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Pakistan's Beleaguered Democratic Project

With Pakistan's general elections only days away (25 July 2018), the contradictions of the garrison state's structure of power are being laid increasingly bare. Serial election winners, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz and Pakistan People's Party, appear to be out of favour with the powerful military establishment, with three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif sent to jail last week after conviction by an accountability court. Cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf appears to be in line for a stint in power. A fresh spate of terrorist attacks, along with the mainstreaming of prominent religio-political organisations with militant links, have shed further doubt on how free and fair the polls will be.

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar¹

The sensational fall from grace of three-time Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif reached its apogee this past week with his immediate arrest and jailing after flying into the country from the United Kingdom after having been convicted of financial misconduct by an accountability court earlier in July 2018. With general elections set to take place on 25 July 2018, Sharif's arrest – alongside his outspoken daughter Maryam who many observers believe is her father's political heir – has confirmed that political stability in Pakistan will

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remain conspicuous by its absence despite the fact that the elections nominally mark a third successive handover of power between elected civilian regimes.

Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party won a convincing majority in the 2013 general elections, an outcome that appeared to have been facilitated by the country's omnipotent and politicised army. The Sharif family came to prominence during the military dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s. Zia appointed Sharif as the Chief Minister of Punjab in 1985. For much of its history, the PML-N has positioned itself on the right side of the establishment, but relations started to sour soon after the 2013 elections.

Cue cricketer-turned politician Imran Khan who has emerged as a major contender for power over the past few years after 15 years in the political wilderness following the launch of his Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) in 1996. The PTI emerged as the third largest party in parliament after the 2013 general elections and, in its immediate aftermath, became the lightning rod of anti-PML-N sentiment. Most notoriously, it held a four-month long sit-in in the federal capital Islamabad in 2014 to demand Sharif's immediate resignation from office under the pretext that he was involved in massive financial and other forms of corruption.

Khan claims to embody a new politics and depicts himself as the vanguard of a popular movement against the PML-N and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) which have been the only two parties to win country-wide elections since 1988. In fact, his rise is widely seen to be backed by the army, which has a long history of manipulating the political process even when it does not directly control the reins of government (as it has done for half of the country's existence). To be sure, the anti-corruption motif has a long history in Pakistan, having been invoked by generals, judges, media persons and pro-establishment politicians time and again to undermine elected regimes. Ironically, Sharif himself relentlessly employed similar rhetoric against the PPP government in power between 2008-13 while insisting that he – and his PML-N – alone could lead Pakistan into an era of peace and prosperity.

Khan's insistence that he is offering the Pakistani electorate a genuine alternative to status quo rings hollow in the face of massive defections from the PML-N and other parties into the PTI, ostensibly because many politicians want to be on the 'winning side' after the elections. In a moment of rare lucidity in early July 2018, Khan admitted that he could only win power

by spending big and winning over ‘electables’ to his side, confirming the entrenched interests that dominate Pakistan’s heavily militarised structure of power.²

A spate of terrorist attacks in the lead-up to election day has raised further suspicions about how free and fair the polls will be. One attack on an election rally in the Mastung district of Balochistan led to at least 150 deaths. Many parties have exclaimed the impossibility of campaigning freely in such an environment, while there is also clamour about the participation in the polls of a number of religio-political organisations with established militant links.³ It is under this backdrop that observers and stakeholders alike are making noise about the establishment’s perceived tilt towards the PTI.

In sum, Pakistan’s garrison state inheritance continues to cast a shadow over its fledgling democracy. Khan’s desire to become the prime minister betrays the fact that virtually no prime minister in the country’s history has managed to establish authority over the army and exercise meaningful autonomy in the making of state policy, particularly vis-à-vis Pakistan’s relations with its neighbours and the patronage of right-wing militant groups.

The military’s larger-than-life role in the polity was institutionalised soon after the country’s inception, with its self-anointed status as the ‘guardian of Pakistan’s ideological frontiers’ crucial in this regard. In recent decades, however, its ever-expanding economic interests have deepened its political stakes considerably. Military-run companies, housing schemes and universities are now a prominent feature of Pakistan’s political economy and would appear to have given the establishment yet more reason to assert itself as the country’s final arbiter of power.

Hence, even a party like the PML-N, which was conceived as a child of military dictatorship, has been unable to sustain a working compromise with the establishment. It remains to be seen whether the PTI can become an exception to the rule. However, with all indicators suggesting a divided parliament in the aftermath of 25 July 2018, the chances are that the

² “You can’t win without electables and money: Imran”, Atika Rehman, *DAWN*, 5 July 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1418060>. Accessed on 15 July 2018.

³ “Senators concerned over ‘mainstreaming’ of banned organisations”, Amir Wasim, *DAWN*, 17 July 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1420578>. Accessed on 16 July 2018.

weak coalition government expected will not even attempt to redress the historically lopsided civil-military power equation.

The parliament also has to contend with a hyper-activist superior judiciary, which has actually been the face of a process of selective accountability throughout the current phase of elected rule, which began with the ouster of General Pervez Musharraf in 2008. It was the Supreme Court that disqualified Sharif from elected office in July 2017, the second time in five years that a sitting prime minister was sent packing by the country's top court (Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani of the PPP was removed from office by a similar judgment in June 2012). The superior judiciary has directly supplemented the behind-the-scenes maneuvering of the military establishment, thus further undermining the long-term struggle to establish popular sovereignty.

With mainstream political forces unable and/or unwilling to take on the historical task of democratisation of state and society, some observers have vested their hopes for political change in the growing Chinese footprint in Pakistan. The much-hyped US\$54 billion (S\$73.6 billion) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor has been hailed as a game-changer in mainstream political and intellectual circles, and the Chinese government's insistence that Pakistani authorities provide safety guarantees for Chinese investments has led some to believe that the establishment will be compelled to clamp down extensively on right-wing militant groups. However, the 'mainstreaming' of militants in the elections would appear to have put paid to this wishful thinking. Indeed, China's interests do not include buttressing Pakistan's stuttering democratic project, and it is much more likely to replicate the United States model of engagement which has historically helped cement the power of the military to the detriment of democracy and social peace more generally.

In the final analysis, only a genuine political alternative to the status quo can uncompromisingly identify the long-standing contradictions of Pakistani state and society, and front a transformative project to bring together a society divided along ethnic, sectarian and class lines. The confrontation between Sharif and the establishment simply confirms that space for the emergence of such a political alternative definitively exists, even if the PML-N is a tainted force that will not itself be the harbinger of change.

Pakistan's population is extremely young, with approximately 65 per cent of the country's 210 million under the age of 25, and its exposure to the new information technologies is certainly changing the terms of political debate in the country. This youthful population will likely soon be watching yet another elected government fall foul of the powers-that-be, unequipped to undertake structural reforms, without which meaningful change is impossible. How the otherwise disaffected mass of people and the principled democratic forces that seek to mobilise them respond will go a long way in determining the direction of the polity in years to come.

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