyses the lead-up to the appointment of such an interim arrangement and attempts at what might be a prognosis with regard to the immediate aftermath of the polls. The all-pervading role of the military is touched upon, and some predictions are made on the results of the elections, albeit briefly.

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Democracy is obviously taking root in Pakistan, though some would contend at an agonisingly slow pace. However, fettered it might appear to be at times, the process has, of late, been reassuringly steady. The gradual movement towards that goal has now crossed an important marker. For the second successive time in a row, the National Parliament has been able to complete its term. Not only that – almost to the final week, it worked on substantive issues displaying a commendable degree of professionalism. An example is the passage on 24 May 2018 of the 31st amendment to the Constitution, merging the Federally Administered

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Tribal Areas with the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Now that the elections have been announced for 25 July 2018, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government of Prime Minister Shahid Khakan Abbasi will shortly lay down office. The provincial governments of Punjab, PK, Sindh and Baluchistan will do likewise. They will be replaced, both at the Centre and in the provinces, by caretaker governments of technocrats without political affiliation. The caretaker prime minister at the Centre has already been chosen by an agreement among the key political parties and stakeholders. As of 31 May 2018, the caretakers will hold office in Islamabad as well as in the other provincial capitals.

This somewhat unique model was actually borrowed from Bangladesh, which had first put such a ‘caretaker model’ in place in 1996. It has since discarded it. Pakistan, on the other hand, has further refined, sharpened and honed the system. Simply put, it presupposes that ‘political governments’ are unable to hold free and fair elections. They are apt to skew the polls to their advantage. They are better conducted by a set of fair-minded and objective technical hands, for a brief period, say three months. The caretaker government would not take any major political decisions on issues of governance. It is designed to solely focus on the elections. Immediately thereafter, it would hand over the reins of office to the elected representatives. The caretaker prime minister is selected following a fairly elaborate process. It entails consultations between the government and the opposition (and possibly requires a nod of agreement from the elephant in or outside the room, but whose presence is all-pervading in Pakistan politics – the Army). Should any disagreement occur, the matter would go to a Parliamentary Committee, and should it persist, to the Election Commission, which would then make the final choice. All these must be concluded prior to the expiry of the government’s term, which, in this case, was 31 May 2018.

Happily, the process was completed at a fairly early stage. There were some initial stumbling blocks but none that could not be removed in several weeks of discussions. There is an advantage in dragging the decision to the final days, as it obviates unnecessary, according to the key players, public debate. In a gesture that displayed an amicable relationship between the PML-N and the opposition, comprising the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), the leader in the Parliament of the latter, Syed Khurshid Ahmed Shah announced the name of the chosen caretaker prime minister. He is a former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Nasir ul Mulk. Justice Nasir ul Mulk was not a front runner, at least not in the public eye, for the position.

Oftentimes in politics, as is well known, front runners do not make the finish line. This was a case in point. Nonetheless, his credentials are impressive. He is a well-regarded lawyer and judge, a barrister-at-law, trained in the United Kingdom, who comes from the once-turbulent Swat region, having undergone the baptism of fire in the courts of Pakistan's 'Wild West' (PK). The last point assumes a modicum of salience as it might smoothen any rough feathers of KP's most notable political actor, cricketer-turned-politician, Imran Khan. His Tehrik-e-Insaaf party rules the province. He could have otherwise reacted negatively to the amicability between his rivals, the PML-N and the PPP, at reaching this agreement. That would have been disconcerting. Indeed in the elections on 25 July 2018, it may very well be that Khan would mount the principal challenge to the governing PML-N.

Unsurprisingly, a question has arisen if Pakistan needs the caretaker system. This theoretical point might merit some discussion. As mentioned earlier, Bangladesh, the original proponent of the concept, has already opted out of it. This leaves Pakistan as the only practising democracy, albeit with its unevenness, that follows such a procedure. The Election Act of 2017 of Pakistan has unambiguously laid down the restrictive parameters of the operation of such a government. It can only attend to the day-to-day functions of governance. It cannot undertake any major political decision, enter into international contracts or agreements, or even make any significant public appointments. Even minor actions such as the transfer of officials would require the approval of the Election Commission. The latter, thus, formally becomes the key apparatus of state. So, why can the president not simply run the country with the assistance of the Election Commission and the permanent secretaries, and, of course, the ubiquitous Army which, in any case, would continue to play the major role it deems fit for itself? That would cut costs in an economy that can ill-afford unnecessary expenses. The temporary turnovers for governments in the Centre and provinces, with such brief timeframes and limited functions, can prove expensive. Also, severe limitations on the caretaker prime minister, if the system continues, could restrict the capacity of the government to act during a national or international crisis, and Pakistan has sadly been subject to many. In such circumstances, the president who enjoys a national mandate, would not feel constrained. Be that as it may, the system exists, and despite the short-comings, has worked to date as one of the few successful instruments of Pakistan's governance. It would be up to the Parliament, and one will be installed soon enough, to determine its redundancy, or otherwise.

As one draws closer to the polls in Pakistan, there are two elements that comprise major features of the backdrop. One is that there has been a significant reduction in the number of terrorist activities in recent times. The Army claims credit for it, citing the success of its efforts, including the Zarb-e-Azb military operations, launched in 2014. However, happy to take a back-seat in governance and enjoy perks that it feels its service deserves, the Army has, nonetheless, offered its nominal civilian masters a prescription, much as a doctor would provide an ailing patient. Popularly known as the ‘Bajwa Doctrine’ after the name of the current Army chief, General Qamar Bajwa, it constitutes an ‘institutional advice’ coming from the broad spectrum of the powerful armed forces. As to be expected, particularly in the Army’s ‘supervisory role’ in the governance of that country, the ‘Bajwa Doctrine’ goes beyond traditional security function to cover the broader policy spectrum, ranging from the economy to foreign policy. It urges the need to reshape policies with regard to coordinating development, eradicating corruption, peaceful coexistence with neighbours (India) and the world (the United States), deepening ties with allies (China) and border-fencing where necessary (Afghanistan). Indeed, it stresses the need for constitutional changes to create balance and order in society, rather than for consolidating and holding on to power (which can be read as a reprimand to the politicians for the tendency to legislate for political benefits).

The other element is the dire straits of the economy. Despite the fact that caretaker governments are meant to avoid entering into major foreign contacts, Nasir ul Mulk and his team may have to negotiate a major US\$1 billion to US\$2 billion (S\$1.35 billion to S\$2.7 billion) loan from China and its banks, to tide over severe and immediate balance of payment deficits. Already, China, Pakistan’s best and ‘all-weather’ friend with close political and military ties, has committed to fund the badly needed power and road infrastructure as part of the US\$57 billion (S\$76.7 billion) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor – a key cog in its vast Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, the dark macro-economic situation has caused the International Monetary Fund, to which either the caretaker government or the post-election one would have to turn to for a major bail-out, to downgrade Pakistan’s economic growth forecast to 4.7 per cent, far below the government’s target of 6.2 per cent. The caretakers may have to deal with the situation that Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves have plummeted to the dangerously low figure of a little over US\$10 billion (S\$13.46 billion), one-third of that

of Bangladesh by comparison, leaving it with two months of import cover (economists tend to believe that the ideal minimum should be for three months).

It is into this situation that the caretaker government and, thereafter, the post-election government in Pakistan will step. A prognosis of the future, even if it should entail an element of crystal-ball gazing, may be worthwhile. Khan, generally seen as the apple of the Army's eye, is sharpening his tools to take on the governing PML-N. His Tehrik-e-Insaaf already rules KP; he has contracted a marriage with and made inroads into southern Punjab; he is making efforts to consolidate in the mega-polis of Karachi; and he has supportive fellow-Pashtuns in Baluchistan. It is worthwhile mentioning that another figure, the charismatic young Manzoor Pashteen, increasingly viewed as KP's Che Guevera (the Cuban guerrilla revolutionary leader much admired by the youth in the 1960s), who leads the Pashtun Protection Movement, is acquiring rapid prominence. However, his electoral nationwide influence is still minimal and he is too virulently anti-army to obtain its requisite assenting nod. However, the PML-N, despite the judicial misfortunes of its national leader, Nawaz Sharif, is popular in Punjab. Even if Nawaz, and his brother, Shahbaz Sharif, are unacceptable to the Army, the latter may live with Abbasi, should they win at the hustings. The PPP's only chance is perhaps to forge a coalition with another party, should there be a hung Parliament, in which case Pakistan's President Mamnoon Hussain may look to and take lessons from an unlikely source, the state of Karnataka in India. In other words, he may intervene in a way to give his own party, the PML-N, a leg-up, by calling on it to form the government, thus encouraging others to align with the side of his choice. Politics, of Pakistan as elsewhere in South Asia, continues to remain a metaphor for uncertainty and unpredictability.

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