
Pakistan's political hybridity: Asymmetric coexistence between Democracy and Martial law

An infamous aphorism goes, "...While every country has an army, the Pakistani Army has a country". And indeed, in Pakistan, the Military Establishment has been for long the *de facto* ruler of the country, overshadowing the political landscape, garnering greater power and legitimacy for itself, leaving the civilian government and other executive bodies in state of disarray and implicit vassalage. Nevertheless, what some could consider complete political takeover, in reality is a complex situation of political hybridity, with an asymmetric coexistence between democratic and military elements, where the Army, more than often, has the final say.

This article will further examine this hybrid nature, arguing that Pakistan's history since its establishment has been built on the perceptions of continuous external threats and domestic unrests, which have been a manifestation of its existential struggle to define its identity, as a result of which the country has failed in consolidating its civil governance, providing the Army with oxygen to operate in a state of impunity due to these promulgated feelings of constant uncertainty and pressing emergency. It will use as case studies the latest fiasco of Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa's extension of tenure and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman's sit-in protests in Islamabad, analysing their implications for the future of democracy in the country and the stronghold of the Army. It will ultimately argue that the role of the Military Establishment should be solely restricted to protecting the borders of the country and henceforth, the article will put forward recommendations and comprehensive strategies for strengthening the democratic governance of Pakistan.

The military in Pakistan has never been simply a ground force, which has been guarding the country against the enemy. In contrast, the Army has been holding political wallop and opinions and exerting overt and covert power whenever needed, largely pulling the strings of the political dominion in the country. As explained in depth in EFSAS Study Paper, "[Pakistan's Army: New Chief, traditional institutional interests](#)" – which marked the appointment of Bajwa as the COAS in 2017 – in order to understand the vast influence and powers the military establishment maintains, one needs to examine the times when Pakistan came into existence in 1947.

During India's war of Independence, the British primarily recruited people from the North-West of undivided India which post partition became Pakistan. The majority of the people recruited in the Pakistan Army during that period were from the so-called Punjab "*martial races*", while Punjab was the second largest province of Pakistan during that period. As a

consequence, Pakistan was founded in an area that was already heavily militarized. Subsequently, the Pakistani Army was dominated by the Punjabis who till date remain the most influential ethnic group in the country in relation to security and political affairs. In addition to that, the ongoing external conflicts with India and internal disturbances (e.g. Balochistan) provided impetus for military interventions and mounting investments in the defence sector at the expense of other institutions, owing to a created sense of war-like conditions, which ultimately resulted in the army strengthening and consolidating its power and control. The Cold War period further modernized the military establishment, as foreign support helped it in taking over domestic politics. Civil bodies were never given the space to develop independently, being reinforced to legitimize the military rule, leading to inept, corrupt and inefficient State institutions. In the course of time, the regular Army which started off with arms, ammunition, soldiers and generals transformed into a well-organized corporative system.

Army as a business enterprise

Pakistan is arguably one of the very few countries, where its armed forces are also involved in business ventures, deviating from its orthodox duty as guardians of the State and obtaining the role of businessmen. As of 2016, the Pakistani Army's commercial wing owned around 50 business concerns and housing property worth over \$20 billion, while in 2019 the Army is running more than 100 businesses with net investment exceeding \$100 billion. Thus, it is evident how the army has been zealously protecting its interests and status quo, obstructing democracy from establishing permanent roots in the country and providing scope for martial law to install and secure not only itself, but also its business interests.

Nevertheless, it is essential to mention that since 2008, after the resignation of General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan can no longer be officially categorised as an authoritarian regime, at least not as apparent as earlier, as during that year opposition parties won power and democratically elected government was set in place. Hence, elements of both military and democratic control have contributed to the current hybrid governmental arrangement, and while the Army still remains the most powerful agency, the reality is no longer '*black or white*', with hues of grey ostensibly tilting towards civilian rule, yet firmly managed and controlled by the Army.

The recent unprecedented political drama of the extension of tenure of the Pakistani Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa further displays the growing questioning of the military rule in the country and dormant imbalance of power among the higher ruling echelons of the Pakistani State. As EFSAS Commentary of 29-11-2019, "[The saga of General Bajwa's extension and the erosion of the sheen of the Pakistani Military Establishment](#)" explains, the spectacle that played out in the Pakistani Supreme Court was not an off-the-cuff or sudden development. It had been in the making for some time now.

Although the extension of the tenure was nothing new – six Pakistani Army Chiefs have enjoyed a prolonging of their services upon reaching retirement age - Bajwa's case signifies widespread public motion of mistrust and doubt in the military establishment, which marks a stage where the Army is no longer seen as the sole impartial protector of the country it once was. The Supreme Court's Solomon judgment to grant an extension of six months until the

Parliament comes up with a legislation which provides a legal basis to the said practice, was accompanied with the caution on behalf of Chief Justice Asif Saeed Khosa that *"unbridled power or position, like unstructured discretion, is dangerous"*, highlighting this newly developed judiciary-military tension. Although such tension might not be long lasting, the recent political spectacle, opened the Pandora's Box in regards to military accountability in front of its civilian institutions and demonstrated that no Army Chief is irreplaceable, rendering Bajwa's continuation controversial. As Sushant Sareen, Senior Fellow at the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation argues: *"Bajwa has been brought down from his pedestal and as such will find it difficult to retain the respect, even reverence, in which the army chief is held by rest of the commanders"*. What will possibly ensue is him trying to further influence the civil government in order for his full tenure to pass through; yet, his image and most importantly – that of the military – remains taunted.

As mentioned, the hodgepodge leading to this distasteful fiasco has been brewing for a while. Within days of the announcement of Bajwa's extension by Prime Minister Imran Khan in August, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl's leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman declared his decision to hold *Azaadi* (Freedom) Marches in Pakistan. The two-week long protests, which further enjoyed the support of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N), shook the capital Islamabad in late October, shortly before the Supreme Court's ruling. EFSAS Commentary of 08-11-2019, ["Pakistan's triple M: Maulana, March & Military"](#) delved further into the matter, describing how the sit-in protests were initiated due to the ongoing public dissatisfaction and claims that the July 2018 elections, in which Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party won, were rigged and Khan has been put in power as a puppet of the Military Establishment.

Hence, the prospects of a political flurry in the country are based on much shakier grounds. Considering that Khan's government would most likely not have been able to reach its current status quo without the largesse of Bajwa, the latter's continuation of duty is a matter of survivability for the Army's blue-eyed boy. Hence, Pakistan is currently finding itself in the midst of a cursory political rumpus due to the peculiar Catch-22 situation it is facing: if, or more accurately, when the Parliament formulates a legal justification as a cover for the extension of past and future Army Chiefs, it might experience some more backlash from opposition parties, while if the extension does not withstand, as Sareen opines *"then it will not just be 'minus one' (read Bajwa) but 'minus two' (also Imran Khan)"*. However, the latter scenario remains highly unlikely since the Army's stronghold in the country might have been slightly scrubbed, but certainly not dented.

Challenges

Nevertheless, one aspect on which all critics agree is that the Pakistani judiciary has been the only civil institution, which in this case stepped forward and exerted its power, righteously so, to question the legality of the Army Chief's extension and seek a legal justification and remedy for the created furor. The Pakistani judiciary holds an imperative part of promoting democracy and good governance in the country. Yet, considering the hegemonic stature the Army has over the country, it does not come as a surprise that the fundamental pillars of impartiality and justice, the judiciary traditionally abides to, are often called into question in

favour of the Military Establishment's yearnings, likening the judges to '*lions under the throne*' – growling but never biting.

Therefore, in order for democracy to flourish in Pakistan, the need of the hour is strengthening civil and public bodies in order to decrease the political foothold of the Army. Clearly, this is easier said than done. However, what the Pakistani people must recognize is that the grave issues their country is dealing with cannot be handled single handedly. There must be a genuine positive cooperation between the civil and military leadership, rather than having the latter holding the reins. As Fateh Najeeb Bhatti, Research Associate at the Strategic Vision Institute, Islamabad, argues: "*Since, the foreign policy of any country is the outcome of its internal strength, domestic peace, prosperity and national cohesion leads to a strong and effective foreign policy*".

Domestic, public, defence and foreign policy sectors must effectively collaborate, while remaining in their own domains and serving the country by acting upon their duties and areas of responsibility. However, in order to achieve such tangible democratic set-up while bearing in mind the hybrid governance structure of Pakistan, as Michael Hoffman, assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at The University of Notre Dame argues, one must ensure "*that the military has 'a credible role in society'. Without this assurance, the likelihood of the military's re-introduction into politics becomes much more likely*". Hoffman's justification is that since the Pakistani military establishment has always followed a unique trajectory in the country, aiming to completely oust them from the political State apparatus, will be counter-productive. Hence, what this article suggests is that although the Army still needs to be involved in the security and protection of the country, democratic institutions, which have been largely underperforming, need to be bolstered from grass-root levels in order to keep the military constantly in check and prevent them from expanding their control.

One of the major reasons behind Pakistan's weak civil society has always been the lack of education. Democracy and large-scale illiteracy walk different paths. According to the latest Economic Survey of Pakistan 2019, the average literacy rates in the province of Punjab stand at 64.7%, in Balochistan at 55.5%, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa at 55.3%, in Sindh at 62.2%, while the report also displays the huge disparity between literacy rates in rural and urban communities and between males and females, which often account for a striking 20-35% difference. Considering that failure to deliver comprehensive education is key to numerous socio-economic issues such as unemployment, poverty, economic stagnation, lack of access to healthcare, etc., it does not come as a surprise that illiteracy ultimately undermines democratic principles, since illiterate voters, especially in a feudal society like Pakistan, are easily misled as they lack the necessary awareness and reasoning skills to take a stance and cannot recognise when they have been deceived and exploited by those in power. Another even more dangerous consequence is the widespread apathy towards taking part in political matters. As a report issued by UNESCO in 2012, titled '*Why Pakistan needs a literacy movement?*' states: "*These illiterate masses remain indifferent to what is happening at national or provincial level*". As a result, as discussed previously, the Army had managed to find a gateway to rule through its proxies in the civil government and remain unaccountable.

In addition to that, the absence of access to secular education has further elicited the mushrooming of religious schools (*Madrassas*), which in the case of Pakistan have been often considered an instrument for fuelling violent extremism and sinisterly influencing young disenfranchised Muslims. The processes of radicalization is readily implemented in Madrassas where innocent children are pulled away from their parents and their normal adulthood dissatisfaction is deviated and aggravated in order to find an immediate-misleading answer in radical Islamic thought. Madrassas have proven to be well-structured and enough full-fledged, ideologically and materially, to radicalize students enrolled therein through the mentioned process.

Therefore, emphasizing on the necessity of internal reform, this article argues that secular education must be provided equitably, uniformly and effectively across Pakistan in order to become the trigger of social justice, cohesion and resilience. That can only be achieved through higher investments in the education sector; delivery of free and compulsory academic curriculum up to secondary level; monitoring and criminal liability for corruption and embezzlement of education funds; greater employment of female teachers; and, '*draining the swamp of radicalization*' by establishing more governmental schools with secular-oriented curricula.

On top of that, while press freedom and freedom of expression are one of the major building blocks of a functioning democratic State that ensure the liberal lives of the population, as well as transparency and higher literacy rates, Pakistan still struggles in the implementation of these pillars of democracy. Widely criticized for its harsh violations of freedom within this category, especially when utterances are critical of the Pakistani Military Establishment or other aspects of State affairs, journalists often risk facing abduction, death threats, torture, and death itself, as has been argued by Mr. Taha Siddiqui, an award-winning Pakistani journalist - who had to flee Pakistan because of threats and danger to his life by the establishment - in an [exclusive interview with EFSAS](#). Pressure on private media news channels, which have been critical of the Army, is also common, with censorship and blockade imposed on them for long periods of time. The taking down of social media profiles, which disseminate news and which are seen as provocative or disapproving of those in power, is also a recurrent practice. Thus, the image that becomes clear is, how media houses, alongside with the journalist community and individual members of society are living in an atmosphere of fear, often resorting to self-censorship in order to save their lives and jobs. In 2019, Pakistan was ranked 142 out of 180 on the World Press Freedom Index, issued by the global watchdog Reporters Without Borders.

One of the strategies, which could appear beneficial in regard to combating rising trends of press and media freedom infringements in Pakistan, is building international pressure and criticism on behalf of international human rights bodies and democratic States, alongside with the establishment of international safeguarding mechanisms which oppose and reject isolationist and fundamentalist sentiments. Private companies, governments, and third parties must maintain constant communication in regard to what is taking place online and continue keeping each other in check in order to secure the safety of the digital space.

Citizens should also recognize the power of their speech and assemble in movements, which challenge the current status quo. Yet, considering the looming danger over their lives, one must also choose their battles wisely. First, an atmosphere conducive for such radical campaigns to take place must be induced. That will only happen with the concerted efforts of private media news channels, global watchdogs and Pakistani journalists abroad who persist on highlighting the abuses against their community, which carry on uninterrupted.

Another important strategy for diminishing the stronghold of the Army and strengthening the democratic set-up in the country is questioning and probing into the economic investments, commercial ventures and subsidiary organizations/foundations run by military personnel. A public discussion must be initiated on the reality of having the Army directly infiltrating and influencing the economy of Pakistan. Transparency and clarity is crucial for informing the Pakistani people on those matters and encouraging them to contemplate the numerous implications for the future of their country and legal grounds of having the defense and security sectors control the commercial and industrial domains.

Conclusion

Although the Islamic Republic of Pakistan is currently deemed a democratic State, for everyone fond of its history, it remains vividly clear that the transition from one democratic government to another does not happen without its Military Establishment, which constitutes the *'deep state'* of the country and remains in control of its political space at the expense of civilian governments. The demonization of democratic leaders, the overtly offensive foreign policy agenda, the utilization of extremist and terrorists proxies against India and Afghanistan, the infiltration of the economy and tolerance for radical Islamism are just some of the few consequences ensuing from the Army's attempts to consolidate itself as the sole hegemon of the country.

In Pakistan, the road towards democracy has proven to be marked by peril. Nevertheless, its people have shown strength and courage in the face of all odds, and faith in the future of its nation, managing to stand up after every blow, and reestablishing their commitment to their own respective survival. Regardless of all continuous efforts to install lifelong autocracy in the country, the Army will find it more and more difficult to find fertile ground, due to the resilience of major sections of the Pakistani people, which reverberates in the words of its first female Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto: *"Democracy is the best revenge"*.

With the recent announcement of the death sentence of the Army's former COAS and President of Pakistan - General Pervez Musharraf - it appears that civilian ascendancy might be making some headway.

Having said that, the foremost predictable thing in Pakistan, is the country's unpredictability.



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