

Road to chaos: Pakistan's face-off with extremists

The long stand-off between the authorities and Islamist protesters on the edges of Islamabad, once again, has exposed the vulnerability of the Pakistan government while dealing with extremist groups. The protesters, led by a little-known group, Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) paralysed the city by [blocking the main road from Rawalpindi for three weeks](#), demanding the resignation of Law Minister Zahid Hamid. The demonstrations were purportedly a response to a proposed change in the oath for lawmakers that moderated the mention of the Prophet. Islamist groups, with Khadim Hussain Rizvi, the chief of Tehreek-i-Labaik, taking the lead, alleged that this amounted to blasphemy. Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi appeared to have no idea how to find a way out. He withdrew the proposed amendment in the wake of Islamist protests, hoping that it would pacify them. When the crowd started blocking the road to Islamabad, the government first ignored it, clearly underestimating Tehreek-i-Labaik's capacity to sustain the demonstrations. When the protesters persisted, the authorities offered to hold talks. When that failed and its handling of the crisis came under judicial criticism, the government decided to use force, resulting in violent clashes between security personnel and protesters on Saturday, in which at least six people were killed and over 100 injured. Even then, the civilian leadership had to seek the Army's help to broker a deal with the protesters. It was after Mr. Hamid resigned as Law Minister that Mr. Rizvi finally asked his supporters to disperse.

The way the government handled the crisis and its final capitulation, under military mediation, to the protesters' ultimatum clearly point to the continuing erosion of executive authority. The Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) government, which suffered a massive setback in July when Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was disqualified, is yet to recover its equilibrium. Mr. Abbasi must take part of the blame for what happened in Islamabad. He failed to act swiftly when the crisis broke. Instead, he waited and watched as the capital city was paralysed. By the time things came to a head, the military played its hand not just to help resolve the crisis but also to project the civilian leadership as being clueless. An equally worrying sign for Pakistan is that a political upstart with extremist views has showed it can hold the government to ransom. It is not clear whether Tehreek-i-Labaik has the support of the ruling party's rivals. But the pace at which thousands of supporters were mobilised in Islamabad against the government reinforces the sensitivity of the blasphemy issue in the country's politics. The growing street power of Islamist fringe groups, the reluctance of the government to take them on and the mediatory role the Army plays at a time when divisions among political parties run deep, all confirm the risk of instability in Pakistan.

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