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Pakistan and the Not-So-Distant Thunder!

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Abstract

Pakistan, in many ways, is at a crossroads. The essay identifies the key players, and analyses the impact on the national politics of the major domestic and external actors. It seeks to discern the fundamental national spirit and values of the people of that country. It argues that it may well be that the main challenge is now up to the courts, to point to the appropriate path for the nation to take at this juncture.

Introduction

Just when the situation appeared to have eased somewhat, the political sky of Pakistan became overcast again, forewarning an imminent thunderstorm. The Supreme Court has summoned Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani again, to appear before it on the 13 February 2012, in the contempt case against him. Gilani is yet to write the letter to the Swiss authorities reopening the corruption case against President Asif Ali Zardari, contrary to what the Court has directed, thus seemingly challenging it. The future politics of Pakistan could hinge very well on the outcome of its proceedings.

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The Key Players

Though these proceedings directly focus on one key player, Prime Minister Gilani, it will impact on all the other key players in the Pakistani political scene. They do not, however constitute a team with any common goal, vision or purpose. Right now it is true that only Gilani is facing the brunt of judicial wrath. He has shown remarkable courage and a modicum of conviction by standing up to the Army in recent times on the one hand (he has dismissed the notion of ‘states within states’, in reference to the role of the military in Pakistan), and the Courts on the other (he is steadfast in the position that the President enjoys immunity). His problem is, while upholding democratic values vis-à-vis the Army, he cannot also be seen to be fickle in his support for his civilian superior. This has landed him between a rock and a hard place. His adamance has annoyed the courts no end, and as a result, the verdict may cause him to fall on his own sword. But should such a political demise be his fate, he will try make it look like martyrdom, which could open up the window, or at least a possibility, of a political afterlife!

Of course, Zardari remains the ultimate target, the one both the courts and the military, together with a burgeoning number of Pakistan’s population, would like to see disappear from the game altogether. He started well, though the reputation of being ‘mister ten percent’ continued to dog him as a constant handicap, with the percentage rising, at least in public eye, in geometrical progression. To his credit, first, his government witnessed a rare restoration of civilian rule in Pakistan, though over time it seemed to become increasingly cosmetic. Secondly, the 18th constitutional amendment that transferred significant powers to the Prime Minister, and thus to the Parliament, was widely viewed as a democratic move, though he continued to remain the ruling party’s chairman. Then came the rub! The economy began to founder on corruption and maladministration. Both militant extremists and Americans began to relentlessly strike at Pakistan’s by now near-mythical sovereignty at will. Zardari’s inexplicable behaviour-pattern, like repairing to a family chateau in France during disastrous floods, fed welcome grist to the critic’s mill. Relations with the military reached its lowest nadir. His popularity plummeted in a free-fall. Thus it was how the situation for him came to this sorry pass!

The formal opposition leader in Pakistan is Mian Nawaz Sharif, who heads the Pakistan Muslim League (PML, Nawaz), a former Prime Minister and an initial alliance partner of Zardari. He remains a player and even a possible alternative but increasingly less so. Noteworthy, though, is that his brother Shahbaz Sharif, as the Chief Minister of Punjab, runs Pakistan’s most powerful province. Nevertheless he is unlikely to be a player on his own on the federal scene and as of now can only buttress his brother. There is, of course a clutch of Islamic parties, whose electoral base, however, is not significant, despite Pakistan’s burgeoning fundamentalism, which finds more of an expression in violence, on a regular basis, perpetrated by the Islamist extremists.

The player insistent on not leaving the crease, though given out by the umpire, appears to be former President Pervez Musharraf. Committed to returning to Pakistan from exile, initially self imposed, in London and Dubai this month, he has now opted to delay the trip.. Wisely so. He is no Bonnie Prince Charlie, and would be well advised to continue in his travels rather than go back home, where there is no one waiting to enthrone him again. Indeed his homecoming would be unwelcome to most; to the government, which has threatened to arrest him on an assortment of charges, including some very serious ones, and as an indication of its unhappiness is seeking to confiscate his farm-house (though it cannot seriously believe it will substantially dent him financially!) ; to that rising star Imran Khan, who is in his good books, but to whom any vocal assertion of support by Musharraf could well nigh be a kiss of death; or even to his former military colleagues, who are keenly sensitive to the sentiments and impulses of a pro-democratic public. Just as for one there is a time to live and time to die, for an exile there is a time to return home, but for Musharraf , this has not yet come. But this is not to say that Musharraf is without powerful friends who are politically influential (he has a wide measure of US and Saudi support). Nor is it to say that he will forever be absent because he is currently out of sight.

Then there is Imran, to some the Great Khan himself, waiting to be called to the wicket to commence his innings. Is it realistic to see him becoming the Pakistani leader in the near future? Perhaps! For long years Pakistanis have had little to cheer about. Like all nations, they too like to aspire to a bit of glory; and many of them see Imran as providing them some glimpses of it. This strikingly attractive star in their political firmament glows even more as there are so few of them. Though no longer young, he remains a role model for the youth, a cricketing hero, a philanthropist, well-schooled and well-heeled, an adoring son who has chosen life at home over one in *vilayet*, financially clean, and someone who has taken the responsibilities of leadership seriously enough to prime and prepare himself for power for a long time. He also reportedly has the blessings of the Army, who may be seeing him as the best possible bargain under the circumstances. But there are practical problems as well. Over time the need to field a winnable team for the Parliament will cost him some in terms of the pristine values that many cherish in him. Then there will in all probability be a Senate, to be elected next month, which is most likely to be hostile if and when he assumes office. So his leadership, if he is able to acquire it, will not be unencumbered or unchallenged.

Finally, but by no means the least, there is the Army, and its leadership, General Ashfaq Kayani and his senior officers, the ISI and its chief General Shuja Pasha, in short the military echelons. Due to exigencies of circumstances, they are lying low for now, but licking their wounds, not only inflicted militarily by the US' and NATO's superior strategies but also diplomatically by far lesser players like the journalist-turned diplomat Hussain Haqqani and the American-Pakistani businessman Mansoor Ijaz, who seemed to be operating against their perceived interests at ease beyond their clutches, unthinkable even in the recent past. But will the man on horseback so easily give up power? Unlikely! Only that military's power now will be exercised differently, not overtly but covertly, not by performing themselves, but by

pulling strings from beyond the stage. In Pakistan military rule tends to come in varied *avatars*.

The International Community

All these actors realise that better relations with India are a factor in Pakistan's stability. But this does not mean they will be a factor in their strategy: at least, not just yet. All Pakistani leaders need to underscore a position on Kashmir, one that is not usually to India's liking. The 'India factor' is the main *raison d'être* of Pakistan's armed forces. But this also does not mean the relationship will always be inimical as they evolve. Indeed more Pakistanis than ever before see the West as a greater enemy than India. They see in the West an existential challenge to Islam itself, and faith often supersedes patriotism in Pakistan. On the other hand, India is seen to have largely accommodated Islam. Thus the deterioration with the relationship with the West becomes somewhat proportionate to the relationship with India; when the former happens the latter tends to improve. Ironical it is for those Westerners, such as the Americans, who have publicly favoured better Indo-Pak relations. All political factions, parties and personalities in Pakistan vie with one another for the affections of China and Saudi Arabia. Perceived proximity to either, or better still both, undoubtedly add to political clout in Pakistan.

The change of sentiments towards the US is worth noting. The two countries have had a long history of collaboration, and even now are formal allies. But the preponderant feeling of each is that with a friend like the other, who needs enemies? Those who feel it might just be a lovers' quarrel may be mistaken in that it may be a quarrel after the love is over. That could be dangerous situation where there may be a sense of no love-lost on either side. Today the US sees Pakistan, perhaps with a modicum of reason, as running with the hare and hunting with the hound, fighting extremists at home and supporting them in the region. Pakistan sees the US, also not without some cause, as ignoring its critical interests and being in cahoots with India. On the crucial issue of Afghanistan, they are at odds, over its present, as well as future. But the reality is, both the US and Pakistan need each other, and neither side, can, or will, abandon the other. Both hope that Qatar's 'good offices' over Afghanistan may reconcile some of the differences, including some of the current bilateral issues between the US and Pakistan, though it may yet turn out to be a triumph of hope over experience!

The Future

Most Pakistanis feel today that their country is better left alone, and not be interfered with from outside. They would themselves like to be in the driver's seat of their own destiny. What they would seek from the rest of the world is the provision of an enabling international ambience for the country to develop. They will tell you that this is not empty rhetoric. They

will hark back to the times of Gunnar Myrdal's 'Asian Drama' when Pakistan was forging ahead of India in socio-economic matrices. All that now seems good history! But this also shows the Pakistanis have the capability – the intellectual, material, and political wherewithal – to deal with the manifold challenges that confront them. But this capability will need to be translated into reality. They will need to strengthen civic institutions, assuage the disgruntled provinces, handle extremism, and build consensus and coherence around policies. All this is not easy, but doable. In global history nations have re-emerged out of deeper morasses.

The spread of fundamentalism may seem rightly inexplicable to the rational. Pakistan's founder, Mohamed Ali Jinnah did not want an Islamist State. He wanted a State for the Muslims of the subcontinent (which was eventually to evolve into two sovereign States), where he famously stated 'Muslims would cease to be Muslims and Hindus would cease to be Hindus'. In contemporary circumstances, he would perhaps have added the Shias and Sunnis – such sectarian violence would have been quite inconceivable in his days!

When Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani faces the courts personally later in February, Pakistan will be at a crossroads. It should not be that the Court by any quirk would throw the nation in a state of disarray. Nor would the courts be expected to be as conformist as they were when over half a century ago in a judgment on the famous 'Dosso versus State' case, they justified the overthrow of governments on the basis of the principle of efficacy derived from Hans Kelsen's 'General Theory of Law and State'. The people of the country would expect the decision of the courts to abide strictly by the law and the constitution, not upset the applecart by adding to the existing fragility from reasons of any personal vendetta or subjective suasion. So, it may very well be that it is now the courts, ironically of all the players in the scene, which face the challenge to guide the nation, although this is not their primary obligation. Thereafter, with this current episode behind them, Pakistanis must get for themselves a leadership that is honest, fair and strong. It must be there among its 180 million people. It is up to its citizens to seek it, and find. Only then will the rolling thunder fade away without developing into a cataclysmic storm.

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