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Pakistan's Political Landscape: Potential for Change and Lessons for the Muslim World

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A unanimous verdict issued on 28 July 2017 by a five-member bench of Pakistan's Supreme Court ordered Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to vacate his seat in the National Assembly. Without being a member of the National Assembly, he could not continue to serve as prime minister. The verdict was based on the findings of a six-member Joint Investigation Team (JIT) that was established by the court to look into the financial dealings of the prime minister and his children – two sons and a daughter. The JIT uncovered a large number of dealings that seem to defy the Pakistani law. While referring these findings to the National Accountability Bureau for action, the court used a relatively minor offence to remove the prime minister from his position. Why did the court act the way it did and what be the consequences of its action? This paper attempts an answer to this and a number of related questions.

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Introduction

Now that things have settled down a bit with the 1 August 2017 swearing-in of a new prime minister in Pakistan, it may be timely to ask and possibly answer a few questions. The answers will be pertinent not only for Pakistan's political future, but will also have considerable meaning for the development of regionalism in South Asia and the delayed political modernisation of the large Muslim world. With the move by the Supreme Court, has Pakistan gone back to political instability that was the main feature of most of its past? The Supreme Court's decision to unseat a prime minister who had a comfortable majority in the National Assembly was an extraordinary intervention by the judiciary in an area of legislative responsibility. Are there lessons to be learnt by the politically underdeveloped Muslim world? How should the West – the United States (US) in particular – react to the rapidly unfolding events in Pakistan? Finally, what was the influence of the country's immediate neighbourhood in it taking the direction on which it now seems embarked?

Path Dependence: Pakistan's Political Past

One of the most repeated explanations of the circumstances that have led to Pakistan's plunge into yet another political crisis is that the "establishment" has struck once again. The use of the nomenclature "establishment" in Pakistan usually implies the military. In the country's rich and tortuous history, the men in uniform have moved on four occasions – 1958, 1969, 1977 and 1988 – to snatch the reins of the government from the hands of civilian leadership. This they did whenever they felt that things were not moving in the direction in which they wanted the country to go. Even when the military did not assume control of the administration, it kept a close watch on the behaviour of the civilians in charge of public affairs. That this may be happening again belongs to what economists call the "path dependence" way of thinking according to which decisions for any given circumstance is confined to the actions taken in the past even though the circumstances may have changed. "Most generally, path dependence means that where we go next depends not only where we are now, but also where we have been before."² This approach to speculate what may happen in the future, given Pakistan's current political crisis, is being deployed to use the past to tell the future. On at least four previous occasions, the military stepped in to "save Pakistan from

² S Liebowitz and Stephen Margolis, *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics*, Volume I, p 985.

collapse.”³ According to Salman Masood of *The New York Times* who wrote the front-page story for his newspaper on the ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the Supreme Court’s action “adds to a grim and long list of civilian governments cut short in Pakistan, including two of [Nawaz Sharif’s] own previous terms as prime minister. And it will further roil the country’s tumultuous political balance, as his rivals vie to exploit his fall.”⁴ This is consistent with the “path dependence” line of thinking. The military seems poised to act again. “The Pakistani military has seldom been able to wield as potent a mix of policy control and popular acclaim as it does now”, continues Masood. “The fragile democratic system in this nuclear-armed nation of almost 200 million people again appears to be on shaky ground.”⁵ However, this paper offers a view of what may happen in the future.

The paper will suggest that Pakistan’s political system has been evolving gradually in a way that is not feasible for the military to once again become a disruptive force. The current circumstances are very different from the past. A number of developments have come together that will likely ensure Pakistan’s evolution towards a liberal democratic order. If that were to happen, Pakistan, along with Bangladesh, will be the only two countries in the Islamic world of 1.6 billion who would have used a representative form of governance to serve their people. That the two countries are in South Asia, located on either side of India which, in many respects, is the region’s anchor, has helped. India, by developing a reasonably inclusive political and economic system, has provided its neighbours with a model they could and should follow.

Some historical recall would help to highlight the trends one notices in Pakistan’s political development. What Pakistan is today dates back not to August 1947 when the country was born in its original form. It dates back to December 1971, when the eastern wing, following a bloody civil war, became the independent state of Bangladesh. From January 1972 to July 1977, Pakistan was governed as a parliamentary democracy with the executive authority resting in the hands of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, an elected and charismatic prime minister. However, Bhutto did not manage well the political process and charges of massive rigging in the elections of 1977 resulted in the return of the military. Bhutto was removed and

³ This belief also ran strongly in former Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf’s book, *In the Line of Fire: A Memoir*, Simon & Schuster, London, 25 September 2006.

⁴ “Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan’s Prime Minister, is Toppled by Corruption Case”, Salman Masood, *The New York Times*, 28 July 2017.

⁵ “Graft case forces out Pakistani premier, roiling fragile system”, Salman Masood, *The New York Times*, 29 July 2017.

ultimately executed and a general, Zia-ul-Haq, came to power. Pakistan then was 30 years old and it was the third time that the powerful military had taken advantage of a minor political convulsion and assumed total power. Once it was in power, it was reluctant to go back to the barracks.

General Zia-ul-Haq, the new man in uniform, governed for more than 11 years before being killed in an air accident in August 1988. His death led to the election of a civilian prime minister – Benazir Bhutto, the daughter of the slain former prime minister – that lasted for a couple of years before being dismissed on charges of corruption and mismanagement. The power to do so was given to the president through an amendment in the constitution by the military ruler.

From 1988 to 1999, two prime ministers (Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif), were twice in power. On both occasions, Bhutto was dismissed by the president, the second time by a person from her political party. Nawaz Sharif was dismissed once but removed by the military the second time around. The coup d'état against him brought back military rule that lasted for eight years. General/President Pervez Musharraf resigned under pressure from the civil society in 2008 and elections were held that brought Asif Zardari, the widower of assassinated Benazir Bhutto, to power as the head of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). However, ignoring the constitutional requirement, Zardari did not transfer executive authority to Yousuf Raza Gillani, his elected prime minister. The president was the real ruler and the two prime ministers who served under him took orders from the presidency. Zardari's five years effectively extended the presidential form of government in the country.

Since 1972, the year of Pakistan's second birth, the country was under presidential rule for 24 years. It functioned as a parliamentary democracy for only 21 years, five of them under Nawaz Sharif when he returned to power in 2013, following an election in which his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) [PML(N)] trounced Bhutto's and Zardari's PPP.

During the 45-year period since 1972, 15 prime ministers have walked the political space. It was only in 2013 that parliamentary democracy returned to Pakistan in full force. Even though Nawaz Sharif was removed by judicial action, there is little doubt that a confluence of forces will keep this system of governance in place. An independent judiciary, a free press, an active civil society, and a chastened military will ensure that the system is not disturbed.

What Pakistan faces today is a deeper crisis than those that tempted the military to take hold the reins of power. That it has stayed in the background at this time is a sign of progress. There are, however, some dissenting voices. For one, Pervez Musharraf maintains that under the rule of the military, Pakistan prospered and won the respect of the world. The opposite happened under the civilians. These assertions were made in an interview to BBC Urdu that the newspaper *DAWN*, in an editorial, called shocking and shameful.⁶

Run up to the 2018 Election

According to the announced plans, Shahbaz Sharif, chief minister of Punjab, will contest the seat made vacant by the disqualification of his brother Nawaz Sharif and after winning the by-election will head to Islamabad and become the prime minister. The seat is in Raiwind, a suburb of Lahore, where the older Sharif has built a palace-like structure where he and his extended family reside. However, a different scenario may be unfolding. As reported by *DAWN*'s Zulqernain Tahir in the newspaper's issue of 6 August 2017, family politics may prevent the Punjab Chief Minister from going to Islamabad. His brother may want to keep the top job in his immediate family.

However, there are other reasons why the younger brother may be kept in Lahore. The party swept the 2013 polls, receiving a significant proportion of the support for the rival PPP. In an earlier work, the author had estimated that the PPP lost its support by 60 to 40 percent respectively to the PML(N) and Imran Khan's Tehrike-Insaf Party.⁷ While the youth voted overwhelmingly for the former cricket hero, the PML picked up the votes of those who were impressed by the development work carried out by Shahbaz Sharif when he was the province's chief minister. Pulling him out of the Punjab capital may not be politically advantageous since some of large projects Shahbaz Sharif has launched – some with the help of the Chinese – may not be implemented with the enthusiasm the chief minister is able to bring to his work. It would be perhaps advantageous for the PML(N), the governing party, still headed by Nawaz Sharif, to keep Shahbaz Sharif in power in Punjab and deliver what the party has promised to its various constituencies. Among these, the most important

⁶ "Musharraf's rantings," *DAWN* (Editorial), 5 August 2017.

⁷ "Pakistan goes to Polls: Imran Khan's Tumble and the Youth Surge", Shahid Javed Burki, ISAS Brief No 22, 8 May 2013.

commitment was to reduce electricity brown-outs that had hurt the economy and caused enormous discomfort to the people. That 2017 has turned out to be the hottest year on record in Punjab exacerbated the situation and the frequent cuts in supply have brought misery to a large number of people.

There is also an urgent need to improve urban infrastructure. Pakistan, with a six per cent rate of urbanisation, is seeing an explosion in city size and there is demand to improve urban transport, drinking water supply and sanitation, and solid-waste collection. The urban demand for quality education and health services also needs to be satisfied. The Shahbaz Sharif provincial administration is fully engaged in all these areas and tangible improvements are expected to be made by the time the electorate returns to the polls. It would, therefore, make political sense to keep the younger Sharif in place in the province he has governed for almost a decade and let the federal government be managed by Shahid Khaqan Abbasi who is well educated and trained, and is known to be a good manager. He will also be in a position to support the activities being managed by Shahbaz Sharif which will help his party to win votes in Punjab, the country's largest province.

Implications for the Muslim World

An important reason for the lack of social stability in most Muslim countries is the absence of open, inclusive and representative political orders. Demographically, most of the Muslim world is on a knife's edge, with the median age of only 25 years. This means that, of the total Muslim population of 1.6 billion, 800 million people are below that age. In the large cities such as Cairo, Damascus, Dhaka, Karachi and Lahore, the youth account for as much as three-fourth of the total population. This large cohort wants representative and inclusive systems; not those that are limited and authoritarian. It was their alienation from the governing systems that launched the Arab Spring of 2011 that toppled long-enduring authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Libya and Yemen, and launched a highly destructive civil war in Syria. The establishment fought back in Egypt and General Fatah al-Sisi stepped in after removing the elected government of President Muhammad Morsi. The Sisi government has the full support of Washington. The current American approach of supporting authoritarian

political systems such as that in Egypt or the closed monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula may produce friendly regimes but, over time, they will bring instability and social violence.

Pakistan could serve as an example other Muslim countries could follow. Together with Bangladesh, it has been influenced by the success of the Indian political experience where a reasonably inclusive system has won political peace and economic progress now for almost 70 years.

The View from Washington

“In most countries where the US has national security interests, the toppling of a prime minister would prompt hurried meetings in Washington and a concern over how change in government will affect American in the region,” wrote Helene Cooper of *The New York Times*. “But not so with Pakistan.”⁸ Washington was convinced that the policy with respect to the US and Afghanistan was made by the military with not much input by the civilian authorities. As such, Nawaz Sharif’s departure from the prime minister’s residence was not consequential. Even with a new prime minister now in place, relations between the two countries that had markedly deteriorated in recent years will continue to travel down the slippery slope on which it had been set during the years President Barack Obama was the resident of the White House.

General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the Chief of the Army Staff, was well known to the Americans. A few days before Nawaz Sharif was sent home, the Army Chief met with General John W Nicholson, the American commander of his country’s forces in Afghanistan, and David Hale, the American Ambassador. The Pakistanis were upset at the American decision to hold back US\$50 million (US\$68 million) owed to Islamabad for the logistics help it had provided to the US’ ongoing effort in Afghanistan. This pot of money went under the title of Coalition Support Fund (CSF) to signify that the money was not a part of the American aid effort in Pakistan. It was to pay Islamabad for the services it had provided. To hold back any flow from the CSF constituted a breach of contract on the part of the US government.⁹

⁸ “Post Sharif, US strategy in Pakistan is likely stable”, Helene Cooper, *The New York Times*, 29 July 2017.

⁹ Shahid Javed Burki and Shirin Tahir-Kheli., *Pakistan Today: The Case for US-Pakistan Relations*, Foreign Policy Institute, Washington, 2016.

To explain why that action was being taken, the State Department noted in a statement that Islamabad had “failed to take significant action” to prevent militant groups, in particular the Haqqanis, who were hurting Afghanistan, from using their sanctuaries in Pakistan. The Pakistani military maintained that the Haqqanis had been driven out of North Waziristan following the launch and successful completion of the army operation called Zarb-e-Azb.

Following his meeting with the American officials, General Bajwa’s office issued a statement complaining that Pakistan was being unfairly criticised for chaos in Afghanistan, citing the “blame game perpetrated by some quarters in Afghanistan and US to undermine Pakistan’s contributions towards war on terror.” General Bajwa’s office went on to say it was “not a coincidence that this theme is being played at a time when policy review is being undertaken in the US” a reference to the Afghanistan strategy that was stalled at the White House.¹⁰

Conclusion

Over time, Bangladesh and Pakistan have moved towards the establishment of representative and reasonably inclusive political systems. Why have they succeeded while most other countries in the western part of the Muslim world seem not to be moving along the same trajectory? This geographic stretch includes the countries in between Morocco and Bangladesh. More than a billion Muslims live in South Asia, the area to which these two nations of relative political success belong.

The South Asian nations are launched in the direction that, it appears, would bring in political modernisation and with it sustained economic progress. As the social scientists Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have pointed out in their important book, *Why Nations Fail*, political and economic progress is intertwined.¹¹ Why these countries are succeeding while other Muslim nations are failing is a question for serious academic and policy research. The author believes that proximity to India has served as an example prompting opinion-makers to push for developments that would replicate what the historian Sunil Khilnani has called the

¹⁰ “Sharif’s Resignation Comes as U.S. Debates How to Pressure Pakistan on Terrorism”, Helene Cooper, *The New York Times*, 28 July 2017.

¹¹ Acemoglu, Daron and James, A Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York, Crown Business, 2013.

“idea of India” in a book of that title.¹² The fact that the three countries share a common past has certainly helped. “Path dependence” is working in this case as well.

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¹² Sunil, Khilnani, Sunil. *The Idea of India*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.