

# ISAS Insights

No. 152 – 16 January 2012

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## Panic in Pakistan: The Makings of a Meltdown?

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### Abstract

*Pakistan today is in the throes of a massive political impasse. There is a divisive dichotomy that places the Supreme Court and the Army on one side, and the civil government and the Parliament on the other. But all players have eschewed any unconstitutional cutting of the Gordian knot. This piece argues that the resolution to the apparently intractable conflict probably lies in early elections, consented to by all parties, and examines, briefly, the future prospects in that context, of the rising star in the Pakistani political firmament, Imran Khan.*

### Introduction

Pakistan is careening from crisis to chaos at a bewildering pace over the past week or so. This has surprised even those who are used to chronic instability in that country. This has also been arousing justifiable concern among the international community.

Pakistan is a major global actor with 180 million people, with over 700,000 in arms that render its conventional military forces one of the largest in existence, possessing one of the fastest-growing nuclear arsenals in the world. It is ridden with internecine strife, bloody insurgencies, and extremist fundamentalist beliefs. At the same time it enjoys vast intellectual and economic potentials.

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Geographically it is most strategically located bordering India, China, Afghanistan and Iran. It is friendly to some and inimical to others, both friendship and animosity running deep. Its role in the world in contemporary times is defined by its relationship with the sole superpower, the United States, which is one of supremely inscrutable love-hate pattern. Pakistan today may often appear to defy rational analysis, but one must take it into account because it is there. The worry that looks us in the face today, however, is that we may be seeing in the happenings there today the makings of a meltdown. If so, what is there to be done?

### **The Crisis Build-Up**

The crisis build-up was slow, but inexorable. In July 2010 almost the entire country was inundated by a flood of near-biblical proportions. The Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP)-led coalition headed by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani failed to secure public confidence in addressing the issue. Indeed, Zardari's ill-advised foreign trip at that time, which reportedly included a visit to a family-owned chateau in France, was much criticised.

Terrorist attacks continued to bleed Pakistan, while groups of them actually were said to be receiving support from the Army's all-powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in shoring up a possible friendly succession to the Karzai regime in Afghanistan, particularly in the aftermath of the announced United States (US) withdrawal in 2014.

Meanwhile Pakistan's economy began to flounder and growth plummeted to merely 2.4 per cent, in dismal contrast to the 7-8 per cent of its arch rival India! The Pakistanis, whose country was once seen as the centre of the 'Asian Drama', found this a bitter pill to swallow!

Then insult piled on injury. In May 2011, its main ally in 'the war on terror, conducted a raid on Pakistani soil to eliminate the terrorist-in-chief Osama bin Laden right under the nose of the Pakistan Army, which remained bafflingly oblivious. An angry Pakistan began to make overtures to China. For the common Pakistanis, who placed great store by the valour and capability of their soldiers, many a myth was exploded! Maybe, the Army was not that invincible after all! Maybe the Emperor had no clothes! Even the civilian government took note, and somewhat emboldened, brought the Army and ISI chiefs, Ashfaq Kayani and Shuja Pasha respectively, to testify before the Parliament, a rarity in Pakistani governance!

The last straw on the camel's back was the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in November 2011 by the US and NATO on the Afghan border. The Pakistani government and Army cried 'betrayal most foul', closed down the Shamsi air base in Baluchistan used to date by the US for drone strikes on suspected terrorists as well as supply routes to Afghanistan, and reviewed

the total gamut of bilateral relations with the US. By now the reputation, vis-à-vis the public, of both the Army and the government was in mud!

Unsurprisingly mutual suspicions between the two began to grow rapidly. It was reported, that, fearing a possible military coup, Zardari encouraged his confidante Ambassador Hussain Haqqani in Washington to approach the US authorities to rein in the Pakistani Army, through an unsigned 'memo'.

But alas, the conduit, a wealthy Pakistani-American businessman called Mansoor Ijaz blew the whistle on Haqqani, and spilled the beans to the ISI chief Shuja Pasha. To the Army this was treason, and much more! It forced Haqqani to resign, with the Americans now pleading for his gentle treatment (for Haqqani was well-liked by them), pleas likely to fall on deaf ears. However, Zardari and Gilani are being kind to him, and, now unemployed, he is said to be enjoying the Premier's hospitality! But the 'memogate' issue became a stick (or baton) for the Army to beat the government with!

## **Enter Judiciary**

Not just for the Army. It appears that every segment of the Pakistani community loves a share of publicity, their fifteen minutes of glory, in the vibrant Pakistani media! The Judiciary appears to be no exception. To start with there was no love lost between the charismatic Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, and the Zardari-Gilani duo. The Court made a two-pronged move last week; first it, via a five-member bench, threatened to take action against Gilani for failing to comply with the court's orders to open up the corruption cases against Zardari. (In response to his colleagues' request, Chaudhry has expanded the bench promptly to seven judges).

Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, whose elevation to the Supreme Court itself was not without some drama, warned of consequences 'not pleasant' if action was not taken by Monday, 16 January 2012. (This would involve a letter by Gilani to some Swiss bankers). Indeed in an oratorical flourish he exceeded the restraint of Shakespeare's Mark Antony (who had at least called Caesar's assassin Brutus an 'honourable man') by describing Gilani as 'dishonest' and 'not honourable'.

A second move was in the form of an aggressive pursuit of the 'memogate' case by a judicial commission. Earlier, the Defence Ministry directly forwarded to the Court the Army's submission, a strange one in any democratic set-up, that it was not under the 'operational control' of the civil government. This was not bounced off the Prime Minister's Office, and Gilani reacted by immediately sacking the Defence Secretary, a friend of Kayani's, and a retired General, Khaled Naeem Lodhi. (As was to be expected, this removal order has also been challenged in the Court). He was replaced by Nargis Sethi, who some said, would be

more amenable to signing Kayani's and Pasha's dismissal letters, should matters come to such pass!

## **Prognosis**

They may not. Right now the political dichotomy would place the Supreme Court and the Army on one side, and the civilian government and the Parliament on the other. The Army, unlike on occasions in the past, does not enjoy the kind of mass popularity to topple the government directly. A 'judicial coup' is possible if somehow the Prime Minister or the President is forced out through 'rulings' such as contempt or disqualified in other ways (the Pakistani judiciary can also be surprisingly innovative!).

In fact, a 'contempt' ruling has been awarded and Gilani has been asked to appear before the Court on 19 January. But the government still has a majority in the Parliament, likely to be buttressed by a win in the Senate in March. A direct confrontation between the Supreme Court and the Parliament would be unhealthy. As for the civilian government, while Zardari has been behaving somewhat erratically by his curiously frequent departures to Dubai for various lengths of time, for reasons as diverse as medical treatments and wedding feasts, Gilani appears to have stuck to his guns not without a measure of courage, almost ready, as if it were, for possible political martyrdom.

But when push comes to shove, it is possible that none of the key players in this intricate game, the Supreme Court, the civil government and the Army would behave irresponsibly. Indeed, each, by turn, has spoken against 'unconstitutional methods' of effecting governmental change, as has the formal opposition, the Pakistan Muslim League of Mian Nawaz Sharif.

The Pakistanis have too much at stake: the failing economy, the burgeoning terrorism, the need to engage in the Afghan end-game, the relations with the US and India, and, even if it now seems somewhat distant, the restoration of a sense of pride that has always been a hallmark of the Pakistan psyche. Yet this impasse cannot continue, and something has got to give!

## **The Khan also Rises**

The answer may lie in early elections, before the scheduled 2013. There is someone waiting in the wings for just that: Imran Khan. He has prepared for fifteen long years, building his party 'Tehrik-e-Insaaf', 'the path of justice', from a scratch, with caution, care and commitment, and with patience that would match the tenacity of Robert Bruce.

Many see him as a budding morrow at Pakistan's midnight. A cricketing hero, he wants to replicate his actions in the political arena, in a nation buffeted by the vicissitudes of misfortune, but thirsting, and indeed dreaming, for some glory. Imran Khan has understood that well.

He has been carefully nurturing and feeding these sentiments, yet not going overboard with commitments that he would be palpably unable to deliver on. Initially he appeared to be fired with a sense of idealism, proclaiming a 'tsunami' against corruption and misrule, even proposing specific administrative reforms. He did that to pull crowds in Lahore and Karachi.

Now he seems more chastened by reality. He has toned down his anti-American rhetoric; and on India, confined himself to the routine articulations on human rights in Kashmir. He has sacrificed some pristine postures by accommodating politicians from various spectra, for he needs them for his parliamentary support.

A possible understanding with former President Pervez Mosharraf may irk Tehriki purists (such as Shirin Mazari), but the path to power will be through pragmatism, and Imran is, understandably, positioning himself to achieve that goal. For the Army, right now, he is its best bargain. Also, perhaps, for the Pakistani people and the global community. We should, indeed must, be able to tell soon, for time now in Pakistan, is very much of the essence!

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