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PAKISTAN: THE STATUS QUO PREVAILS, OR TIME FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT?

Part Two: Radicalism, Militancy & the Civil-Military Divide

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With Pakistan facing an election in 2013, its role as a key component in the Afghanistan equation and as a nuclear state, whoever rules the country will need to address a number of critical questions that focus primarily on internal issues, but whose repercussions go well beyond domestic boundaries alone. Beyond the two major concerns of the economy and the governance (discussed earlier in Part One of this Note); increasingly radicalised mindsets; extremism and militancy, and the civil-military divide are issues that are conditioning as much the country's uncertain future.

Continuing the discussion of the challenges currently facing Pakistan, Part Two looks at the remaining "top three" issues: radicalism; extremism and militancy; and the civil-military divide, which alienates the intelligentsia from both the state and the military.

Radicalism, militancy and the civil-military divide constitute critical challenges facing Pakistan's rulers and have linkages to both governance and economic issues.

Security and geo-strategic challenges include that of the obvious links between (violent) radicalisation and militancy. However, there is also a more insidious form - the radicalisation of mindsets.

With the liberalisation of press laws, on the one hand, freedom of expression has flourished. However, the visual media is not well-versed in the ethics of criticism, and extremist, ultra-nationalist and often irresponsible views are routinely aired on private television channels.

The failure of political parties to develop a counter-ideology to combat mindsets of extremism has the consequence that, because of the lack of a better alternative, people take refuge in a more tangible, rightist, religious ideology, which is fuelled by a growing anti-US sentiment.

Some see "the crisis of conscience and integrity of the ruling elite - civilian and military" as being rooted in a failure to see serving the people rather than fostering self-interest, which is regarded as the single most salient challenge for Pakistan.

Overall, the jury is still out on how these all-too-real challenges will play out on the ground. Possible scenarios range from the radical - state collapse, with armed ideological separatist tribal and sectarian non-state actors taking power; to the liberal-constitutional - with the country tentatively moving towards some type of liberal and constitutional democracy; to the "status quo ante" whereby Pakistan would simply still go on "muddling through and patching up" critical issues, as has been the pattern of the past six decades.

Radicalism, Militancy & Insurgency

The links between (violent) radicalisation and militancy are obvious. However, there is also a more insidious form of radicalisation - that of mindsets, which manifests itself in non-violent as well as violent forms. Western media analysis tends to focus on the latter, rather than the former - to the detriment of changing the prevailing, increasingly entrenched narratives. Many in Pakistan see their country as not well understood - or indeed, very misunderstood - by the west, and particularly by the USA. The perceived misconceptions about Pakistan as a withering state, about to be torn apart, with crumbling structures which turn to terrorism to keep themselves afloat, and in which the writ of the government is absent, is seen as an overly-simplistic interpretation that serves the interests of Western states more than it helps Pakistan to address its very real problems.

(a) Radicalisation of Mindsets

Radicalised mindsets manifest themselves differently across distinct socio-economic groups. Among the lowest strata of society, socio-economic deprivation which results in poverty, coupled with lack of education, has a direct link with criminal and militant activity. Ideology too has a strong part to play, particularly among the lower-middle classes, whose entrenched drivers of attitude are ideology, politics, issues of identity and nationalism, instead of economic issues. Pakistan has also experienced an increased radicalisation of the mainstream educational institutions (both public and private), resulting in student radicalisation. Among the elites, alienation and politics have given rise to social groups such as *Al Huda*, the *Hezb e Tahrir*, and at another level, the formation of the *Defa-i-Pakistan* Council.

Networks providing shelter given to militants in southern and central Punjab do not undertake actual attacks, and indeed, in the case of southern Punjab, these regions have experienced fewer militant attacks than say Lahore, the provincial capital. However, as importantly, the mindset of pro-

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viding shelter to people who do undertake militant violence, exists. The central belt of the Punjab has broadly escaped the consequences of militant attacks, in part probably due to the highly militarised cantonment development structures in (eg) Khalian, Jhelum, Lala Moussa, and because central Punjab has historically been a recruitment area for the army. But, could that change?

Following the liberalisation of the media under General (later President) Musharraf, freedom of expression has flourished. However, the visual media is not well-versed in the ethics of criticism and extremist, ultra-nationalist and often irresponsible views are routinely aired on private television channels. One example is that of liberal intellectuals speaking out against the January 2011 assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of the Punjab province, whose assassin was greeted with acclaim and rose petals as he was taken to court. Extremist sentiments were widely and vocally expressed during talk shows, and applauded by the audiences. The media therefore has arguably shown insufficient social responsibility in its coverage of events which are clearly shaping Pakistani society and its outlook.

(b) The Impact of the Consecutive Wars in Afghanistan & the Brutalisation of Society

Whilst the religious right are largely still marginalised officially, reportedly “sleeping” cells exist within different social strata, having sprung up for a number of rea-

sons, including the failure of political parties to develop a counter-ideology to combat mindsets of extremism. The consequence of this is that, because of the lack of a better alternative, people take refuge in a more tangible, rightist, religious ideology. This is fuelled by growing anti-US sentiment (which has existed since the 1960’s, but has greatly increased since 9/11 and the impact of the war in Afghanistan on Pakistan). Following the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistani society became brutalised, and a “Kalashnikov culture” became prevalent across the country, fuelled by the narco-economy, black money and fast-tracked corruption. Following the Russian withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan faced the fallout from the US’s clandestine war, with sections of the economy (e.g. transport) reportedly being taken over by ideologically-motivated cells. Another nexus of anti-US feeling (particularly in the Musharraf period) is the perception expressed by a member of the ruling PPP, that when it suited the vital national interests of the US, it has supported military dictatorships in Pakistan, to the exclusion of democratic fora. 9/11 gave carte blanche to riding roughshod over democratic processes, and the War on Terror (WoT) became synonymous with Musharraf, more than with the stance of the nation itself. Certainly, there has been considerable resistance to “selling” the WoT as a vital national security interest, a hurdle of ideology encountered by former President Musharraf.

The Civil-Military Balance

For some analysts, the most important challenge facing Pakistan is “the crisis of conscience and integrity of the ruling elite – civilian and military” whose entire aim is seen as self preservation, rather than serving the people who empower them in their positions.

Despite a lot of noise about an imminent military coup in late February / early March 2012, the expected did not happen, and at the time of writing, it seems likely that the PPP government will – unusually in Pakistan’s history - actually finish its term in office. The army are giving clear signs that it does not want to interfere in civilian politics (an informal indication of which is the fact that General Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff, reportedly routinely declines to attend “civilian government” social events, preferring to leave representation to the Foreign Ministry) – despite the army continuing to see certain aspects of foreign policy such as strategic interests, including India, as very much its own territory rather than that of the elected government. Domestic issues too such as the insurgency in Balochistan are regarded as the purview of the military, not civil, government.

It would appear none the less that the military are finally beginning to accept the idea of civilian authority in the view. Indeed, the 18th amendment legally blocks the army’s takeover of the country, unless Pakistan should reaches

such a point of concern whereby the military feels it needs to step in to “save the country”. Currently, it would seem that there is neither the appetite nor the capacity to do so (on the part of the military). The people of Pakistan have little stomach for yet another round of military rule, though the military are certainly not happy with the way the country is being run, the levels of corruption, incidents like the Bhoja air crash and their institutional implications, etc.

The Upcoming Elections

The timing of the next elections (likely to be held in early 2013, though some are betting on autumn 2012 – one indicator being that the national budget is to be announced in May instead of at the end of June, as is usual –) will in part be based on crisis management of the deteriorating economic situation, leaving the latter to be dealt with by an interim government, rather than the incumbent PPP.

Observers say that the most likely outcome is that the PPP government will not win outright, but will probably be the leader of a coalition. The negative domestic impact of the power shortages and price rises will likely impact more on Nawaz Sharif’s PML (N) party, with its primarily urban base: (the PPP’s vote bank is rural and in the labour movement). Imran Khan’s *Tehreek Insaaf* party has garnered considerable popular support particularly among the youth and intellectuals – including at a peaceful rally of 200,000 people in Quetta, Balochistan, in mid-April, which passed off entirely without incident, in a context where sectarian and political violence has sadly become routine. However, this appears to be more “a movement in search of a party” than a mature party political structure that can churn out the voters necessary to win enough seats to form a government. Certainly, he is likely to win the votes of the disaffected – those fed up with the corruption, incompetence and sheer lack of caring, of successive governments. But will that be enough? Probably not – in this round, at least.

Which Crises, Which Outcomes

Award-winning journalist Najam Sethi in a recent editorial in *The Friday Times* “*Whither vs Whether Pakistan?*”¹ characterises Pakistan as wracked by ten major crises: (i) the economy (stagflation, dependency, resource scarcity and mass impoverishment); (ii) education (the madrassah challenge, jihad indoctrination, the divide between English and Urdu as media of instruction); (iii) urbanisation (where he singles out slum development, criminalisation and ethnic strife); (iv) demography (the youth bulge, religious con-

servatism and class volatility); (v) a conflict-dominated, isolationist and estranged foreign policy; (vi) terrorism and radicalisation; (vii) civil-military relations (the incapacity of the former and the dominance of the latter); (viii) governance and the political system; (ix) the continued crisis of law and order; and (x) the crisis of identity, wherein notions of nation-state and pan-Islamism confront one another. These be viewed as sub-sets of the “big five” challenges identified in Parts One and Two of this Note.

However, how might these crises play out on the ground? Will Pakistan see a state collapse with armed ideological separatist tribal and sectarian non-state actors taking power? Or will the country feel its way tentatively towards some type of liberal and constitutional democracy where all organs of the state and civil society play their defined roles with relative stability and equilibrium? Or will the experience of the past six decades in “muddling through” simply potter along in a status quo outcome?

Three contrasting possible scenarios are presented below.

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(i) The Status Quo Continues

Barring what Sethi terms a “black swan” event of cataclysmic proportions, judging on past performance, a paradigm shift is unlikely. Under a status quo scenario, the economy would remain stagnant, foreign investment will be absent, energy will continue to be scarce, and governance poor. The military will continue to dominate foreign policy, coalition politics will prevail with an emphasis on regionalism, ethnicity and religious conservatism.

(ii) A “Black Swan” Event Occurs

One such “black swan” event that could radically alter the face of Pakistan, is the blowback from Afghanistan after the US withdrawal.

This would be an external nightmare, whereby internecine conflict in Afghanistan results in Pakistan being sucked in.

As noted recently by Khalid Ahmed (April 22 2012, *The Express Tribune*), “*Pakistan is home to the armies that will enter Afghanistan (after the US withdrawal in 2014), but it hardly controls them. Therefore the blowback from Afghanistan this time will be transformational for Pakistan*”. It would certainly result in the empowerment of the Taliban on the Pakistani side of the border (an existing example of which is the Bannu jail break

1. April 20 2012.

in April 2012 where over 200 Taliban prisoners escaped and travelled in a convoy through no less than six checkpoints, to the Afghan border. This is widely thought to have been an inside job, with the complicity or at best studied indifference of the authorities). It is worth noting here that there are still “guest” Taliban on Pakistani soil; and the country still hosts some 2.5 Afghan refugees – all of which combine to impact on the country’s social fabric.

Under this scenario, the politics of appeasement pursued so far would proceed to a logical end, with the remaining attributes of the state falling off, with religious parties and *madrassas* with *jihadi* capacity increasingly exercising authority. As Ahmed sees it, under a civil war scenario in Afghanistan, “fundraising” by non-state actors through kidnappings and bank robberies in major cities, the increasing criminalisation of the Pakistani Taliban and the Talibanisation of criminals, the settling of vendettas with suicide bombings carried out by the surplus *fedayeen* “sold” by the Taliban, and the kidnappings for ransom witnessed in Karachi and Peshawar, and – on current performance – in parts of Lahore also, would be likely to increase, should post-2014 see a civil war in Afghani-

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stan. In Ahmed’s view, Pakistan has so far sought to appease terrorism by becoming anti-American and pro-Taliban. After the withdrawal, a Talibanised Afghanistan will survive only if Pakistan goes down the *khilafat* route – the logical consequence of the politics of appeasement.

(iii) Mass Disaffection & Ensuing Chaos Lead to a Lower-Ranks Military Coup

As one observer put it, “the country has seen worse times” (e.g. the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the 2005 earthquake, the floods, food insecurity). Yet, there has been no significant social unrest, attributed by some to the country’s politically polarised society and the relatively newly-acquired ability to give vent to feelings via the media. According to this view, “there will be no Arab Spring in Pakistan”. But, should this view be wrong, and should the socio-economic “volcano” erupt, and should chaos and mass disaffection ensue, what would be the likely outcome? Some say that, whilst the Pakistan army is a very professional and disciplined force which would not allow the space for rebellion from within. Others posit the view that under such circumstances, a lower-cadres military coup could be on the cards. The existing trend to-

wards radicalisation of thought (as exemplified by the attitudes of the official bodyguard who murdered Salman Taseer in January 2011 and the public approbation he received from some quarters) means that – should this occur – the outcome of any such coup would likely be increased religious and social conservatism. However, most interlocutors (personal communications April 2012) consider that a judiciary-led rather than a popular coup is a more likely scenario, given the redressal of the civilian-military balance witnessed in the past year, and because the army is stretched to its limit by events in Balochistan, FATA and the challenges posed by internal militants.

Conclusions

Yet again, Pakistan faces a tough set of challenges, and yet again, it appears to be teetering on the brink of major changes. All too often in the past, the “doom-sayers” have predicted fragmentation, meltdown, descent into chaos (to quote Ahmed Rashid). But so far, this has not happened (explained by some observers as due to the “weak state, strong

society” paradigm); “muddling through” has repeatedly been more the order of the day than any really radical change; and the status quo has prevailed. However, the present combustible situation of a failing economy; the glaring and growing gap between rich and poor; lack of robust governance which actually filters down to the level of the masses; increased radicalisation of mindsets; the geopolitical circumstances of the country’s neighbours, combined

with an apparent lack of a strategic approach to addressing the bigger picture, mean that the coming twelve months could see Pakistan facing a scenario of “...and now it’s time for something completely different”. Just how that might play out, remains to be seen.