Pakistani's Military:
The Challenge of Sustaining Democracy in Pakistan

by Saeed Shafqat

Analysts today are skeptical about the possibility that Pakistani political parties – which have done little to promote a democratic culture internally, have pursued power with little regard for the public good and whose leaders are unable to communicate with each other without an "international broker" – can provide an alternative to the military. And yet, despite such political uncertainty, the restoration of party-based government is a positive development as it aids nation-building and helps facilitate agreement on issues of national significance. After the 2008 elections, for example, the leadership of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Awami National Party (ANP) have conducted politics by consultation and consensus building, which has created an expectation that they will be able to sustain a coalition government and stable government-opposition relations. Yet this fragile consensus could rupture if the "international brokers" (mainly the United States) withdraw support, change direction or lose interest in "managing" Pakistan's internal politics.

The PPP-led coalition government is in its third year of rule, but corruption, violence and sectarian strife continue to deepen the crisis in Pakistan. Despite significant political achievements – including the passage of the 18th Amendment, the seventh National Finance Commission Award (which governs the distribution of resources between the four provinces) and a Balochistan package (economic and other measures to address provincial sentiment after former President Pervez Musharraf's use of force there) – the political government's public stock has been low on account of its weak governance and inability to solve the deepening energy crisis, rising inflation and joblessness. All this has eroded public confidence in party government and democracy. Furthermore, its poor and insensitive handling of the worst floods in Pakistan's history could turn out to be a watershed for the resurgence of the military and even the demise of party rule.

Two contradictory trends are evident in Pakistan's post-February 2008 election era. The first is political continuity -- the third and fourth generations of the traditional feudal, tribal, religious and business families are entering the political arena. Middle class representation in elite structures remains marginal. Political parties remain personality-centric and are in decay: they are organizationally weak, lack vision and a clear program, and have no leadership succession plan. The ruling coalition led by the People's Party has banded together not on the basis of any principle but of expediency and a desire for power.

Second, the social class origins of the dominant institutions, namely the military, is undergoing transformation -- the recruitment pattern is shifting from the upper-middle class to the lower-middle class. The emerging military elites are increasingly from an urban background and not rural. This means that the social composition of Pakistani elites is undergoing change. The emerging elite has humble origins, holds conservative social and political views and reflect authoritarian tendencies rather than democratic values. Some elite circulation appears to be taking place but the implications for strengthening democracy and a party system remain uncertain.

Given these changing dynamics, the critical question is how is the military adopting to a party-led government? There are several indications that, despite serious crises, civil-military relations are undergoing an important transformation. This is borne out by several developments. In July 2010, Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gillani ended his tenure generation at the helm of military decision making. Until 1971, the base of military elites (brigadiers to general) was relatively small, around 120 officers. Today, there has been a five-fold increase to more than 600 officers. During the 1960s and until the mid-70s, the generals from a rural background and the Potohar – the so-called martial races – were dominant. But the new breed is more urban and comes from more modest social backgrounds. There is a noticeable shift from the "Huntingtonian model of military professionalism" to the "Janowitzian model" -- moving beyond a soldierly profession and assuming constitutional functions.

The first noticeable trend is that the military's role in Pakistani society has undergone transformation -- it has acquired a new sense of confidence, and is tentative and cautious in showing "deference" to the political
leadership. Second, the military elites have been vigorous and aggressive in consolidating control over the security, defense and foreign policy arenas. In relations with the U.S., the global war on terrorism, Afghan policy and relations with India, the military has shown tenacity and craftiness in consistently adhering to the political leadership that in this policy arena, the military will set the direction. The political leadership has shown little resistance and has covered its incompatibility by accepting the military’s role as a senior partner in this domain. This could mean the beginning of a new power-sharing mechanism between civil and military relations.

Is there any noticeable shift in this trend in the post February 2008 period? The indications are that the military has made a tactical withdrawal, under Musharraf (1999-2007), particularly after 2001, its policies had become too closely identified with the U.S.-led global war on terrorism. The operations that the military launched in 2005-06 in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly known as the North-West Frontier Province, for example, did not secure adequate political or public support, which had a demoralizing effect on the troops. As political and professional costs mounted, the military leadership sought to regain the trust and confidence of the people.

In the post-Musharraf era, the military elites reassessed and re-strategized their role and relationship with the civilian leadership. They have shown “deference” to the political leadership as compared with their predecessors, yet it is still too soon to tell what the future holds... the direction of civil-military relations in Pakistan may see a new turn and sustainable democracy may become an achievable goal.

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IN DEPTH: PAKISTAN’S TURMOIL

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Summary Conclusion

Suffice it to say that the contestation among these groups of officers continues and the command structure allows debate, but at the highest level, shared decision making and collective responsibility prevails and preserves the unity of command. That conveys the strength and resilience of the military as an institution in Pakistan’s political setting. There are two overarching factors on which there is broad consensus among all three groups. The first is that India is a serious and potent threat and that Pakistan’s military must be ready to counter this threat on any and all forums. The second is that Pakistan’s nuclear assets and nuclear power status must be preserved and protected. On both these points, there is a broad national consensus and public support. What worries international observers and domestic policy analysts is whether the Ideological and the Professionals are likely to retain their dominance. It is pertinent to recognize that the army is the largest among three services and army chief does have an impact in facilitating the selection of air force and naval chiefs. Kayani’s second term implies not only continuity and stability among the armed forces but also that he will see the end of Prime Minister Gillani’s five-year term in March 2013 and President Zardari’s in September 2013.

The military has been able to restore its public image and rebuild trust. Under Musharraf, the military’s professional reputation was damaged on three counts. First was the case of “missing persons” – allegations of abductions of suspected militants by intelligence agencies (ISI, MI) and illegally handing them over to the U.S. Second, during operations in FATA and NWFP (2004-07), allegations that the army violated the ethical and professional image and reputation among citizens. Third, the allegations that the military cultivates, protects and supports the “Jihadi networks” implied that a military that relies on a dubious civilian force to pursue its professional objectives is tolerating mercenary-like relationships with political and military leaders. This means that it is too soon to tell whether the “deference” the military has shown for the political leadership is a tactical shift or more deeply rooted. It is visible that both are showing forbearance and caution not to violate the trust. At the highest level, the military leadership appears to be giving advice to civilian leaders privately and firmly. Yet another less recognized trait of Pakistan military elites is that, for almost two decades, they have been deeply involved in insurgency, counterterrorism and clandestine warfare along with the civil authorities. Therefore there is a segment of Pakistani military officers who are seasoned, proficient and have acquired skills to confidently communicate with domestic and international political leaders. The war in Afghanistan, tensions with India, deepening involvement in the strategic dialogue with the U.S. and military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, have given a new professional set of skills of combat and negotiations to the top echelons of Pakistan’s military.

Thus the current generation of military leaders seems to be showing greater forbearance toward political leadership as compared with their predecessors, yet it is still too soon to tell what the future holds. However, if Kayani stays on the course he has shown in his first tenure (November 2007-10) as chief of army staff into his second term (until November 2013), the direction of civil-military relations in Pakistan may see a new turn and sustainable democracy may become an achievable goal. By December 2010, six lieutenant generals who are seasoned, proficient and have acquired skills to confidently communicate with domestic and international political leaders. The war in Afghanistan, tensions with India, deepening involvement in the strategic dialogue with the U.S. and military operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA, have given a new professional set of skills of combat and negotiations to the top echelons of Pakistan’s military.

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