

ISAS Brief

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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>



Is Pakistan Sliding Towards a Coup?

Shahid Javed Burki¹

In wondering which way Pakistan is headed I am reminded of a conversation I had with General Abdul Waheed Kakar in July 1993. He was then Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff and had forced President Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to resign from their respective offices. An interim government was appointed with Moeen Qureshi, former Senior Vice President at the World Bank, as Prime Minister. I was made the new prime minister's economic advisor. Recounting what had happened a month earlier, the General said that "two senior-most executives of the government, the president and prime minister, were behaving as school kids. I had to come in as a monitor and expelled both of them". It does not seem that the political system has matured much in the 20-year sordid period since then. Once again the army has been called in to arbitrate a dispute between the government and one noisy section of the opposition. But if the armed forces are now on their way back into the corridors of political power, they are following a script different from that which 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.

four previous military presidents had read. In 1958, 1969, 1977, 1999, the military, distrusting the civilian leadership, moved in quickly to take charge of the country in stress.

Given the involvement of the military in Pakistan's political affairs, a number of fingers were pointed at the generals as the confrontation between the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and some of his bitter opponents developed into a full-blown crisis now. Several interpretations of the role played by the military were offered. According to one written for *The Wall Street Journal* by Saeed Shah, the military agreed to help the prime minister come out of the crisis but at a price. He had to agree to the filing of the first information report (FIR) that begins the investigation of a crime in the Pakistani administrative and judicial systems. The FIR cited here concerned the death of at least ten people in Lahore's Model Town, when the followers of the cleric Tahirul Qadri were confronted by the police. The FIR named the prime minister, his brother (chief minister of Punjab) and several senior members of the PML(N) among those alleged to be involved in the crime.

The other price was even steeper. The military would like to "see the prime minister give up control of security affairs and strategic foreign policy". "The power shift follows nearly two weeks of boisterous street protests that have turned into a proxy fight between the civilian government and coup-prone military used to having its way – a conflict government officials say has been won by the armed forces", continued *The Wall Street Journal* story. There was a widespread belief that the political conflict was shaped and then supported by the military. "The prime minister had pledged to make peace with India and to end Pakistan's interference in Afghanistan, both issues that riled a military and intelligence establishment used to controlling strategic interests". The *Journal's* report referred to a conversation with an adviser to the military, according to whom "the armed forces concluded that Mr. Sharif was a national-security risk and had to be ousted. But in the recent stand-off, the military appeared to have chosen a softer option curtailing Mr. Sharif's powers related to security matters".²

Husain Haqqani, also writing for *The Wall Street Journal*, provided an explanation of why the prime minister had lost so much political authority in just 15 months after winning a decisive electoral victory. "Mr. Sharif is vulnerable partly because he governs more like a monarch than a democrat, putting family members and retainers in key government

² Saeed Shah, "Pakistan Prime Minister to face murder charges", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29-31 August, 2014, pp. 1 and 16.

positions...Mr. Sharif also tends to encourage polarization by refusing to compromise with political opponents, a short-coming that his predecessor Mr. Zardari avoided along the way to competing his full five-year term”.

He spoke from experience having served as Pakistan’s Ambassador to the United States for most of the five-year term of Asif Ali Zardari as President. Washington, the former ambassador was of the view, should remain engaged with a country that was economically and politically fragile but was located in an important part of the world. He also advised the Obama Administration not to “ignore the political turmoil in Pakistan as a part of its general retreat from foreign affairs”. The former ambassador argued that Washington should put its weight behind Pakistani democracy, discourage Pakistan’s generals from manipulating protestors and nudge Prime Minister Sharif towards a more inclusive-government approach.³

Once the consensus among analysts had developed that the military was siding with Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri, questions about the nature of the endgame were raised. Nazish Brohi, writing for *Dawn*, felt that what was being staged was reactive theatre “where the play proceeds in tandem with audience reactions. Or to bring in social theory, where the representation stops being a copy of the real, the point of origin becomes irrelevant and it takes on a life of its own: simulacrum”. Referring to the midnight coup by General Pervez Musharraf, which followed a well-scripted play staged several times before and in which the military took over the main television station to announce that the military had taken charge, the narrative here runs as follows: “we will not have troops jumping over PTV gates to organize a post-midnight speech. Instead we have organized mobs of people to counter organized representatives of people, till representation itself requires mediation”. The last passage is a reference to the decision taken by Prime Minister Sharif to call in the army to mediate the dispute. But there was doubt whether that would result in yet another coup. “All mainstream political parties banded together on the bottom line that a takeover will not be countenanced. Civil groups were equally emphatic with avowals from journalists’ and lawyers’ associations and political and social activists. The courts have iterated that no unconstitutional steps will be tolerated and no Presidential Constitutional Orders would go

³ Husain Haqqani, “Pakistan’s protests risk another military coup”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 August, 2014, p. 11.

through”.⁴ The PCOs had become the device used by four military presidents not only as the “legal” framework to govern but also to tinker with the Constitution.

The senior military commanders met in Rawalpindi for four hours on the evening of 31 August and once again reiterated their view the “political problems should find political solutions”. But the rebel leaders were not inclined to compromise on their demand that the only political solution acceptable to them was the resignation of the prime minister.

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⁴ Nazish Brohi, “Civil-military ties, not back to square one”, *Dawn* 29 August, 2014, p. 9.