

# Rebel or stakeholder?

## No need for a Pakistani Tahrir Square for Qadri's people's democratic revolution



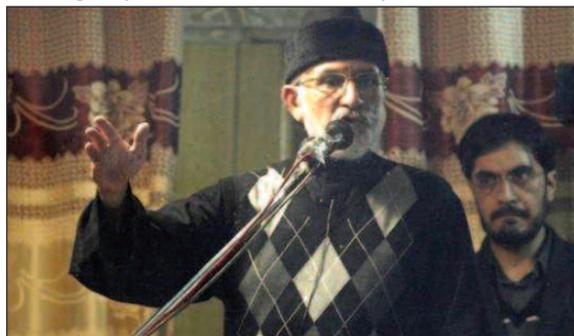
DR. SIEGFRIED  
O. WOLF

If one is to believe the reports of the international media, Pakistan is the most dangerous place in the world. An evaluation which seems to be increasingly en vogue with recent publications titled 'Descent into chaos', 'Frontline Pakistan', 'Armageddon in Pakistan', 'Pakistan's Lawless Frontier', 'Pakistan: a hard country', 'Breakdown in Pakistan' etc. Such platitudes – besides pushing the circulation of these publications – do not help at all to understand the complexity of the multi-layered challenges and conflicts which the country has to face. However, one has to admit that all these publications point at one significant phenomenon which cannot be denied: Pakistan has serious problems which go far beyond a negative image.

In this context, one has to state that due to the 'direct and immediate concerns' the current international attention and awareness is mostly centred around Pakistan's links with terrorism, especially its cross-border facets, but the domestic causalities and surroundings are either ignored or not taken adequately into account. Despite this narrow perspective, there is a common understanding that Pakistan is characterised by a weak civil society and civilian institutions, an imposition of a central governance system undermining any effective federal structural state organisation, and extremely unhealthy civil-military relations which finds its expression in the absence of civilian supremacy. The subsequent military dominance, supported by an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, in all political decision-making areas leads to a tremendous imbalance in favour of security related aspects of governance. In consequence, social and economic development is seriously hampered not only by the weak civilian institutions, but also by a 'military leviathan' consuming most of the national resources. This is especially significant, because this overstretched security apparatus is neither able to ensure stability, law and order in the country nor to compete with the arch-enemy India in a conventional manner. Furthermore, the few resources available to the civilian sector which are required to promote development outside the security-sector are hampered by an unrestricted, existential struggle between the civilian institutions. This is not a new trend; in fact it was determined the history of the country since its

existence. Historically most prominent is the conflict between the president and the prime minister which somehow got overlain by the escalating confrontation between the judiciary and the executive. This in combination with the disastrous management of natural catastrophes creating existential threats for large segments of the country's population, the disastrous economic performance worsened by the dubious reputation of being one of the most unsafe countries in the world is leading to an widespread political alienation of the populace. This frustration of Pakistanis is furthermore increased due to extraordinarily limited opportunities of political participation, articulation of interests and their respective aggregation through political parties. Since Pakistan's political parties are highly factionalised and personalised organisations in which loyalty is more important than efficient agenda setting and implementation, they have turned into ineffective organisations serving only particular interests of political dynasties and certain pressure groups. Therefore it is not surprising that the common people think that political parties are working against their interests. In consequence, Pakistanis are turning towards alternative forms and mobilisation strategies to gain a voice in the system not only to express their protest against the current conditions, but also to enhance effective participation in the political decision-making process. A significant expression of this phenomenon is reflected in the growing presence of social movements in the country. Generally one can state that social movements are not an unknown forum for non-electoral, non-party political activities in Pakistan. Today there are a large number of social movements, addressing a variety of issues, such as fair trade, economic and educational development, human rights, environmental problems, labour and minority issues, in operation in the country. However, they are not new creatures in the contemporary political landscape, rather artefacts which are deeply entrenched in the history of Pakistan's rich history of social movements. Particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, student organisations and trade unions were widely involved in non-party political activism. Though different martial law regimes often interfered with the activities of these organisations,

many managed to survive due to donations from international circles and Pakistani citizens living abroad. The Pakistani Diaspora and other supporters see such movements as potentially contributing towards the build-up of civil society as complementary to and in contention with the political parties and the electoral arena to help expand and deepen the process of democratisation. Among the most prominent examples in Pakistani civil society are the Woman Action Forum (WAF), a collective of women against the oppressive Hudood Ordinance introduced in 1979 and other themes of gender inequalities, the People's Rights Movement (PRM), an association of various social movements opposed to capital-intensive agriculture initiatives like corporate farming, the 'doctors movement' against corporatisation, the 'lawyers movement' against the suspension of the chief justice in order to restore the independence of judiciary which was challenged by the then rule of



military backed President Pervez Musharraf, or the initiative of cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan to transform Pakistan into an 'Islamic welfare state'. Often not mentioned or forgotten is the fact that Pakistan has also witnessed a couple of pro-democracy movements which led to the toppling of several military as well as authoritarian civilian regimes marking a 'Pakistani Spring'. Most recently the domestic as well as international media have now tried intensively to subsume the so called 'People's democratic revolution' of Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri into the very same line.

In brief, Qadri tried to organise a major non-violent protest – 'the march of millions' – to force the current government to step down and to dissolve the parliament before the end of the term. The subsequent aim was to pave the way for a new caretaker government that is convenient for military as well as the Supreme Court. However, Qadri's sudden appearance, and its timing, just

some months before the country was to experience the first regular and democratic transitions of power between two civilian governments, took even veteran political observers by surprise. His main thrust was a harsh critic aimed at the two major political parties of the country Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) combined with the promise of cleaning-up the political system of corrupt practices.

These ambitious goals and the manner in which the whole situation developed raised a series of interesting questions: First of all who is this Qadri? Second, where does his money come from? Third and most troubling question – who or what is backing him? Organising such a major event in Pakistan without having the patronage of at least one of the country's major stakeholders or actors obviously does not match political realities. Whereas the first question is pretty much straightforward and easy to answer, the second

and third questions are rather difficult.

But let us start with question one. Qadri is a well-known eccentric Canadian based Islamic scholar of Pakistani origin who had made unsuccessful attempts to establish himself as a politician in the past. His Pakistan Awami Tehrik, a political party which he founded in 1989 was more or less seen as a pure 'one-man show' with no other well-known figures apart from Qadri himself. One should also mention that Qadri did not stand up in the 2008 elections after ousting of Pervez Musharraf in order to re-establish democratic structures. This is quite astonishing since it offered an occasion and platform to launch his 'altruistic vision' to improve the efficiency of Pakistan's political system. In the context of questions two and three, attempts to offer answers are turning out to be speculative in nature. Nevertheless, there are some determinants one should keep in mind whilst analysing the discussed phenomenon.

Doubtlessly, Qadri belongs to the moderate Bareilvi stream of Islam. Issuing a fatwa against terrorism in 2010 seems to distance him from the radical extremist outfits, especially the Taliban. It also makes the cleric an interesting person for the country's military and intelligence agencies. Pakistani security forces have not only lost control over numerous militant and extremist outfits, but have been finding themselves at war with them since over more than a decade. Having extraordinary difficulties in beating the Jihadists in military terms on the home soil, it seems to be a logical consequence to finally support moderate streams of Islam in order to counterbalance the extremists. However, organising 'only' some ten-thousands instead of millions it is unlikely that Qadri will be able to form a major entity of moderate forces which are politically fragmented and inactive.

Promoting and demanding a political role of non-electoral institutions like the army and the Supreme Court, it is common understanding that political parties are not in favour of Qadri. Therefore, the politicians were celebrating the negotiated agreement with this political cleric in order to end his movement as a landslide victory for Pakistan's democracy. Despite the fact that Qadri's movement was a fruitless endeavour, for him personally it can be interpreted as a cunning and successful initiative bringing him in the lime light of Islamabad's political arena. This was possible because of a much larger process, the ongoing change in Pakistan's power structure which offered a window of opportunity to bring him into the forefront of Pakistani politics. The fact that the Supreme Court issued an arrest warrant on the charges of corruption (an issue which is pending since Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf came into office) exactly during the time of Qadri's agitation in Islamabad can be seen as an indicator therefore. The two most significant features of this development is first the appearance of more actors. Pakistan not only witnessed the emergence of new social movements, which is doubtless an outcome of a much more active civil society, but also a growing private media sector focusing on the political and socio-economic aberrations in the country. The second feature is the growing independence of an extraordinary and vigilant Supreme Court, which might

be one of the most active courts in the world particularly since the 2008 elections. Being worried about its unchallenged role in the country's decision-making, the judicial activism is creating major headaches among the military top brass. In consequence, both sides, the Supreme Court, represented by its chief justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, and the armed forces represented by the COAS General Ashfaq Parvez Kayaniare, are trying hard to delineate red lines for each other. In sum, due to the formal rearrangements of power structures and the preoccupation of the major stakeholders, Qadri was able to occupy a place for himself in the country's politics – at least temporarily.

But besides choosing a strategically important time to gain national and international attention, Qadri seems that he and his 'People's democratic revolution' misinterpreted or ignored two significant trends. First, it seems that there is no need for a negotiator between the conflicting institutions of the country especially between the judiciary and the military. It looks like that they are able to figure out their respective limitations, at least for the moment when it comes towards non-interference into the electoral process. The fact that Kayani and Chaudhry were announcing the need for a redefinition of the concept of national security last year can be seen as an example that both are able to overcome their traditional acrimony. In addition, the fact that several civilian institutions are allowed to play a more active role in security related decision-making can be seen as an indicator towards some kind of normalisation of civil-military relations. Second, that there is a silent but still noticeable improvement in the work of political parties. It appears that Asif Ali Zardari is using his extraordinary power of being President of the country and head of his (currently leading) political party not only for the sake of keeping the Prime Minister in check but also to improve parliamentarism and political party work in the country. The conundrum how far this behaviour is due to Zardari's remarkable skills for political survival or a potential conviction in democratic values lies beyond the scope of this article.

Furthermore, it also seems that the ever tense relationship between the government and opposition seems to move towards a more constructive

one. This finds its expression in an increased interaction between the opposition leader Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan from the PML-N and the Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf from the PPP introducing first substantial signs of reconciliation, dialogue and a "spirit" of mutual understanding into the political landscape of Pakistan.

However, all these positive developments can't ignore the reality that the whole process of democratic transition and consolidation is still on the brink and that there is no guarantee that there might not be a déjà-vu of the 1990s where Pakistan's longest and turbulent democratic phase found an abrupt end through a military coup. Even if Qadri was able to put the government and the major political parties under pressure temporarily to find a common stand regarding his demands, this momentum of harmony will not last forever. Furthermore, the fact that the Supreme Court is trying to keep the military at bay does not a priori mean that Pakistan's Armed Forces and its intelligence agencies are ousted as political players. The history of Pakistan shows that as soon as the political establishment endured some degree of pressure it turned towards business as usual meaning a resurgence of old patterns of corrupted and ineffective governance. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that Pakistan's civil society further progresses towards a forth pillar of the state and acts as a regulating factor to maintain the new delicate balance of power in the triangle of government, military, and judiciary. Having this in mind, Qadri's slogans like 'save the state, not politics' sound bizarre and displaced taking into account that such statements were traditionally used as an invitation and legitimisation for the military takeover.

In this context, Qadri's rhetoric has walked a thin line between stabilising and distorting the latest political improvements. To sum up, there is no need for a Pakistani Tahrir Square, the Egyptian launch-pad of the Arab Spring, occupied by the cohorts of Qadri, who acts rather like a rebel for his own cause than a stakeholder of Pakistan's democracy.

The writer is a lecturer of Political Science and International Relations as well as a senior research fellow in the Department of Political Science, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University