

ISAS Brief

No. 296 – 14 October 2013

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassecc@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



Pakistan: Politics of Promises, Perils and Progress

Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury¹

Mian Nawaz Sharif was swept into power in May 2013 on a mandate that contained a slew of promises. These included addressing in all seriousness the problems of terrorism, economy, energy and relations with key relevant powers. It was no surprise that Nawaz, and his Pakistan Muslim League (PML) should have won the polls in a canter because of the rampant corruption and woeful mismanagement of governance during the preceding rule of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The fact that the transition was peaceful, democratic and smooth – the first-time-ever a civilian government transferring power to another – signalled the dawning of a new and positive era in Pakistan's politics.

Nawaz played his politics deftly. He allowed the party of a tactical ally but potential threat, Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf, to form government in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The same was the story with Balochistan. This reflected a commitment to democratic values. Of course he retained his brother and principal adviser Shahbaz Sharif as the Chief Minister of Punjab, the largest and the most prosperous of provinces and the sword arm of Pakistan. This action drew some flak from ethical purists, but Nawaz calculated that the risk to the impeccability of political reputation was worthwhile to keep Punjab under total control. Politics is after all about retaining power, and not always giving it away.

But that is exactly the risk he seems to be running in dealing with the Taliban and the terrorists. His detractors are accusing him of giving away power, or at least military

¹ Dr Iftekhhar Ahmed Chowdhury is Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He is a former Foreign Advisor (Foreign Minister) of Bangladesh, and he can be contacted at isasiac@nus.edu.sg. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of ISAS.

advantage to them. The Taliban had mellowed slightly and generally welcomed Nawaz's offer of talks, but they soon became divided on the issue and a series of bombings was unleashed. This lent grist to the mill of the military, particularly the Army Chief General Ashfaq Kayani, who was never to be confused with Florence Nightingale vis-à-vis the extremists (though he and the Army, particularly its all-powerful intelligence branch had empathy for the Afghan Taliban). Should the gulf between Nawaz and the military widen on this, this could become a cause for some concern. Nawaz will bear this in mind while choosing Kayani's successor in November. He has sought to unite the major political parties at a recent conference in order to be able to forge a common position against terrorists. What is critically needed is a comprehensive strategy to deal with the terrorists, some kind of what in military parlance is known as a Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP).

A Muddle-Through

The economy is muddling through, and the IMF has just approved a US\$ 6.2 billion bail-out. But the economic fundamentals must be put right to ensure sustainability of development. So, though market has turned around, it is not yet time to celebrate. Some power-plant dues have been cleared, and the punishing hours of load-shedding have been reduced, but not eliminated, and the threat of return to those unsavoury days lingers. Nawaz has rightly focused on infrastructure, roads, rails, ports and pipelines. He went to China, not in quest of knowledge as Islam bids its believers to do, but in search of energy. The port Gwadar is to be land-linked to China. The burgeoning understanding between the US and Iran may help remove some impediments from completing the Iranian gas pipeline. Otherwise the project would have fallen foul of US-imposed sanctions on Iran.

Issues with India are far from being resolved, but Nawaz and India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh have at least met, and we see the glimmer of rapport. But on both sides there are 'nay-sayers' and every cross-border incident contains the seed of disruption of ties; but at least for now, positive signals are emanating from high political offices in both Delhi and Islamabad. For India and Pakistan this is no mean progress. Of course the litmus test will be if the Bharatiya Janata Party was to lead government in Delhi following the upcoming elections, but Nawaz is not keen to meet trouble half-way. Also with the US some of the past misunderstandings are now behind. US President Barack Obama is expected to receive Nawaz soon in Washington. Enhanced understanding between the two protagonists, at times friends and at other times foes but on paper always allies, is essential if Afghanistan is to see a modicum of stability at anytime in the future.

'Reconciliation' Mantra

In all his approaches Nawaz seems to have chosen to be 'reconciliatory'. He prefers to accommodate rather than give affront. There is a broad sense prevailing in the public mind that his heart is in the right place, and he is genuine in his endeavours. Only time will tell if

this tactic makes for political wisdom. There will be perils and pitfalls on the way to substantive progress, but those who want Pakistan to succeed will draw comfort from the fact that this reincarnation of Nawaz as Prime Minister shows a more savvy, seasoned and sure-footed politician in power, if not always in total control.

.....