

ISAS Brief

No. 340 – 29 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: Moving Towards a Solution

Shahid Javed Burki¹

There is growing frustration in Pakistan that the leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the governing party in Islamabad, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led by Imran Khan and the Pakistani Awami Tehreek (PAT) led by the cleric Tahirul Qadri have not found a way to resolve their differences. The agitation started on 14 August 2014, the country's Independence Day anniversary, has continued for two weeks. The PTI has six demands on the table; the PAT two. The only thing common between the two sets of demand is the call for the resignation of the "Sharif brothers" – Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif. The brothers owe their positions to their victories in the elections of May 2013.

In a democratic system that Pakistan is hoping to become, regime changes are brought about by elections or by votes of no-confidence in the assemblies. The PML (N) came to power because of its electoral triumph in 2013; its overwhelming presence in the National Assembly and in the

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.

Punjab Provincial Assembly had ensured that it could not be dislodged from either because of its political legitimacy. The PTI's case against the PML(N) was based on its assertion that the elections were massively rigged by the PML(N) which, at the time the poll was held, did not govern the country but was in power in Punjab. Even though the elections were supervised by the caretaker administrations in Islamabad and Lahore respectively, and their heads were chosen through agreement among the ruling and opposition parties, the PTI claimed that the Sharif brothers had enough influence over the bureaucracy and the judiciary to influence the conduct of the elections. It had moved the Election Commission of Pakistan and the courts to call for a recount in four Punjab constituencies, but did not win rulings in its favour. Consequently, it resorted to agitation politics. Its list of demands included a thorough probe into the way the elections were conducted.

The PAT, on the other hand, wanted not just regime change but a change of the entire system. It wanted the constitution to be abrogated and a breathing space of two years to be provided during which the country could be governed by a group of technocrats and scholars while a new constitution could be written. Although Qadri is a cleric, his demands did not include any relating to the role of Islam in politics.

The government's initial approach towards the two groups was to use force to keep them out of Islamabad. It blocked the roads to the city and created a "red zone" with no unauthorised access. The "red zone" included the parliament building, the presidency, the residence of the prime minister and prime minister's secretariat, the secretariat complex and the diplomatic offices and residences. These restrictions were relaxed as the two large groups of tens of thousands people proceeded from Lahore to towards Islamabad on 14 August. Initially the PTI and the PAT were allowed to set up speakers' platforms just outside the "red zone" but then were allowed to move into the zone and operate from outside the National Assembly compound.

A series of meetings were held between the senior leaders of the PML(N), the PTI and the PAT between 25 and 29 August. The government accepted five out of the six PTI demands. All of them concerned the modalities of reviewing the conduct of the 2013 elections. The PML(N) also agreed that the prime minister would resign in case the probe into the elections found that he was responsible in some way for any interference with the elections and that he had indeed influenced its outcome. The PTI also changed its stance, indicating that it would be satisfied if the prime

minister took leave of absence for a month or so while the election probe was being conducted. That, however, was not acceptable to Nawaz Sharif.

During the course of these discussions, Imran Khan adopted a number of other postures. He and his party decided to quit the National Assembly with the PTI members submitting letters of resignation to the Speaker. The PTI chief also called his followers not to pay taxes and utility bills, defining these as aspects of a civil disobedience movement he was launching.

This move, judging by the commentary in the media, was not received well by the public at large but may have kept the former cricketer's followers and audience in place. On 18 August, the International Monetary Fund issued a formal statement about the state of the Pakistani economy. It said that it "was encouraged by overall progress made in pushing ahead with policies to strengthen macroeconomic stability and reviving investment and growth. Economic indicators were generally improving with growth continuing to gain momentum, inflation on a downward trajectory, and credit to the private sector rebounding sharply. GDP growth is now expected to rise to 4.3 percent in fiscal year 2014/15 (to June 30) compared to a provisional estimate of 4.1 percent in FY 2012/13".

The fact that the public sentiment about the state of the economy had also turned positive was revealed by a survey conducted by the Washington-based Pew Research Centre. It found that 36 percent of the people surveyed in May 2014 were of the view that the economy was improving as against 20 percent in 2012. The proportion of those satisfied with the country's direction increased from 12 percent to 25 percent in the same period. The same survey found that 64 percent of the population viewed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif favourably compared to 53 percent in the case of Imran Khan, the PTI leader. General Raheel Sharif, the Army Chief, came in third with an approval rating of 41 percent. (See table below.)

Table 1: Ratings of the Leadership (April 15 - May 7, 2014)

	Favourable	Unfavourable	Don't know
Nawaz Sharif	64	32	4
Imran Khan	53	24	22
Gen. Raheel Sharif	41	12	48

Iftikhar Chaudhry	40	19	41
Mamnoon Hussain	29	16	55
Asif Zardari	27	69	4

Source: Pew Research Centre

On 27 August, following a two-hour long meeting with General Raheel Sharif a day earlier, Prime Minister Sharif made a defiant speech in a rare appearance in parliament that suggested that he was unwilling to make major concessions to the demonstrators, wrote Farhan Bokhari in the *Financial Times*. “Business leaders and middle-class Pakistanis, some of whom supported Mr. Khan in last year’s election, say they are concerned by the way the protests are disrupting the economy and opening the door to the armed forces intervention”, he continued in his report.

The door to the military was opened but only a bit. The prime minister met General Sharif for the second time on 27 August and invited him to play the role of a mediator between the two warring sides. The general accepting the request, called Imran Khan for a meeting on the night of 28 August and offered him a way out of the box in which the PTI leader had placed himself by continuing to insist on his sixth demand – the prime minister’s resignation. The general suggested that the investigation into the way the elections were conducted could be supervised by the military, an institution that had the highest approval rating in the Pew survey cited below. See Table 2. The political crisis seems to be moving towards a resolution.

Table 2: Ratings of Institutions (in percentage, in two categories)

	Bad	Good
Military	8	87
Media	16	68
Religious leaders	20	64
National Government	31	60
Courts	26	47
Police	58	33

Source: Pew Research Centre

.