

ISAS Brief

No. 337 – 18 August 2014

Institute of South Asian Studies
National University of Singapore
29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
#08-06 (Block B)
Singapore 119620
Tel: (65) 6516 4239 Fax: (65) 6776
7505 www.isas.nus.edu.sg
<http://southasiandiaspora.org>



Pakistan: Populism and Real Politics

Shahid Javed Burki¹

The marchers under the banners of two parties—the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the Pakistani Awami Tehrik (PAT)—didn't get very far from Lahore as the sun set on 14 August 2014, the country's Independence Day anniversary. As with so many other targets the two political groups had set for themselves, this too didn't yield the expected results. The two parties came up with the idea of a “million-man march” to focus on their very different and seemingly irreconcilable goals. Imran Khan, chairman of PTI, wanted to topple the government headed by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and have a mid-term election held which he hoped to win. Tahir ul Qadri, the Sufi from Canada and the head of PAT, on the other hand, wanted to topple the system, not just the man who was heading it. Both wanted change to serve their different purposes; and in the process they brought the country to the edge of yet another political abyss.

What was the underlying dynamics that produced this particular political convulsion? Why were tens of thousands of young people prepared to appear on the road connecting Lahore

¹ Mr Shahid Javed Burki is Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be contacted at sjburki@gmail.com. Opinions expressed in this paper, based on research by the author, do not necessarily reflect the views of ISAS. During a professional career spanning over half a century, Mr Burki has held a number of senior positions in Pakistan and at the World Bank. He was the Director of China Operations at the World Bank from 1987 to 1994 and the Vice President of Latin America and the Caribbean Region at the World Bank from 1994 to 1999. On leave of absence from the Bank, he was Pakistan's Finance Minister, 1996-97.

and Islamabad to join these two protest marches? Answers to these questions should help in understanding the factors that are driving politics in Pakistan and also in indicating what should be the course for the future which could bring relative political stability.

Pakistan has reached a defining moment in its highly erratic development because of the confluence of four distinct factors. Two of these are demographic, one is economic and the fourth is political. Begin with demography. Because of the high rate of population growth in the recent past, Pakistan's population is young. The median age is only 22 years, which means that, of Pakistan's 190 million people in 2014, 95 million are under that age. The youth's aspirations in an inter-connected world are very different from those of the generations that came before them. The young, acutely aware of what is available to their counterparts in other parts of the world, want the same kind of access to goods, services, and political participation. They want to be represented in the political system, not to be ruled by it.

Pakistan has also been urbanising rapidly, at a rate much higher than the government statistics indicate. A population census has not been held for 16 years in large part because the landlord-dominated political establishment would not like to concede political space to urban interests. The proportion of urban population is perhaps as high as 50 to 60 per cent of the total. This means that more than 100 million people live in towns and cities. Urbanisation is occurring not only because of the migration of rural folks to urban areas. The rapid development of communications and the social media have brought urban values and attitudes to the rural population.

The third element in this changing situation is economics. There has been a significant slowdown in the rate of growth in the national product. During 2008 to 2013, the five-year period when the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) ruled the country from Islamabad, the economy grew at an average rate of 3 per cent a year. This was less than one-half the rate of increase needed to accommodate some million-and-a-half newcomers who join the workforce every year. Again, official statistics don't really tell the whole story. The rate of unemployment is much higher than what the government's data indicate. There is considerable underemployment. Pakistan's social structure is such that even those who are under-employed end up providing a helping hand to the households in which they live. This

keeps the unemployed somewhat occupied but adds little or nothing to household income. There is much “disguised employment” in both rural and urban areas.

The fourth element is politics. Here we may want to go back to the writings published decades ago by two American academics. Samuel Huntington who gained fame later for writing *The Clash of Civilizations* had written an even more powerful book earlier. In *Political Order in Changing Societies* he suggested that relative deprivation can alienate people to such an extent that they resort to agitation – even violence – in their attempts to change the existing structure in their favour. The political-economist, Albert Hirschman, in *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, wrote about the three options available to those who are alienated from the system in which they live. If voice and loyalty are not possible, the disgruntled head for the exit. This is what hundreds of thousands of young people chose to do in Pakistan by marching to Islamabad on 14 August.

That the demographic and economic changes would unleash destructive political forces should have been anticipated. To understand why that could happen, we should compare two very different developments in Pakistan’s neighbourhood. It was relative deprivation that drove hundreds of thousands of youth in the Middle East to enact the “Arab Spring”. Those who thought that that convulsion would bring about the long-awaited political development of the area should have understood that it takes time and a great deal of effort to create inclusive and representative political systems. This point has been emphasised at some length in Francis Fukuyama’s forthcoming book, *Political Order and Political Decay*. The only country that was positively affected by this youth-led movement in the Middle East was Tunisia, which unlike Egypt, Libya, Syria and Iraq was socially and politically more developed.

The other example comes from the other side of Pakistan—from India. The wave of alienation and resentment in that country produced by the tired management of the economy and the political system during the ten-year rule of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also produced a convulsion. However, it did not take the form of destructive marches but the electoral triumph of Narendra Modi and his organisation, the Bharatiya Janata Party. The inherent institutional strength of the Indian political system was able to absorb in a constructive way the dynamics unleashed by the weak performance of the Singh administration.

Even if the elections of 2013 in Pakistan were rigged, it is doubtful that the result would have been much different. The electorate showed great maturity by clearly signalling with their votes what they wished to get from the political system. They wanted to punish the PPP for poor governance during the five years it was in office. They wanted to give the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) a chance to apply its Punjab model for the rest of Pakistan. That model had made Punjab the more vibrant part of the country's economy. They wanted Imran Khan and his PTI to wait in the wings if the PML(N) were to stumble. The election results represented a swing in the party affiliation of the youth from the PPP to the PML(N). This was not a permanent realignment. This politically mobile group is likely to move again if the PML(N) does not deliver the desired results. The move could be in the PTI's direction. But instead of waiting in the wings where the electorate had placed him, Imran Khan became impatient and wanted power now rather than in 2018 when the next elections are likely to be held. Will his impatience hurt him? We will have to wait for answer to this question.

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