

Deep state, deeper problems: Pakistan

Whatever their outcome, [Pakistan's general election scheduled for July 25](#) is unlikely to change four fundamental realities. First, Pakistan's military-led establishment will continue to wield effective power, drawing strength from allegations of incompetence and corruption against civilian politicians. Second, civilian politicians will continue to justify their incompetence and corruption by invoking the spectre of military intervention in politics. Third, jihadis and other religious extremists will continue to benefit from the unwillingness of the military and the judiciary to target them as well as the temptation of politicians to benefit from their support. Fourth and finally, Pakistan's international isolation and economic problems, stemming from its ideological direction and mainstreaming of extremism will not end.

The [conviction of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif](#) by an accountability court last Friday has set the stage for him to portray himself as the latest martyr for democracy. He has argued, as others have done before him, that he is being punished not for corruption but for standing up to Pakistan's invisible government — the military-intelligence combine that has dominated the country effectively since 1958.

His supporters are willing to ignore the fact that Mr. Sharif's own political career was launched by the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and the likelihood that allegations of unusual expansion of the Sharif fortune since the family's advent in politics are true.

Spotlight on the judiciary

The conduct of Pakistan's judiciary in the matter has been far from judicious. The Chief Justice of Pakistan, Saqib Nisar, views himself less as an adjudicator in accordance with the law and more as a super policy maker. He has expressed interest in everything — from water scarcity to running of mental hospitals and prisons. He has taken to touring various government facilities and has even created a fund for the construction of dams. The fund will receive public contributions because the Chief Justice knows the exchequer does not have enough money to build the dams he wants built.

None of these actions is part of a Chief Justice's job description, even after recognising that some judges are more activist than others. Justice Nisar has made his political biases well known and the case against Mr. Sharif proceeded in reverse order. Instead of beginning in a trial court where evidence of his wrongdoing was established beyond reasonable doubt, he was first disqualified by the Supreme Court and then put on trial.

But perceptions and common knowledge of political corruption cannot be a substitute for following legal principles. Elsewhere in the civilised world, the Pakistani practice of accusing someone of criminal conduct first in the highest court and then demanding that they prove their innocence would be deemed grossly unjust. The fact that this happens only in political cases further strengthens the view that politics, not corruption, is at the heart of such 'prosecutions'.

Moreover, the Supreme Court invited representatives of the Military Intelligence and the ISI to help investigate the money trail for Mr. Sharif's alleged properties in London. This highly unusual procedure itself casts doubt on the real motives behind the former Prime Minister's trial. The military-led prosecutions of politicians, even when their malfeasance is well known, helps the politicians in building their case that their political conduct is the source of their troubles.

Pakistan is, therefore, unable to hold the politically powerful accountable through its politicised judiciary. The cynical view of Pakistani politics would be that three decades ago the deep state

advanced Mr. Sharif's political career while portraying Benazir Bhutto's spouse, Asif Zardari, as corrupt; now Imran Khan is the 'chosen one' while Mr. Sharif's alleged corruption is being targeted.

Problem with this 'narrative'

The military, which now refers to itself as 'the institution', has helped build a simplified narrative to justify its constant intervention in political matters as well as to explain Pakistan's myriad problems. According to this narrative, civilian politicians are incompetent and corrupt, which is the only reason the military needs to periodically intervene to set things right. There is no explanation for how politicians would ever learn the art of governance if they are to be constantly corrected by unelected generals and judges.

Another part of 'the narrative' is the notion that Pakistan's dysfunction and periodic economic crises are the result of the massive corruption by civilians. Imran Khan and his supporters have been advancing that simplified narrative. Their message finds resonance with those who want to believe that once kickbacks on large projects and their corrupt practices are eliminated, Pakistan would somehow become the land of milk and honey.

There is, of course, no justification or excuse for corruption but Pakistan has been ill-served with the 'corruption is the only problem' over-simplification. Since at least 1990, it has become an excuse to gloss over more significant policy issues that hold Pakistan back. Corruption has been exposed in many countries, from Iceland to China but none of them is as dysfunctional as Pakistan.

Limiting national discourse to a discussion of corruption makes it impossible for Pakistanis to discuss how jihadi ideology and religious extremism are leading to Pakistan's isolation. Similarly, Pakistan's slow growth in exports, for example, is hardly a function of corruption. It reflects low productivity and inadequate value addition which are consequences of poor human capital development and failure to attract investment, among other factors.

Pakistan is the sixth largest country in the world in terms of population, has the sixth largest army in the world, and possesses one of the largest nuclear arsenals. Yet, it has the highest infant mortality rate; more than one-third of its children between the age of 5 and 15 are out of school. The country's GDP on a nominal basis ranks 40 out of nearly 200 countries while its GDP per capita stands at 158 out of 216 countries and territories, according to World Bank data.

None of these facts, however, has found any mention in the election campaign of any Pakistani political party. Although Mr. Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) have at least cared to publish detailed manifestos, Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) published its manifesto on Monday, July 9, less than 20 days before the election. The party feels it only needs Mr. Khan's charisma and the outrage against corruption or enemies of Pakistan to claim voters' loyalty.

Economic woes

The anti-corruption enthusiasm has sometimes added to Pakistan's economic woes. Pakistan is currently burdened with compensation payments running into billions that must be made to foreign companies whose contracts were cancelled as part of investigations into corruption of officials involved in awarding those contracts. But fighting corruption is a useful slogan if the deep state wants to avoid fighting all jihadis and does not wish to acknowledge the flaws of its national narrative.

It is ironic that Mr. Sharif faces jail ahead of an election that opinion polls indicate his party would

win, if voting was free and fair, even as a long list of internationally designated terrorists is free to seek votes. That contradiction is at the heart of why the outcome of the elections is unlikely to change any of the fundamentals of the Pakistan crisis. If the PML-N overcomes all odds and still manages to win, the corruption cases will continue to cast their shadow. If someone like Imran Khan wins with the help of invisible hands, he would start his term under a different cloud.

Pakistan will, unfortunately, not emerge stronger after an election whose winner lacks credibility and whose loser is likely to initiate confrontation with the winner right after polling day.

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