

Washington's handprints found in Pakistan crisis management

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The three-month crisis in Pakistan, which took a full-blown form on April 18 with the President dissolving Parliament and sacking the prime minister, has gone into a temporary lull, with both the President, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, and the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, agreeing to step down. A caretaker prime minister and a caretaker President have assumed control at the center and four provinces of Pakistan, and preparations for the Oct. 6 national assembly and the Oct. 9 provincial assembly elections have begun.

The crisis had turned into a sordid drama and the country was increasingly ungovernable. During this period, the duly-elected Nawaz Sharif government and the National Assembly were dissolved by the President, who was already engaged in a bitter feud with the prime minister. Five weeks later, the prime minister and the National Assembly were restored, under the order of the country's highest court. Within days, the provincial governments became involved in the bitter fight and within two days (May 29-May 30), the two provincial governors, both presidential appointees, hit back with the dissolution of the provincial assemblies. Although the Lahore High Court overturned the governor's decision to dissolve the Punjab Provincial Assembly on June 28, within minutes of the court's decision, the Punjab governor dissolved it again. Prime Minister Sharif, whose political strength lies in Punjab, gave direct control of the province to the federal government, in a bill which never took effect.

On July 11, the opposition, led by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who had openly sided with the President before the latter's sacking of the prime minister and dissolution of the National Assembly on April 18, called for a "long march" into Islamabad on July 16, with fresh elections. At this point, the Army Chief, Gen. Abdul Waheed Kakar, handpicked by the President against the wishes of the prime minister, moved in and began talks among the President, prime minister, and the opposition leader to bring the crisis to an end. On July 2, General Kakar gave Prime Minister Sharif two weeks to resolve the crisis, although both the Army and the government denied this officially.

Following the resignations, Senate chairman Wasim Sajjad was appointed acting President and Moeen Qureshi, a former senior vice-president of the World Bank, was named to head the caretaker cabinet. Provincial heads, many of

whom are retired Army men, have also been named.

U.S. meddling

Prior to and throughout the crisis, one major player remained in the shadows, namely Washington. Prime Minister Sharif got on the wrong side of Washington when Arab leaders, allies of the United States, began complaining early this year about the training of Muslim guerrillas in Pakistan by the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence, under the tutelage of Javed Nasir, an orthodox Muslim and a close follower of the prime minister.

Although Nawaz Sharif had supported the U.S. role in the Gulf war and bent over backwards to accommodate the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sharif is an industrialist and not a part of the feudal establishment. And it is Pakistan's establishment with which Washington has close cooperation. It really does not matter whether any particular feudal leader is pro-democracy, as the Bhuttos nominally are; he or she belongs to the establishment and hence is fully manageable from Washington. Sharif is not a part of the establishment, although he did his best to get in, and even today takes pride in having been handpicked by the late Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who was as much a part of the establishment as any other military ruler in Pakistan.

On the other hand, Benazir Bhutto, who is strongly backed by the Project Democracy crowd in the United States, was always part and parcel of the establishment. After she was sacked by President Ghulam Ishaq Khan in August 1990 from the prime ministership, she made peace with the two most important wings of the establishment—the Army and the bureaucracy, the same two wings which were involved in hanging her father for defying the establishment. Later, Miss Bhutto even became the messenger of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan to implore Washington not to label Pakistan a terrorist state.

Her sudden switch from being a virulent opponent of the President's extra-constitutional power to a co-conspirator with the President in bringing down the Sharif government was motivated by two basic designs. First, she was given the signal by Washington and the Army that she is acceptable, and hence wants to seize the opportunity to become prime minister again. The second reason, equally important for the

feudal class to which she belongs, was to save herself and her husband, who was slapped with criminal charges by the President.

At the center of the sordid drama stands President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, the 78-year-old bureaucrat par excellence. Having risen from a revenue officer to become President and having served in the highest office for the last two decades, Ghulam Ishaq Khan (known as the BABBA—Best and Biggest Bureaucrat Alive) has been a towel boy of the United States for decades. Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, the open-armed invitation to World Bank-IMF conditionalities, and umpteen coups in Pakistan—in all this Ishaq Khan remained a central figure, acting cunningly, secretly, and listening carefully to what Washington wanted. On the one hand, he bent with the slightest breeze, but on the other, in domestic affairs particularly, he was the cantankerous old man who refuses to listen and change. Of the 12 prime ministers so far in Pakistan, nine were dismissed, one assassinated, and one hanged after a sham of a trial.

In Pakistani politics, the winner takes all. The winner has the right to vilify, jail, and destroy the loser. President Ghulam Ishaq Khan is a highly successful product of such a system. But the bottom line always was his obedience to the United States; that kept him alive. Nawaz Sharif said recently that the reason the elections would be held in October was because the President's term expires on Dec. 12, and even after all this, he is thinking of seeking a fresh term once a new government and new National Assembly are in place. It is more than likely that Ishaq Khan expects this little benevolence from Washington. After all, he has served his masters well.

Toward an Army takeover?

It is widely acknowledged that Washington has gotten back control of the Pakistani Army after almost a decade. It was Washington's man in Islamabad in the latter part of the seventies and earlier part of the eighties, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who began to defy the United States, dreaming of Pakistan's control over Afghanistan. During the period that Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachov was steadily bringing the Soviet Union closer to the United States, General Zia, however, against Washington's expressed wishes, had continued to back the Afghan rebels and even picked his favorite, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, with the hope of controlling Kabul from Islamabad.

General Zia paid dearly with his life for this misadventure, but his replacement, Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, a Zia protégé, was no different. His dream, however, was a little more grandiose, thinking out loud of a strategic Islamic alliance with Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian countries. He probably did not realize that the winds of change were already blowing across the Pakistani Army. His support to Iraq's Saddam Hussein and his mistaken belief that the Iraqi Army would defeat the U.S.-allied forces made

him redundant to both Washington and President Ishaq Khan. It was a foregone conclusion that General Beg would not be given an extension, and he did not get one.

Since then, President Ishaq Khan veered the Army leadership toward a pro-U.S. and so-called professional line. General Kakar, like his predecessor Gen. Asif Nawaz Janjua, is favorably inclined toward rebuilding ties with Washington. It is no surprise, then, that on July 7 a news item appeared in the *Independent* of London which said that the western world is favorable to an Army takeover in Pakistan. "Democracy has been derailed and it appears that only the Army can do a repair job," one western diplomat is quoted saying. "We will back the Army to put the train of democracy back on the rails," the diplomat added.

Subsequent reports carried by the *Washington Post*, which said that the United States does *not* want the Pakistani Army to take over, were patently a sham. The article appeared on July 16, at a time when General Kakar had already worked out the formulation, with Washington's help, which led to the resignation of the prime minister and President. The news was propagated to "reconfirm" Washington's "faith in democracy" and opposition to military rule. However, the fact remains that on July 2, when both the President and the prime minister were insisting on hanging on to power, General Kakar had issued an ultimatum to the prime minister, and the reason that Miss Bhutto had called off her "long march" was that General Kakar, who had met her on the night of July 15, told her that the adopted formulation was in place.

Qureshi, the World Bank's man

But all the evidence cited here is convoluted, compared to what happened next. Following the resignation of the President and the prime minister, Moeen Ahmed Qureshi, a senior vice-president of the World Bank who had spent a good part of his career in Washington, was flown in from Singapore to be the caretaker prime minister of Pakistan. Qureshi, who is reportedly ailing from cancer, is an economist, and observers believe that his selection as the country's interim chief executive was dictated by Washington, in order to get Pakistan's balance of payments support through his contacts in the IMF and the World Bank.

In other words, Moeen Qureshi's job is similar to the one that was carried out by another World Bank vice-president, Dr. Mahbubul Haq, in 1988, following the death of General Zia. At that time, Dr. Haq, in collusion with President Ghulam Ishaq Khan, had signed the IMF conditionalities during the interim period, so that the new administration could not dilly-dally in signing those "important" documents once it was in power. It was the signing of those conditionalities which tied the hands of the Bhutto administration, and forced Benazir Bhutto to adopt the austere economic policies demanded by the IMF.

Pakistan now has a break from a three-month old crisis, but the pieces are in place to create new instabilities.