

ISAS Brief

No. 342 – 2 September 2014

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Pakistan's Democracy Dilemma

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Democracy gets established only with practice. If any proof is needed for this proposition, Pakistan's leaders and its people need to look just across the border – at India. India was born with a considerably more political maturity than was the case with its sibling, Pakistan. It had a well-developed political party that had not only fought for independence but had also defined what an independent India would look like. Unlike the Congress Party, Pakistan's Muslim League was a one-issue party – the establishment of an independent state for the Muslim community of British India. Once a part of that dream was realised, the party drifted and was lost in the political wilderness. India, on other hand, moved quickly to establish a political order. It appeared, in May 2013 – when the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) won a convincing victory in the elections and assumed the reins of power from the rival Pakistan People's Party that was allowed to complete its full five-year term – Pakistan too was headed towards political stability. But that has not been the case so far.

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On 31 August 2014, after two weeks of protests by two groups with considerable backing from some segments of the population, there was violence in the streets of Islamabad. Tired of waiting, the two rebel-leaders, Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, ordered their supporters to storm the parliament building and march towards the residence of the prime minister. This was the second red line to be crossed in two weeks. The first one was soon after the throng of Khan/Qadri supporters arrived from Lahore. The government had said that the protesters would not be allowed into the “red zone” defined as the area that housed important government buildings and diplomatic quarters. Changing its mind, the government allowed the protesters to camp outside the parliament compound. From there, using improvised shipping containers as the stage, they continued to escalate their demands. There was one common element in the two sets of demands: resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The immaturity of the developing political order was on display again. Once again a reference to the Indian example would help.

India has also known popular resentment against the ruling establishment. Most recently it surfaced in the form of a campaign launched by Anna Hazare, the anti-corruption activist. He too used the *dharna* technique perfected by Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian independence movement. Hazare and his supporters camped out in a public square and the activist resorted to a fast-unto-death, to press his demands as Gandhi had done during the struggle for independence. His main demand was to have the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the parliament, pass a legislation aimed at strengthening the existing accountability system. He did not ask for the resignation of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Hazare respected the constitution and stayed within the limits prescribed by the functioning political order.

Arvind Kejriwal, another anti-corruption activist, went a step further and founded a new political party to reform the system from within. His Aam Aadmi Party stayed within institutional boundary by contesting in both state and national elections. These protests strengthened the Indian political system, not weakened it. Respect for the existing rules of the game and exercise of patience are the main elements in the Indian way. Both are missing in Pakistan at this time.

Nawaz Sharif’s massive electoral triumph created the impression that Pakistan may finally be setting on the road to sustainable political development. Three moves had to be made to realise this long-held ambition. One, military’s power had to be constrained by bringing it

under the control of the civilian authority. Two, Islamabad had to loosen its control over governance by allowing more space to the provinces. Three, the rise of Islamic extremism had to be dealt with by sending a clear message to the various radical groups that they had to operate within the system to bring about change and not use violence as the preferred form of political expression. There is a developing consensus in the country that the Sharif government has failed in the first endeavour while partially succeeding in the other two. Even if he had not been pressed by Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to give a role to the military in governance, he had adopted a course of action that was destined to bring the army in, overtly or covertly.

Not temperamentally accustomed to sharing power, Sharif interpreted his large electoral triumph as a mandate to monopolise political power by reining in the military. The method adopted had an effect opposed to what was intended. Partly to settle a personal score and partly to give a clear message to the military that the constitution demanded its complete obedience to the civilian administration, the prime minister aggressively pursued a treason case against General/President Pervez Musharraf. While the prime minister could not cite the 1999 coup against him by the General, since that particular move had received the *post facto* approval of the Supreme Court, the case for treason was built on the military president's action taken on 3 November 2007. On that day the president put the country under a state of emergency. General Musharraf argued then that the power to do that was available to him as the Chief of Army Staff and used it to fire a number of Supreme Court and Provincial High Court judges. That act antagonised the judiciary, which was not forgiving when the Sharif Government moved the treason case against the former president. Not pleased with the public humiliation of a former chief of army staff, the military wanted the prime minister to back-track. It is believed that an agreement was reached under which, the General after being formally indicted by the court for treason, would be allowed to leave the country and stay out in exile. The prime minister reneged on the promise.

The second opportunity came with the attempted assassination on a busy Karachi street of Hamid Mir, a popular TV anchorperson. The journalist openly accused the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI, of orchestrating the attack. There was open conflict between Geo, Pakistan's most popular private TV channel and the ISI. The prime minister seemed to have sided with the media.

The struggle against the rise of extremist Islam anchored in the country's tribal belt was the third area of contention involving the army command and the prime minister. The military wanted to move against the extremists operating out of the safe-haven they had created in the tribal agency of North Waziristan. The prime minister preferred to first negotiate, losing precious time when the mountain passes in the area were closed by snow. It was only five months later that the military was allowed to launch the *Zarb-i-Azb* operation against the terrorists.

The responsibility for the violence that erupted on the last day of August 2014 can be evenly distributed among the various politicians. Imran Khan kept changing his mind about the fairness of the May 2013 election in which his party, coming from nowhere, had won the second largest number of votes, 16.9 percent against the 32.8 percent by Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League. Mildly protesting the fairness of the election, he had in the first place accepted the overall verdict and he took his seat in the National Assembly and accepted the invitation of the prime minister to have his party form the government in the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. But over time he became impatient with the "wait for your turn" verdict given by the electorate. His demands kept on increasing developing into a six-point programme which included the resignation of the prime minister, a position that could not possibly be accepted by a comfortably elected prime minister.

Did the prime minister show political maturity as the situation escalated in Islamabad? Not necessarily so, was the answer provided by an editorial that appeared in the 31 August issue of the respected newspaper *Dawn*. "Last evening the political crisis that has captivated this country for three weeks boiled over", wrote the paper. It then went on to report the details of the deal that was reached, with the military facilitating it. Under this deal, the prime minister would go on a month-long vacation, with a senior member of his government running the administration and with the Supreme Court-led judicial commission investigating the allegations of fraud in the elections. If the allegations were to be proven valid, the National Assembly would be dissolved and fresh elections held. However, a few hours after the deal was supposedly reached, the prime minister spoke scornfully about the protesters and their numerical strength in Islamabad. The agitating leaders reacted by ordering their followers to cross the second redline, fully expecting that to result in violence. "This was a political crisis that was mishandled from the outset", continued *Dawn's* editorial. "Too much confidence, too much scorn, too much arrogance ... For five years from 2008 to 2013, Mr. Sharif said and

did the right things. The democratic project had apparently – and thankfully – become larger than Mr. Sharif’s whims. But one year into his term, in his handling of the forces determined to undo the project, Mr. Sharif has proved to be a leader very much out of his depth”.² The development of a durable political order has once again got stalled.

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² *Dawn*, editorial, “A disastrous turn of events”, 31 August 2014, p. 8.