

Civil-Military Relations and the 2007 Elections in Pakistan: Impact on the Regional Security Environment

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Besides being located in the most disturbed region of the world, Pakistan is also faced with several internal threats. On its western border is Afghanistan which in the last thirty years has been devastated by a series of geo-political and strategic events. First it was the Soviet occupation that led to the launching of the “Jihad” fully supported by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, China and a large number of western countries. Then soon after the events of 9/11, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan in 2001. Afghanistan to date continues to be under foreign occupation and caught in an internecine fight among its various factions. The greatest threat to Pakistan from Afghanistan is its instability caused by the upsurge of Taliban forces in the South and South Western provinces bordering Pakistan, where they virtually control and administer the area. Current U.S. and NATO counter insurgency operations in Afghanistan have a spill over effect on Pakistan. Many Taliban and other militant groups cross over into Pakistan’s tribal belt (FATA), taking advantage of their historical, cultural, tribal and religious linkages despite the government’s efforts to prevent it. Pakistan has deployed nearly 80,000 troops on its western border and lost nearly 700 of its soldiers fighting this insurgency.

On the Southwestern of Pakistan is Iran, which is locked in a dangerous nuclear standoff with the U.S. and is the focus of new American deployments causing deep anxiety in the region. Islamabad enjoys close relations with the U.S. and considers its support vital for its own security and economic development. On the other hand, it has deep historical, cultural and religious ties with Iran. In the event of a U.S. attack on Iran, Pakistan will find itself in a very difficult situation.

Moreover, due to geographical proximity, pan-Islamic bonds and cultural ties, the fast deteriorating situation in Iraq and open ended Israeli-Palestinian conflict has strong reverberations on Pakistan. Unfortunately, when a superpower makes a mistake, the negative foot

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print is global and for adventures in the Gulf or the Middle East, Pakistan is one of those countries that are affected the most.

The security environment between India and Pakistan has improved significantly, considering how these two nuclear rivals had their armies eye-ball each other nearly four years ago. Many significant confidence building measures have been agreed, but progress on substantive issues of Kashmir and even much less complex ones as Siachen and Sir Creek remains disappointing, which makes the peace process somewhat tenuous.

The internal security situation in Pakistan is also fairly troublesome. Nationalist forces in Baluchistan are up in arms against the state and there is an ongoing low intensity insurgency. The impact of lawlessness and absence of state structures in South and Southwestern parts of Afghanistan is posing a serious challenge to the stability of the Pakistan's tribal belt and giving rise to the growing influence of the Taliban especially in North and South Waziristan. Pakistan is being continuously accused by U.S. and NATO forces for "not doing enough" whereas Islamabad maintains that the West scapegoats its failures and does not appreciate Pakistan's military and political limitations. This is creating friction and mistrust with the U.S. and Hamid Karzai's government in Afghanistan. Military action in the tribal belt has given rise to retaliatory acts of violence by militants in several parts of Pakistan.

General Elections in Pakistan

In this regional and domestic environment, the question arises as to what will be the possible impact and outcome of the 2007 general elections on the regional security environment.

As a matter of broad principle and empirical experience, free and fair elections have a salutary affect on turbulent societies, unifies a country to face external threats, and facilitates resolution of internal strife and insurgencies. Much would therefore depend on how the elections are conducted as there is a high level of distrust about the fairness of government's conduct. Political parties remain apprehensive about the impartiality of the present government and if elections are manipulated, it could have a destabilizing effect. Already voices are being raised against the government for pre-poll rigging. If this continues, tension between the political parties and military will worsen and the civil-military divide will sharpen.

Experience has shown that even when civilian governments are in place, the covert role of the military has led to an undermining of the elected governments and created economic hardships and political instability. There is also talk of elections being postponed on the pretext

of the fast deteriorating regional situation. It is not as yet clear if the government is seriously considering this as an option or using it merely as a ploy to confuse the already weak opposition.

Regrettably, there is insufficient realization among the major stakeholders, especially the military, that it has to start relinquishing its role in politics to allow normal democratic evolution in Pakistan. A country's stability is overwhelmingly determined by the type of political structure and political authority that it has. Due to the prolonged involvement of the armed forces, the political parties and institutions in Pakistan are weakened and demoralized. Equally damaging has been the impact on judiciary and civil society. Consequently, the military has become the most dominating and powerful institution overshadowing every other organ of the state and uses that as the rationale for perpetuating its hold on power. It thus becomes a circular self serving logic that the state would collapse if the army were to abandon power "to the emaciated, corrupt inefficient political parties". In fact, long term involvement of the military in civilian affairs will have an equally deleterious effect on its professional competence and institutional cohesion.

A crisis of political legitimacy faces the current government. President Musharraf's exclusion of the two main political leaders from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML) from the political process has further undermined his legitimacy and has been one of the major reasons for the vacuum being filled by religious parties. The future of Pakistan would be at stake if President Pervez Musharraf would not give space to civilian institutions and processes. There is no doubt that a significant number of people, especially businessmen and liberals find Musharraf acceptable and even preferable to the exiled leadership; yet they disapprove of the way he is perpetuating the hold of the military and his disrespect for institutions. President Musharraf's insistence of deciding for himself to remain President and army chief has led to a serious standoff as the opposition parties do not accept its legitimacy. For President Musharraf to acquire true legitimacy, he will have to relinquish his right to appoint the Chief of Army Staff. Doing so could also provide an opportunity for transiting to a stable democracy. If the military insists on retaining the status-quo and gives scant space to genuine political parties and their leaders, the political downward slide would continue.

Undoubtedly, there are other factors that have effected the democratic political situation in Pakistan such as the socioeconomic development, ethnic and sectarian tensions and relations with neighbors.

Governance has suffered from major structural weaknesses in Pakistan's democratic institutions and this in turn has promoted a culture of disrespect for the rule of law at the national, provincial and district

level. The authoritarian attitude of political leaders, lack of democratic culture within political parties, and the corrupt practices and disregard to developing and implementing issues that directly affect the lives of the people, have had a very negative effect on the development of democracy.

High minded objectives, recently spelled out in the “Charter of Democracy”, signed in 2006 between the two exiled leaders of the main political parties—PPP and Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) (PML-N), could be termed as a positive development. But the real question remains: are the political parties prepared to reconcile their differences, abandon their selfish feudal culture and genuinely work for a better future for the people of Pakistan?

In the final analysis, key to stabilizing Pakistan lies in developing political institutions that promote merit based society which shuns political polarization, religious bigotry, ethnic and sectarian factionalism and incorporates checks and balances. Functional democracy is also critical for economic development, growth of civil society, as well as regional harmony and stability.

Three Possible Scenarios

With several variables, it is difficult to project the outcome of the forthcoming elections in 2007 but for the purpose of analyses, three possible scenarios will be examined, followed by discussions on how the different outcomes would impact on the security environment. The three scenarios are: (1) a parliament with mainstream political parties in majority, (2) that the religious and centre right parties form a coalition, (3) a hung parliament.

A parliament with mainstream political parties in majority. Mainstream political parties are by and large in favor of the peace process with India. Relations with India are therefore likely to improve incrementally. They would uphold the existing agreements and take steps to further deepen and expand them in scope and continue to pursue the resolution of Kashmir and other issues. The Indian government should find it more comfortable working with PPP or PML dominated civilian government and this should also give greater legitimacy and durability to the relationship. However, from past experience it could also be said that they would be less sure of the validity of an agreement with any civilian government unless it is fully endorsed and backed by the military leadership.

Dealing with Iran would be relatively easier for a mainstream-led civilian government. The military regimes in Pakistan have always been suspect in the eyes of the Iran’s religious leadership for being too U.S. oriented. Pakistan’s initiative in holding a conference of foreign ministers

in March 2007, from seven Muslim countries, excluding Iran has created further doubts in the Iranian top leadership about Pakistan's intentions. Nonetheless, an attack on Iran would pose a serious challenge for any Pakistani government. There could be tough demands from the U.S. for the use of Pakistan's territory and in the event of a refusal, they could flout Pakistan's decision and violate air space or its territory. An attack on Iran would give rise to a steep increase in anti-U.S. and anti-Western feeling, which would be difficult for any government to contain.

If the PPP-led coalition assumes power they would continue to support the U.S. and Afghan government's efforts at curbing the influence of the Taliban in the tribal region and would probably use nationalist elements to counter Taliban politically.

For the Baluchis, a civilian political government dominated by mainstream political parties would be preferable as it would engage with nationalist elements and Baluchi leaders would feel more at ease dealing with political forces than military and intelligence agencies. Influence of religious parties in Baluchistan has grown ever since 1999, due to the political vacuum created by the policies of the present government. Nationalist and secular parties of Baluchistan had a rough deal and remained suppressed. With the advent of a civilian government, they will get an opportunity to reassert themselves. Incidence of violence and acts of sabotage are likely to subside over a period. Once Baluchis are engaged in the political process, calls for greater autonomy or independence could diminish if the incoming civilian government would allow Baluchis and Pashtuns manage their provincial and local affairs. By giving them sense of participation, Baluchis could be won over. Clearly, inter-provincial harmony and a stable Baluchistan is a key requisite for sustained development and social cohesion of Pakistan. The trilateral Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline could become a more feasible and attractive proposition if peace would return to Baluchistan. Similarly, misunderstandings about the development of the Gwadar port among the Baluchi nationalist elements would be relatively easier for a civilian government to handle. Moreover, the growing influence of Taliban and reactionary orthodox forces can be countered politically by mainstream and regional nationalist parties more effectively.

Allowing political parties to operate in the tribal belt could assist in countervailing the influence of Taliban and other militant elements. Victory of mainstream political parties in the provinces of Baluchistan and NWFP would be helpful in reversing the growing trend of radicalism and Talibanization.

Tribal areas have remained neglected for decades and Afghan Jihad and events after 9/11 have decimated the administrative, social and economic structure of that area. Involving tribal areas in the political and

economic process and integrating it with the rest of the country will pose the greatest challenge for any future government.

The U.S. will in all likelihood continue to work closely with Pakistan's civilian government in its fight against Taliban and other militant groups. Pressure from U.S. and other Western countries will remain on Islamabad as long as Afghanistan and the tribal belt remain unstable. The Pentagon will maintain good relations with Pakistan's military as Washington cannot abandon interests in Pakistan due to its critical geo-strategic position in the region. Washington also acknowledges Pakistan's role within the Islamic world and hopefully this should enhance with the formation of a civilian democratic government.

The religious and centre right parties form a coalition. Religious and rightist parties are more rigid with respect to the Kashmir issue. It is, however, possible that they may suitably adjust their policy of supporting the insurgency once in power. India would remain distrustful and the peace process would receive a set back. A politico-religious grouping favoring "Jihad" in Kashmir could invite a serious response not only from India but from most of the European countries and the U.S..

Religious right would also be sympathetic and supportive of the Taliban. This can create serious misgivings in the West especially in the U.S.. Pakistan will come under extreme pressure both at the regional and global level. India will step up its activity in Afghanistan and U.S. interference in the tribal belt would intensify. They would be emboldened to take direct action on the pretext of sanctuaries and violate Pakistan's territorial space more frequently and with less sensitivity.

The West would also become concerned about Pakistan's nuclear capability, if religious parties assume power. Although the military will continue to be the custodian of nuclear assets and to a large extent, of its policy, the U.S. would still remain very uneasy. Safety and security of nuclear assets will be the source of anxiety for them.

The Chinese have always maintained very good relations with both civilian and military governments of Pakistan and have followed a policy of non-interference in domestic politics. The strategic and economic content of the relationship has expanded in scope and depth during both these periods. They are likely to pursue the same path, notwithstanding, that they would be uneasy if a religious dominated group came into power.

Hung parliament. Much would depend on the nature of the coalition, but a government with a weak political base and divergent interests is likely to be more amenable in its foreign and defense policy to the military viewpoint. Present policies would probably continue but the

peace process with India could slow down and U.S. pressure to “do more” on the war on terror would be intensified.

In view of the past and present history of dominance of the military in national affairs, it is not clear as to what would be the attitude of the military towards political parties after the elections. Will they accept the supremacy of the civil government and follow faithfully the foreign and defense policy formulated by them? Of course, all democratic governments seek professional advice from the military leaders, but are eventually dictated by their own judgment. Going by the past and taking an objective assessment of reality it can be safely assumed that the next civilian government, irrespective of its political inclinations, will rely heavily on the advice of the military. However, two distinct advantages will accrue as a consequence of having a civilian government. Policies pursued in respect of Afghanistan, India and the Middle East will have broader public support and acceptance, even if in substance these are not very different from the present and based on input from the armed forces. Prospects of a more peaceful domestic environment will also be brighter, which should have a salutary impact on the regional security environment.