

# HOW THE 'DEEP STATE' GAMED THE SYSTEM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Pakistan

Uninterrupted democracy for the past decade has inspired hope that Pakistan is changing and that history might be a false guide to a new type of civil-military relationship inside Pakistan. The peaceful transition to a new electoral force represented by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf is seen by some as further proof of an evolving system where civilian politicians, by drawing their power from mass electoral politics, are emerging from the shadow of an army-dominated state. And since civilian politicians do not have any apparent stake in confronting India, democratisation in Pakistan would eventually transform the geopolitics of the sub-continent. Is there any basis for such an assessment?

We must introduce a little more complexity into the enticing civil-military model that sometimes underlies Indian thinking. Pakistan's tryst with democracy has always been a complicated affair. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan is the closest we can trace to a genuine civilian advantage over the military structure. But the circumstances were unique. The Pakistan army had been thoroughly discredited after its defeat in the 1971 war. And yet, despite such favourable conditions, India's quest to re-arrange the decks within Pakistan utterly failed. Bhutto was able to use his weakness and generate goodwill — and hope for a new Pakistan — in Delhi to soften its post-war posture. Ironically, one of the strongest civilian leaders in Pakistan's history did more to salvage the Pakistan army — extracting the 90,000 prisoners of war from India and territorial losses on the western front — than a military dictator has ever achieved.

Nevertheless, the Pakistan army learned its lesson and in the 1980s consciously cultivated a new network of politicians to counterbalance the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). As Christophe Jaffrelot notes, "From the start of his career in Punjab under Zia's patronage until the election campaign of 1990, [Nawaz] Sharif owed his political success wholly to military support. But even if he was the most famous client of the security establishment, he was not the only one to enjoy its protection." Similarly, Imran Khan should be viewed as another strategic investment by the deep state that dislodged the erstwhile two-party structure monopolised by the Pakistan Muslim League (N) and the PPP.

If an assertive civilian political elite could send the Pakistan army back to its barracks, Indian policymakers would welcome and even encourage that trend. But any hypothesised civil-military struggle rests on two fundamental assumptions.

First, the civilian elite must be genuinely committed to re-defining Pakistan's identity towards a more positive nationhood. Many observers recognise that there is a general anti-India identity problem in that Pakistani nationalism coheres itself by projecting an opposite "other" — a secular India. This negative identity has been historically cultivated and sustained by the military establishment to fuel its own vast political economy privileges, and to ensure that Pakistani nationhood does not lose its sense of purpose. But the last decade of democracy has shown little momentum towards a progressive discourse or quest by civilian leaders to question the idea of Pakistan. When in power, politicians have pursued far more modest goals. Rather than re-imagining alternative identities for Pakistan, they seem mainly interested in self-interest and survival.

Second, it is presumed that the army cannot game the civil-military system or successfully

neutralise any challenge to its authority or rival conceptions of the national interest. The Pakistan army's successful co-option of institutions like the judiciary, the election commission and the media shows that it actually relishes its role as the unaccountable arbiter of Pakistan's overall political destiny, but without being at the forefront of state governance, which constrains its hand and taints its prestigious position in the body politic. It is instructive that a October 2017 Gallup survey found that 82% of Pakistanis trusted their army more than any other political institutions even as a majority (68%) welcomed democracy as a political system. Such favourable ratings would quickly disappear with martial rule, as the army discovered first-hand during the Pervez Musharraf years.

On the civilian side, there is no evidence to claim a defiant struggle with the military establishment is in the Pakistani politician's conception of her or his own interests. In fact, more often than not, the civilian political elite is eager to compromise and cut deals with the army, especially if that enhances its policy agency in the non-security spheres. Pakistani scholar Ayesha Siddiq's thesis of a symbiotic military-civilian relationship where politicians rarely question the primacy and vanguard role of the army and both groups collectively profit from the systematic plundering of the economy remains more plausible than ever before.

The recent election in Pakistan suggests a more sophisticated system — referred to as a 'hybrid state' — has come into being whereby the military establishment, acutely conscious of the costs of martial rule, has promoted an alternative framework so that there is a 'buffer' between the army and society. The recurring backlash and legitimate grievances of the people are borne by expendable politicians absolving the real authority behind the scene from any responsibility for governance and developmental failures. The political parties and civilian elite seem to have embraced their role in this metamorphosis of Pakistan's "managed" or "guided" democracy.

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