

ISAS Brief

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Pakistan in Turmoil: Some Crystal Ball-gazing on its Future

Pakistan was recently paralysed for several weeks by blockades on a main crossing leading to the capital Islamabad. Trouble started when Pakistan's Law Minister Zahid Hamid purportedly made the omission of the reference to Muhammad being the last Messenger in Islam. Believing that his action was deliberate and was aimed at appeasing the minority Ahmedi sect, the Islamist political party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, took to the streets. While the blockades have ended, they have left bold imprints on the future of Pakistan's complex politics. The essay seeks to analyse some of the implications of the blockades.

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Even before the Pakistani nation fully recovered from the throes of the Panama Papers leak (which disclosed the illegal offshore accounts of many of Pakistan's current civilian rulers), that witnessed the ousting of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and threw the country into a political turmoil from which it seemed to be extricating itself slowly and painfully, this nuclear-armed nation appears once again to be on the brink of a political abyss. This time, Pakistan was posed even greater dangers to polity and politics.

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It began with initially a small group of extremist clerics opposing what they saw as a piece of legislation designed to challenge, however subtly, the concept of *Khatam-e-Nabuwat*, the idea that the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, was the last Messenger of God. The detractors, who form an Islamist political party, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, were led by Khadim Hussain Rizvi, a firebrand critic of any accommodation with the Ahmedi sect which has been declared non-Muslim in Pakistan for espousing the belief that Mirza Ghulam Ahmed was a prophet in his own right. His followers began blocking roads in the first week of November 2017 as a part of their *dharna* or sit-in, leading to the capital Islamabad, in protest against the legislation and its initiator, Law Minister Zahid Hamid. Hamid was naturally only acting on the government's behalf. His resignation was one of the principal demands of the protestors and he, ultimately, became the proverbial sacrificial lamb.

After weeks of inaction by the government, the Courts ordered the clearance of the protesters in three days. The government called the military for assistance, but chary of confronting the people among which it deemed itself popular, the Army dithered. In what, in many situations, would be seen as 'mutiny', the Army Chief instead lectured the government on the need to use the police more optimally. The attempts of the government bereft of military support to clear the streets ended in futility and the turmoil rapidly spread across multiple urban areas. A totally disempowered Minister of Interior, Ahsan Iqbal, was given only 15 minutes to appear before the Court with a 'contempt' notice slapped on him. Hours earlier, Hamid, was forced to sign, reaffirming eternal allegiance to, and fervent love for, the Prophet, whose finality of divine mission he underscored as being beyond a shadow of doubt.

Sympathisers of the original protesters, before long, swelled in great numbers and very nearly brought Pakistan to a standstill. Educational institutions were closed down and the private electronic media taken off-air. The casualty figures rose and, even if exact numbers were difficult to ascertain, it was believed that there were seven dead and over two hundred injured. The cabinet of the ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), while still resisting resignation as a whole, was being sliced away with the gradual elimination of several key ministers, including its leader, Nawaz Sharif. The Acting Prime Minister, Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, did not, most certainly, bargain in having to confront such a situation when he assumed office some months ago, then confident of leading his party to victory in the elections scheduled for next year. Now, the elections seem closer, and victory seems drifting further away.

This became all the more apparent when, following a violent weekend, a deal between the protesters and the government was clinched, ending the *dharna*. However, what robbed the Abbasi government of glory was the fact that the agreement which ended the blockade was brokered by the Army, and its chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa. Initially, when the Army was called upon to intervene, Bajwa reportedly told Abbasi that the Army could not use force against its own people. Thereafter, he negotiated the understanding between the protesters and the government by securing the removal of the Law Minister and obtaining a clemency for the arrested demonstrators. Thus, Bajwa was able to cut the Gordian knot of the impasse in a way that the Army came out smelling like roses and the civilian government utterly humiliated. Indeed, the leader of the violent movement, Rizvi proclaimed the Army and its chief as ‘saviours’.

The whole crisis has great implications for Pakistan’s political future. It is clear that, in the country, the Chief of Army Staff is in command, not just of the troops, but virtually also of the nation. The civilian government has come out as being totally delinked from governance. The Army’s popularity, already high, has soared even further. In Pakistan, the Army is already seen as being a mirror-image of the masses, as representatives of the common man and professionals as opposed to the feudal lords and rich commercial classes that dominate the political parties. They are seen as riddled with corruption as evidenced in the leakages of the Panama Leaks and now the Paradise papers.

However, this does not mean the Army will assume direct power any time soon unless compelled by extreme circumstances. It will certainly wield power from the background. It is noteworthy that, since the days of the homespun religion-prone Prime Minister, General Zia-ul-Haq, the Army is no longer the Kemalist force that was previously led by Sandhurst-trained commanders like Field Marshal Ayub Khan. It is far more religiously inclined today. Still, the Army remains almost the last bulwark against total extremism in Pakistan. While it has tolerated the Mullahs to an extent, it has also conducted fierce anti-terrorist operations in the country, for example, *Zarbe-e-Azab* under the previous Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif. Since a direct takeover may provoke international opprobrium, and an Army that is so closely associated with the United Nations peace-keeping operations and is depended on external support in terms of procurements, it is likely that Bajwa will shun a formal role as leader.

However, there is unlikely to be a civilian dispensation without its blessing and that of the judiciary – the two often combine to bring down the civilian rulers a peg or two when the latter tend to become too assertive. Thus, a form of political power sharing in Pakistan will remain a categorical imperative. This could lead to the emergence of a diluted but operational democracy, where extremism can possibly be controlled, the economy given a fillip and the public permitted to air views through a free private and social media. This could be the best of a bad bargain on a matrix of limited options.

As of now, the government of PML(N) has been bloodied, almost fatally. The civilian political figure that will tend to gain most is perhaps the mercurial ex-cricketer, Imran Khan. Despite his Oxford background, past British marital connections and excellence in the intensely English sport of cricket, he is seen as acceptable to many on the religious right, mostly due to his often carefully articulated anti-United States and Western stance. He is also said to be liked by the military. The constellation of forces appears to be lining up in his favour. However, he must win the next elections. Bookies had earlier written him off. Given the sad state of contemporary governance, this is no longer so. Nonetheless, politics in Pakistan is fraught with uncertainties just as in a game of cricket and Khan – the great cricketing star of Pakistan – must surely be aware of that!

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