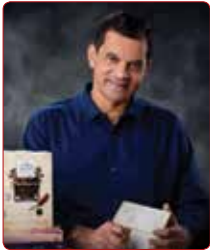


Pakistan at a Crossroads: The Army, Politics, and Foreign Influence



Ajay Singh

Pakistan faces political turmoil with Anwar Haq Kakar as the interim Prime Minister amidst delayed elections. While Imran Khan remains popular, he's embroiled in legal battles, making his election participation uncertain. The army increasingly controls the nation indirectly, fostering a 'hybrid government'. Internationally, Pakistan's position weakens, with the US favouring Army control and sidelining Pakistan. Islamist extremism rises, intensifying as elections approach. China's patience thins due to slow progress on the CPEC and security concerns, but sees the Army as its ally. Pakistan's future hinges on the Army's manoeuvres and international relations.



A Caretaker Government and Elections

They say that if you stare at an abyss long enough, the abyss stares back. Pakistan has been staring at an abyss for decades now, and perhaps what it sees in the dark there is a reflection of its own future.

A lot has changed in Pakistan, but little has changed. For starters, there is a new Prime Minister. Anwar Haq Kakar, a little-known senator from Baluchistan was appointed as head of the national caretaker government to oversee parliamentary elections in one of the most turbulent periods in its history.

Prime Minister Kakar has his task cut out. Shehbaz Sharif dissolved the National Assembly three days before the completion of its five-year term and Kakar was sworn in as the Interim Prime Minister, heading a government of bureaucrats and technocrats that will oversee government functioning till the new government is in place after the elections. The appointment of a caretaker government is a stipulation of Pakistan's constitution to ensure that elections are held in a free and unbiased manner. The constitution also states that elections are to be held within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament.

Therein lies the nub. Elections would thus be due in November this year, but a technicality has ensured that it cannot happen. In 2023, a national census was conducted and hurriedly passed through parliament. The census counted Pakistan's population as 240 million, up from the 210 million in the 2017 elections. As per law, the Election Commission has to notify constituencies based on the new numbers

and can hold elections only after that is done. That process itself will take 4-6 months and it thus seems unlikely that elections will be held this year – perhaps March – May 2024 seems more likely.

There is one more catch. The caretaker government is to only oversee day-to-day functioning till the new government is in place. Kakar's prime claim to fame is that he is close to the Army Chief, Gen Syed Asim Munir, who after the 9 May uprising has emerged stronger and plays a more direct role in the government (albeit by proxy). The powers of the caretaker government have been significantly enhanced to enable them to make crucial, long-term policy decisions. This will allow Munir to push through hard reforms and critical decisions that have been mandated by the IMF in return for its \$3 Billion tranche, and still escape the backlash that these measures would entail.

But what of the elections themselves? The main question being asked is whether Imran Khan will, or will not, be allowed to participate. As per public sentiment, he is still the most popular man in Pakistan and if allowed to contest, will sweep the elections in a landslide. But will he be allowed to contest? The establishment has gone all out to discredit him. The media is

banned from mentioning his name; his image was even removed from the Pakistan Cricket Board's list of iconic national cricketers. In any case, he is still in jail serving a three-year sentence in the Toshakhana case for illegally retaining 58 gifts received during state visits abroad. This ruling debars him from contesting elections for five years. He received a temporary reprieve when the Islamabad High Court suspended the sentence and ordered his release. But it is a suspension and not a revoking of the sentence. He still languishes in jail for leaking state secrets; a charge that came about when he waved a piece of paper claiming it was a cypher that showed US involvement in his ouster. That promptly got him booked under the Official Secrets Act. Even if he

gets a reprieve from this charge as well, 154 other cases are pending. Although the judiciary has been relatively free and independent in its stance, Imran can still be pinned down in a raft of cases to discredit him as a political force

His party, the Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf is in disarray. After Imran's supporters went on a rampage on 09 May following his first arrest, the army clamped down. Within days most of the party's leaders and supporters were arrested. The top leaders also changed their stance (In Pakistani political parlance, underwent "software updates") and broke away from Imran to form what is called a 'king's party' – Istehkam-e-Pakistan. But despite all this, Imran's charisma still holds sway, and if allowed to lead his party, can still pull off an upset.



Corruption is in the spotlight as Pakistan's economy spirals downwards

But then Shehbaz Sharif's own party, the Pakistan Muslim League (N) is also eyeing a return. The paths are being cleared for Nawaz Sharif – now in exile in London – to return to Islamabad, and he was announced as the Prime Ministerial face of the party. But after Nawaz's run-ins with the Army, which saw him being removed from the chair three times before, the Army seems to be in favour of the more amenable younger Sharif, Shehbaz, who could well emerge as the next 'selected' Prime Minister.

The Army – Holding the Reins

All this brings out that the Army has gone back to doing what they do best – controlling the nation through proxy. A military coup or a direct takeover

carries the risks of accountability for failures of governance – and Pakistan faces too many failures now, for them to handle. They would thus resort to a ‘hybrid government’ wherein the civilian government runs the country with the remote control in the hands of the Generals. That is the pattern they will follow for the interim government and the one to follow.

And despite all these obvious mechanisms taking place, no one really seems to care. The USA – for all its claims of being the Champion of Democracy – is far more comfortable dealing with the Army (or a civilian government doing the Army’s bidding). In any case, they were not too fond of Imran. Also, with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan no longer has much use for it. So, though the USA and Western nations will make their noises about democratic processes and keep Pakistan afloat with slivers of aid, Pakistan is internationally sidelined.

In a strange irony, the USA has actually praised Afghanistan for “countering international terror groups” while ignoring Pakistan. Yet for Pakistan, the Islamic terror that it helped unleash is staring it in the face. The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan continues to launch deadly attacks in the border areas virtually twice a week – and the Taliban continue to provide covering fire and safe havens to TTP cadres inside Afghanistan. Pakistan no longer has any heft over its former protégé and the tensions with the Taliban threaten to open another front on the Durand Line. In the political chaos sweeping the country, the greater dangers of Islamic extremism have been ignored. As the run-up to the elections draws close, the Islamist groups will intensify their actions, and may even field extremist political parties in the fray. Their clout could enable them to be coalition partners in the next government – as they were with Imran’s government in 2017.

China is another major stakeholder in Pakistan and its processes. But from some indicators, even the Chinese are running out of patience. The CPEC is making very slow headway and there are growing instances of attacks on Chinese personnel. Freedom fighters of the Baloch Liberation Front have repeatedly targeted Chinese engineers and establishments near Gwadar. Mobs have attacked Chinese workers for ‘blasphemy.’ China would not be too concerned with the niceties of democracy and human rights, but will definitely want a return on the \$64 Billion of investments it has made in Pakistan. And they too see the Army as the only power that can

help them safeguard their interests.

So, with all this, the Army will be calling the shots till the elections and beyond. As it is, Munir is positioning the Army and himself as the institution that will revive the economy, fight militancy, handle external affairs, bring in investments and even restore electricity – but through a civilian face. They have already started selling stakes in oil and gas companies and power plants to UAE for \$2 Billion and are selling national assets to foreign nations and companies to raise funds. This fire sale of government assets to revive the economy may prove disastrous in the long run and impinge its very sovereignty. Perhaps China too, could arm-twist them to hand over parts of Gilgit-Baltistan, or even control of Gwadar port in return for debt exemption. After all, Pakistan handed over the Shaksgam Valley to China in 1963, and today Chinese presence in Gilgit-Baltistan is rampant.

What Next?

Many in Pakistan see that many of its problems can be resolved through peace and cooperation with India. That may be wishful thinking as of now, and the election season will only see a rise in anti-India rhetoric. But if the sentiment prevails, perhaps some kind of rapprochement and working relationship can be achieved. Both nations are now in the run-up to the national elections and no long-term decisions can be taken. Both nations are also likely to go into elections around the same time of March–May next year, which will be a delicate period for both. But the newly elected governments with a fresh five-year mandate could set about taking long-term policy decisions, economic cooperation and resetting of bilateral ties. That is unless something else upsets the apple cart.

Pakistan’s political, social and economic churn will continue. But so will the primacy of the Army. One cannot predict the outcome of the elections, or even if Imran will be a part of it, but in all likelihood another ‘selected’ government will be in power. And as before, the Army will continue to call the shots and be the shadowy hand behind government decisions. The same cycle will repeat itself and Pakistan will continue to peer into the abyss and stare at the dark within. [SA](#)

Ajay Singh is the award-winning author of six books and over 200 articles. His latest book “The Russia-Ukraine War” was recently released.