

Pakistan's uncertain road

Pakistan appears to be in the throes of interesting transitions. The NA 120 Lahore by-election result saw Pakistan Muslim League (PML-Nawaz) hold on to its bastion, albeit with a much reduced victory margin, enabling ousted PM Nawaz Sharif to sustain the narrative of being wronged by a biased judiciary.

Despite counsel from his own family to stay away, tending to his ailing wife in London, Nawaz decided to return and face the expected indictment before National Accountability (NAB) Courts on old corruption cases. Potential disunity within the party influenced his decision. His younger brother, Shahbaz and his son, Hamza have long suppressed their ambition to ascend to greater political responsibility. A disgruntled former interior minister with professed links to the army, Chaudhry Nisar Ali, has been sniping at the margins. PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi is singing the right tunes for now but could switch loyalties to suit the military establishment.

The senate, where the People's Party (PPP) still has a numerical edge, passed by a slender majority of one vote an amendment in the Election Reforms Bill, 2017: It did away with the "sadiq" (honest) and "ameen" (truthful) disqualifying clauses in Section 5 of the Political Parties Order (PPO). This enabled Nawaz Sharif to be elected PML(N) chief again.

Though [Imran Khan](#) benefited politically due to his relentless pursuit of the Panama papers' case, his Pakistan Tehrik-e- Insaaf (PTI) has a long way to go before it can challenge the strong feudal and kinship ("biradari") hold of the PML(N) in Punjab. Winning sizeably in Punjab would be crucial to Imran's prime ministerial quest in 2018. However, Chief Justice Saqib Nasir's observations while hearing PML(N) politician, Hanif Abbasi's petition seeking Imran's disqualification for concealing facts behind purchase of his Bani Gala property, indicate he too could meet a similar fate.

With Jamaat ud Daawa (JuD) threatening to contest all seats in its Milli Muslim League (MML) incarnation, Punjab could have a fractured mandate. The planned mainstreaming of MML seems to be an effort by JuD's army/ISI handlers to embed radical Islamic groups in politics. Partly reflecting the army's exhaustion with political parties like PML(N), PPP and PTI, the tactic offers an opportunity to invest a non-lethal role and an umbrella of legitimacy, not least because of the JuD's professed anti-sectarian record in domestic conflict, while not abjuring the option of its proxy instrument loyally executing lethal attacks externally when needed.

Whether the 2018 elections can be held on time remains an open question as delimitation of constituencies based on the new census figures will pose complex administrative and political challenges, especially from Mohajirs in Karachi.

On the military front, Army Chief General Qamar Bajwa struck a measured note in his Defence of Pakistan Day speech (September 6), reiterating known positions of the deep state. Emphasising again that Pakistan had borne the brunt of terrorist reprisals, he asked "the world to do more". He said he was not seeking "aid but respect and trust". He mentioned alleged repression in Kashmir but urged India to "prioritise political and diplomatic solutions". The army could end terrorism but "monopoly over violence should be the prerogative of the state only".

Elsewhere, Bajwa denied instigating the judiciary to disqualify Nawaz Sharif. He professed the army's support for democracy. In what seems a healthy precedent, he called in members of the Defence Committees of the Senate and National Assembly for an interactive discussion. The Punjab government was prevailed upon to contend before the Lahore High Court that keeping Hafiz Saeed under detention was still necessary.

However, all does not seem comfortable within the army. In his latest military reshuffle, Bajwa has moved Lt. Gen Aamir Riaz, GOC XII Corps, Quetta to IV Corps, Lahore. Perceived by some PML (N) politicians to be anti-Bajwa and pro-Imran, Riaz's placement could be to oversee events in a politically turbulent Punjab, building up to the 2018 elections. Lt Gen Asim Saleem Bajwa, former Chief Raheel Sharif's "pet" at the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) makes a comeback as the new Southern Command head and GOC, XII Corps, Quetta. The Lahore Corps Commander, Sadiq Ali goes to the backwater post of DG, Arms in GHQ. Expressing his pique at not being considered for a corps command, Lt. Gen Rizwan Akhtar, former director general, ISI, currently in the sinecure National Defence University post, put in a request for premature retirement. Lt. Gen Sarfaraz Sattar, erstwhile defence attaché in India, promoted and posted as corps commander, II Corps, Multan only in December last year goes as DG, Strategic Plans Division (SPD). Sattar will be the senior-most lieutenant general after Bajwa retires in November 2019.

Civil-military tensions flared up again as interior minister, Ahsan Iqbal was prevented by Pakistan Rangers from entering the accountability court trying Nawaz. After he raised a hue and cry, the Rangers withdrew their entire security deployment outside Parliament. Corps commanders went into a seven-hour huddle on October 3, ostensibly for a security situation review and an appraisal of Bajwa's latest Afghanistan visit, even as the civilians decided to question the army about the Rangers' deployment. DG, ISPR Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor laboured hard in a long press conference to explain away this glitch, without convincing anyone.

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