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# OPINION

## The Micromanagement of Politics in Pakistan

Ashish Shukla\*



Pakistan, as a society, remains desperate, fractured and divided along religious, sectarian, ethnic, linguistic, and provincial lines. Due to a number of reasons, right since the beginning, it failed to evolve a positive and common national narrative to integrate every section of society into a cohesive national unit. The nation was imagined insufficiently by its advocates but the politico-security elites from Jinnah to Shehbaz Sharif and from Gen. Ayub Khan to Gen. Asim Munir pushed it in a direction that no one appreciates today including the intelligentsia of the country. Those at the helm of affairs in Karachi/Islamabad have miserably failed to strengthen democratic institutions during their tenures.

Indeed, most of the ruling elites in Pakistan contributed to democratic backsliding in one way or the other. As a result, over the years, Pakistan found itself entrapped into a vicious cycle of unending crises. At present, the nation is passing through one of the most difficult phases of its history where most of the state institutions have either become incapable, ineffective or not functioning optimally within the existing politico-legal framework.

### State or Corporate Firm?

The ongoing crisis has multiple dimensions attached to it which makes it quite complex to resolve without resorting to large scale restructuring of important institutions. Pakistan Army remains

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the most dominant political force in the country. In present circumstances, it not only controls the levers of power in Pakistan, it goes on to micromanage everything including politics, economy, national security, judiciary, foreign relations and what not. Unlike in the past, when the security establishment had tightly gripped certain key areas of decision making, Pakistan army appears to be dictating terms in almost every domain of decision making. It is for these reasons, a section of society compares the Pakistani state with a corporate firm owned and operated by none other than the security establishment. Some consider politics in Pakistan just as another highly paid corporate job where the job security depends not just on your performance but also on the satisfaction level of the owners of the corporate firm called Pakistan.

Javed Iqbal, a PPP leader (not quite active these days) and father of the jailed PTI activist Sanam Javed, in an interview with Mansoor Ali Khan for his YouTube channel categorically stated that civilian politics in Pakistan is nothing more than a 'job'. During the interview he argued that "*Mujhe Nahi Samajh Aati Ki Pakistan Mein Log Politics Kis Ground Par Karte Hain. Yahan Na Left Ki Politics Hai Na Right Ki,*

*Na Have na Have-Not Wali. Yahan To Ab Sirf Yeh Hai Ki Naukri Kaun Achhi Karta Hai.*"<sup>71</sup> (I don't understand on what ground people do politics in Pakistan. There is neither space for left or right or for that matter for the haves and the have-nots. It only matters who does his/her job better.) Like a corporate firm, the job security of political leaders in Pakistan depends upon the satisfaction of the powers that be.

### **Instability as the New Norm**

History suggests that Prime Ministers in Pakistan have come and gone as per the wishes of the security establishment. None of the Prime Ministers so far has been able to complete a full five-year term in office. However, in post-Musharraf period, at least the elected parliaments have been allowed to complete their full terms. Since 2008 till date, there were four general elections in Pakistan but the nation witnessed six different leaders assuming the responsibility of Prime Minister. The incumbent Prime Minister Mr. Shehbaz Sharif assumed this responsibility twice, first for the eighteen months after Imran Khan's downfall in April 2022 and then after the February 2024 general elections. Their tenures ranged between two hundred

seventy five days to four years and eighty six days. Even Imran Khan, who at one point of time was the blue-eyed boy of the security establishment, could remain in office for three years and two hundred thirty-five days. This indicates that political instability has become a regular feature of Pakistani polity.

### **The Dialogue-cum-Negotiation**

The so called democratic order in Pakistan is greatly handicapped due to factitious inter-party political contestations between PML-N and PTI.<sup>2</sup> Both the parties do not fully rely on democratic institutions to resolve their outstanding differences. Instead, in order to gain an upper hand or get some concessions, they wait for signals from powers that be. There are reports in mainstream media about the dialogue-cum-negotiation between PML-N and PTI representatives. Two rounds of meetings have already been held. The third round will take place soon. PTI has so far put forward two specific demands; release of all political prisoners including Imran Khan; and constitution of a judicial commission to probe 9 May and 26 November incidents.<sup>3</sup> The real negotiations, however, are taking place behind the civilian veil and away from media glare.

There are reasons why these negotiations are taking place now. Firstly, Imran Khan and PTI have agreed not to target the security establishment openly, especially the top brass of Pakistan Army and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Instead, they have been given space to vent their frustration and ire against the incumbent government which one can very well identify just looking at the kind of statements PTI leaders are making these days.

It is important to note that ever since the removal of Imran Khan from power, he and his party resorted to a confrontationist approach vis-a-vis security establishment. They deliberately targeted the top brass of the Pakistan Army and ISI in their speeches and statements. Sit-ins and marches were used as a tactic to demonstrate Imran Khan's growing popularity among the masses on the one hand and to pressurise the security establishment to give in to its demand of a fresh elections on the other.

### **Crossing of the Red Line**

A redline was crossed on 9 May 2023 when PTI activists and supporters, following the arrest of Imran Khan, attacked and ransacked a number security installations in the country including the residences of Corp Commanders in Lahore and

Karachi, the Mianwali Airbase, ISI Building, Askari Bank, Askari Tower and most importantly the General Headquarters (GHQ) of Pakistan Army in Rawalpindi.<sup>4</sup> After this, the security establishment came down full throttle to suppress the PTI. Soon Imran Khan was rearrested and a number of prominent leaders of PTI along with a large number of activists were put behind the bars. Later his wife Bushra Bibi too was jailed in Toshakhana corruption case.

The second reason behind the negotiation is that the PTI has dropped its long-standing demand of getting what it would call “the stolen mandate” back. It is no secret that Imran Khan, despite languishing in Adiala jail, remains the most popular leader in the country, even if that does not mean majority of people support him and his party as the last elections showed (his party secured only 18 million votes out of 59.2 million votes cast). PTI’s independent candidates, in spite of pre-poll rigging and post-poll mechanisations, outperformed and emerged as the single largest group in February 2024 elections.

### **26<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment**

Third and possibly the most important reason behind the

negotiation process is the confidence of the executive (to deal with any emerging situation) generated by the recent legal and constitutional changes introduced through parliament. Through these moves, the ruling dispensation has changed the rules of the game in higher judiciary. The 26th Constitutional amendment gave powers to a parliamentary committee to appoint the Chief Justice overlooking the seniority principle.<sup>5</sup> The amendment was passed by both the houses of parliament on 20 and 21 October 2024 with an implicit objective of denying Justice Mansoor Ali Shah the position of Chief Justice in the Supreme Court.

Justice Mansoor Ali Shah was part of the eight judges that declared PTI eligible to get reserve seats in National Assembly and provincial assemblies.<sup>6</sup> PTI did not object strongly to 26<sup>th</sup> amendment because of a secret deal with the establishment to secure Bushra Bibi’s release from jail. Senator Faisal Vawda, who is considered to be close to the security establishment, claimed that her release was part of a deal.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the 26<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution was passed by both the houses of parliament on 20 and 21<sup>st</sup> October 2024 and Bushra Bibi got bail on 23 October 2024. This somewhat indicates a *quid pro quo*.

### ***The Legal Moves***

On 4 November, several key legislations were bulldozed through the two houses of parliament without any debate. The six bills were passed in less than an hour from both the houses of parliament. These laws allowed the government to ensure a favourable balance in higher judiciary by increasing the number of judges in Supreme Court from 17 to 34 and in Islamabad High Court from 9 to 12.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the law increased the tenures of three Services Chiefs from three to five years.<sup>9</sup>

This was done to ensure that Gen. Asim Munir continues to be the Chief of Army Staff till November 2027. In case, he gets one extension which is not uncommon in Pakistan, Gen. Munir will continue to be Chief of Army Staff till November 2032. No one knows for sure how many individuals would assume the premiership by then. What was interesting in this respect was the fact

that PTI did not object strongly to these changes in hope of negotiating another deal to get Imran Khan and other senior leaders out of jail. The negotiation process is going on and possibly at the end of it we may see Imran Khan out of jail.

### **Conclusion**

Given the history of volatility and the present state of affairs in Pakistan, it would not be an exaggeration to say that political instability has somewhat become a permanent feature of Pakistani polity. The ordinary people of Pakistan have suffered enormously due to the vicious cyclical instability which has gripped the nation. The politico-security elites could singlehandedly be held responsible for this sorry state of affairs in the country. Their personal ambitions and greed for power has harmed the nation to the extent that sometimes it appears to be impossible to get things back on the right track. ■

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