

Pakistan: Descent into chaos

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Less than five months after Pakistan installed a freely elected democratic government, it again seems headed for a major crisis. The ruling Pakistan People's Party is considering whether to formally ask President Pervez Musharraf to step down or face impeachment, while Pakistan's military is under US pressure to escalate its operations against the Taliban, writes Praful Bidwai.

Less than five months after Pakistan installed its first freely elected democratic government following eight years of military rule, it again seems headed for a big crisis. A confrontation of potentially large proportions is reportedly brewing between President Pervez Musharraf and the ruling national coalition led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which is moving towards formally asking the President to step down or face impeachment.

At an anti-U.S. rally in Karachi in July, activists of the Islami Jamaat Talba, the student wing of the Jamaat-i-Islami, condemned the bombings in Pakistan's tribal areas by U.S.-led coalition forces from Afghanistan.

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According to Pakistani press reports, the decision to give priority to the impeachment issue over the restoration of dismissed judges came at a crucial meeting on August 5 between PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari and Pakistan Muslim League (N) chairman Nawaz Sharif. Although there is no official confirmation of this by either party, this seems plausible.

At any rate, the reported decision is now being discussed with the other parties comprising the coalition. They may or may not accede to it. But it is not excluded that Musharraf will strike suddenly and dismiss the government – before the impeachment motion is moved in the National Assembly. Indeed, the rationale of impeaching him seems to be the apprehension that he has been consulting various political parties, including the loyalist or “King's Party”, the PML (Qaed-i-Azam), with a view to dissolving the national and provincial governments and Assemblies exercising his powers under Article 58 (2)b of the Constitution.

A confrontation may ultimately be averted. The ruling coalition might fight shy of impeachment – a difficult job to accomplish in the most favourable of circumstances – and opt for a milder measure such as asking Musharraf to address the National Assembly and seek a vote of confidence, in keeping with his earlier offer to do so.

It is also possible that Musharraf will himself decide to throw in the towel in the knowledge that he may not be able to secure the backing of the United States or the Pakistan Army for a confrontationist course. After all, he is no longer in a critical and day-to-day policy-making position, and the U.S. does not need him as an indispensable ally as far as the prosecution of its Global War

on Terrorism in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan is concerned. Besides, Washington will find it extremely awkward and unpalatable to have to handle a massive new crisis in Pakistan during an election year.

Musharraf, too, may not relish the prospect, in case he dismisses the present government, of having to hold another election in three months, in which Nawaz Sharif's PML could emerge as the single largest party.

Whatever happens, the terms of the political contestation under way in Pakistan seem to be shifting. Zardari, who has doggedly resisted the early restoration of the dismissed judges of the Supreme Court and the High Courts, as well as the removal of Musharraf, is likely to find himself weakened and on the defensive. Whether, and in what manner, Sharif presses his advantage remains to be seen.

Zardari has a great deal to lose from a restored judiciary, which could open up to scrutiny Musharraf's so-called National Reconciliation Ordinance, under which Zardari and Benazir Bhutto were allowed to return to Pakistan and numerous cases against them were closed. Musharraf, too, would be in deep trouble if the Provisional Constitutional Order, under which he imposed emergency rule last November and dismissed some 40 judges, were stuck down.

However, some things are clear. It would be unwise for India even to appear to be siding with Musharraf. Second, the Pakistan situation is likely to get messier. There is a danger that the gains from the recent trends towards democratisation will be badly eroded, even lost. As this column (*Frontline*, July 4) argued, these trends run against hierarchy and authoritarianism, negatively view the Three A's (Army, Allah and America), and favour moderation and accountability, besides isolation of the mullahs, whose parties were decimated in the February elections. The trends also include broad-based support for the peace process with India. Already, significant retrogression is visible in Pakistan. The business of governance is in the deep freezer. Pakistan's economy is in poor shape and inflation runs at 20 per cent a year, with food prices rising by over 30 per cent. Pessimism and gloom are all-pervasive. According to an opinion poll by the U.S.-based International Republican Institute, as many as 86 per cent of Pakistanis believe their country is headed in the wrong direction.

Meanwhile, extremist forces that believe in violent jihad are growing. The first anniversary of the Lal Masjid's storming witnessed an eruption of militant protests. Thousands of women pledged to raise their children for martyrdom in "holy war". Militants are burning down girls' schools in the Tribal Agency areas, where the writ of the state does not run. Anyone can raise a lashkar or a private militia and create mayhem.

PRESSURE ON MILITARY

The only gainer from all this is the military, which must relish the ineptitude of the civilian leadership. But the army's authority stands greatly eroded and its popular acceptance, which has taken a beating over the past year, is plumbing new lows.

The military is under enormous pressure from the U.S. to escalate its operations against the Taliban along the border with Afghanistan, or to allow the U.S.-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to undertake anti-militant raids. Its Frontier Corps is unwilling and incapable of fighting pro-Taliban elements effectively and is under pressure to have its troops trained by ISAF in anti-insurgency operations.

The result is a growing power vacuum and a descent into chaos, which is also the title of veteran journalist Ahmed Rashid's disturbing new book, which traces Pakistan's post-September 11, 2001,

evolution amidst the U.S.-led war on terror, the inept and ineffectual peacekeeping, the reliance on tyrannical warlords and the intense local rivalries – all against the backdrop of Pakistan's regional ambitions and its fraught relationship with India, now with a dangerous nuclear dimension added to it.

Two recent developments have further complicated this situation. The first is a notification issued by the Pakistan government on July 26 placing the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) under the control of the Interior Ministry, and its withdrawal within seven hours following protests from the President's office and army headquarters. This has been called "the fiasco of the year". In the latest move, the government has officially put the order in abeyance.

The second is the growing suspicion within the U.S. establishment that the ISI has been involved in numerous undercover operations in Afghanistan, including the July 7 attack on the Indian Embassy in Kabul, in which four Indians and 56 others were killed. This has adversely affected – but mercifully, not aborted – the tense and semi-stagnant peace process with India. The process is already at a precarious stage given Pakistan's weak civilian government and the general elections in India at most nine months away.

The notification on the ISI was timed to coincide with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani's visit to the U.S. and to reassure President George W. Bush that the ISI under civilian control would cooperate earnestly with the U.S. in its war on terror. Its withdrawal had the opposite effect, leading Bush to ask Gilani just who controls the ISI. More important, it highlighted the vulnerability of the civilian government vis-a-vis the military, which is loath to give up control over the notorious agency and has long implemented Pakistan's policy towards both India and Afghanistan. This is a setback to Pakistan's democratisation.

Pointed Message

The second development is more important. On July 12, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) despatched its deputy director, Stephen R. Kappes, to Pakistan with evidence of the ISI's links with pro-Al Qaeda militants. Along with Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, he delivered "a pointed message" to Pakistani officials. To quote The New York Times: "the CIA assessment specifically points to links between members [of the ISI] and the militant network led by Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani, which American officials believe maintains close ties to senior figures of Al Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal areas." Haqqani is said to be the face of the resurgent Taliban in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

This is the first time the CIA has confronted Islamabad with intelligence suggesting that it has been passing to militants crucial inputs about the ISAF's planned anti-Taliban operations, thus enabling them to evade attacks. Since then, both the CIA and the Indian government have said that the ISI was involved in the Kabul attack, confirming Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's much-reiterated allegation and his identification of the ISI as the source of many terrorist attacks calculated to destabilise his country. The Pakistani authorities deny this, but not convincingly.

In Colombo, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took up the issue with Gilani, who promised to order an independent investigation into the allegation, which has major implications for the India-Pakistan peace process.

However, Musharraf has since accused India of fomenting trouble in Balochistan. The Pakistan Foreign Ministry also charged India and Afghanistan with instigating violence in its tribal areas, and protested against the operation of Indian consulates in various Afghanistan cities, including Jalalabad, Kandahar and Mazar-e-Sharif. It alleged that the Indian and Afghan governments worked in unison, and held Afghanistan responsible for its failure to protect its consulate in Herat in

Western Afghanistan from an attack on July 31.

MAJOR BATTLEGROUND

Whatever the specific validity of these charges and counter-charges, there is little doubt that Afghanistan has become a major battleground of India-Pakistan rivalry. Both are fighting for influence or dominance in that country.

Pakistan is not only keen to preserve its influence in a country which it has long regarded as its strategic backyard, or a region that gives it “strategic depth”. It also seeks to deny India any influence in Afghanistan. Many elements in the Pakistan Army believe that the Taliban could be used as frontline defence against ISAF troops along the Durand Line, much in the way it used jihadi militants in Kashmir against the Indian Army.

India, on the other hand, is not only keen to maintain and deepen its historic relationship with Afghanistan, which is a legitimate agenda. It also seems to be looking for a vantage point from which to launch low-intensity operations across the border into Pakistan. That purpose is less than legitimate, and risks drawing India into an ugly, open-ended confrontation, which is likely to claim many innocent lives, especially of Afghans, to help whom is India’s professed policy.

Gain in defusing tension

Many hawkish Indian strategic experts advocate an even deeper Indian involvement in Afghanistan. But India has much to gain from defusing and ending this rivalry. India has run a large aid programme in Afghanistan and has just expanded it from \$750 million to \$1.2 billion. Unlike Western aid projects, India routes its assistance directly to the recipients, without engaging numerous middlemen. Indian aid is far better focussed than Western assistance on felt needs in health care, education, urban transportation, and in the training of civil servants, diplomats, police and the judiciary. This has earned India a great deal of goodwill in Afghanistan.

It would be in India’s interest to offer security and confidence-building measures to Islamabad, including cooperative aid projects in Afghanistan. India must proactively engage Pakistan and accelerate the peace process.

This is a political-strategic imperative. The alternative is competitive rivalry in a badly ravaged and unstable country, which will harm the interests of both India and Pakistan – and above all, the Afghan people.

P.S.

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