

ISAS Brief

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People, Power, and Politics - Confrontation Pakistan Style

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On 14 July 1789 when the French Prison Bastille was stormed by a mob, the incident was reported to the imperious and naïve monarch Louis XVI by a courtier. “What, a revolt?” Louis exclaimed in apparent disbelief. “No, Sire, a revolution” was the quiet response from the courtier, a brutal but correct prediction. When recently crowds supporting the mercurial Imran Khan and the enigmatic Tahirul Qadri occupied the official television station in Islamabad, in furtherance of their demand for the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, one could be forgiven for drawing parallels with that situation in France. But in reality, are there any?

Perhaps it is still too soon to tell. Imran, Qadri and their supporters want Nawaz to go. For weeks now they have paralysed the capital by their control of the streets and ceaseless demonstrations in show of their strength. They accuse Nawaz of rigging the elections that put him in power in May 2013. Nawaz is adamant that he will stay. Under normal democratic circumstances the question to ask would be, what do the people want? But Pakistan’s politics

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has its unique features. What is really in everyone's mind in Pakistan – and beyond – is what does the Army want? At the time of writing, the Army is pondering. Its decision now will be critical to Pakistan's future.

Just over a year ago, Nawaz seemed invincible. He had won a landslide victory in polls. He had made a series of credible promises to lift the economy. He had sent in troops to fight the Taliban in North Waziristan (though some say his heart was not in it, and that decision was forced upon him by the Army). He had put the former dictator General Pervez Musharraf behind bars. He had sought to ease relations with India by responding to Narendra Modi's invitation to be present at his inaugural. But all those actions perceived as positive then, appear now to be his undoing. He was unable to deliver on his promises on the economy. His actions on the Taliban seemed too little, and were too late. Taking on Musharraf was like confronting the tiger with a toy-gun. Going to Delhi was easily portrayed by the detractors as being akin to Chamberlain's trip to Munich (appeasement of the enemy without reciprocation). Consequently the cricketing hero Imran, in a cricket-mad country, and the Sufi cleric Qadri, in a nation that leans towards syncretic Islam, according to some with a nudge and a wink from the army, decided it was time for Nawaz to go. They believe they have wounded and weakened him sufficiently. Now they want to move in for the kill.

But that may be a tad too hasty. The ball is in the Army's court. The military was formally requested to mediate between the government and the protesters. Such a phenomenon would be inconceivable where pluralist values preponderate. People there did not worry about it too much though. Experience has taught Pakistanis to be realistic. The Army Chief, Raheel Sharif, has met the Prime Minister. Some say he had asked his nominal political master to resign. Others say that was not the case, though the contents of the conversation are not all public, and whether he had 'popped the question' or not, the general could most certainly have done it without anyone batting an eyelid. That may suit the Army just fine.

Meanwhile, Nawaz gathered the houses of parliament in Islamabad to underscore their support for him. This they have dutifully done. But that was neither fish, flesh, fowl nor good red herring, as most legislators are his supporters anyway. Indeed it is the right of some of them to be there, i.e. the electoral process that is being challenged. Imran's and Qadri's chosen method of deposing Nawaz is *not* through a vote of no-confidence in the parliament.

If the Army allows Nawaz to continue, it will be at a price. Army would perhaps want control of foreign policy, particularly with regard to the US, India, and Afghanistan. Musharraf would have to be let off. The Taliban would have to be tackled the Army way. There would not be left for the Prime Minister to do, and he would have ample time to do what little functions remained. No democratic leader worth his salt could want to hold office under such terms. Nawaz may be better off dissolving the Parliament and calling fresh elections. But that too, would be a Hobson's choice. If he wins, the same politics may repeat. But the current impasse is quite unsustainable. Something has got to give, and time is fast running out before complete chaos engulfs that nation.

It is said, over two millennia ago, Alexander the Great, when he was at the gates of current-day Pakistan, observed to his general Seleucus that he was wary of engaging such inscrutable opponents from what appeared to him to be a 'weird land'. Sagacity was said to be one of Alexander's strong points.

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