



Comment

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Old Habits Die Hard!

First year of Nawaz Sharif's third tenure

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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 during the last years with publications titled 'Descent into Chaos', 'Frontline Pakistan', 'Armageddon in Pakistan', 'Pakistan's Lawless Frontier', 'Pakistan: A Hard Country', 'Breakdown in Pakistan' etc. But such platitudes only partly help to understand the complexity of the multi-layered challenges which Pakistan has to face. However, one has to admit that all these publications point at one significant phenomenon which cannot be denied: Pakistan contends with serious problems that go far beyond a negative image.

In this context, one has to state that in recent years due to the 'direct and immediate concerns' the current international attention and awareness was mostly centred around Pakistan's links with terrorism, especially its cross-border facets. There was a certain understanding that Pakistan is characterized by an unrestricted struggle between ineffective political parties, a weak civil society, and inefficient civilian institutions – an imposition of a central governance system which undermines any effective federally structured state organization, and extremely unhealthy civil-military relations which finds its expression in the absence of civilian supremacy.

But the matrix of implications and causalities of terrorism, militancy, religious extremism and the unfavourable socio-economic conditions, especially regarding

the quality of democracy and the state of the civil society, were either ignored or not taken into account adequately.

However, there were many promises and hopes in the 2013 election year in Pakistan. The first democratic transfer of power from one elected civilian government to another was largely celebrated as an event which could determine the critical juncture in order to change unfortunate traditional patterns in Pakistani politics. Or in other words, the elections were interpreted as a most crucial step towards a democratic transition.

Undoubtedly, the 2013 general elections were a milestone in the country's chequered political history. The Pakistani people witnessed several coups d'états, military dictatorships, elected governments with strong authoritarian tendencies, or military controlled civilian regimes. But never have the Pakistani people ever experienced the regular ending of the tenure of a civilian administration which subsequently led to free and fair elections without any derailment or disturbances that have been induced by Pakistan's omnipresent security apparatus.

There was much talk among the observers during the election process about several positive signs that indicate that the country is finally making its transition towards democracy. Statements by the military top brass to stay out of politics, the country's successful first steps in coalition politics, more professionalism within the political parties, the passing of several major bills through the national parliament, significant

constitutional amendments, the way in which demands for an extra-judicial technocratic caretaker government were ruled out, and finally the political rise of Imran Khan who was portrayed as someone deemed to be fit for preventing the downward spiral of the nation were seen as clear indications that the country was finally ready to join the league of democratic countries.

But by observing the democratic enthusiasm in 2013 one must wonder if this evaluation really matches the reality on the ground in Pakistan. One of the major puzzles is: to what extent are the statements made during the campaign of the victorious politicians and their respective political parties implemented in concrete political decisions? Or was 2013 just another short episode of wishful thinking?

The domestic political situation in 2014 still looks rather grim. Pakistan's socio-economic and political problems are mounting and it seems that Nawaz Sharif's government is not making much progress in any crucial field. The problems that Pakistan faces include rampant terrorism, multiple insurgencies, tremendous ethno-religious conflicts, an economy in free fall, the lack of electricity and a debilitating foreign policy. Being confronted with such extraordinary challenges can we still talk about a new positive era in Pakistan politics?

In order to do so, one should focus on analysing whether Pakistan is in a transition from authoritarian-technocratic rule towards the beginning of a linear process of

stabilization and consolidation of its democracy. Therefore, it is most important to assess the performance of the new government under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which has now been in office close to one year since the elections.

The first thing that catches the attention is how Nawaz Sharif has changed his personal leadership style, his way of making politics and to run the state of governmental affairs. This is gaining significance if one takes the trajectories of his first two tenures during the 1990ties into account. In his first two tenures (1990-1993 and 1997-1999), the civilian governments under Nawaz Sharif had the opportunity to consolidate their effective power to govern and to improve the quality, effectiveness, and ethos of the political and administrative institutions in Pakistan. Of high importance is that civilians at that point had the opportunity to establish institutionalized civilian control. Especially during Sharif's second tenure he entrusted with substantive power. Being endowed with a two-third majority in the parliament Sharif immediately repealed the 8th amendment, which was identified as the military's 'Trojan horse' within Pakistan's constitutional framework to exercise political power via the President. Furthermore, to reduce the option for the military to weaken his parliamentary position, he passed the 14th amendment (in 1997) taking away the rights of the members of the assemblies to vote with whichever political party they wanted

(anti-defection or horse-trading). It appeared that Sharif changed the political structures favouring an army-backed president and disadvantaged the civilian government. The fact that the Prime Minister was able to remove a President, a Chief Justice and a COAS seemed to indicate this and marked a significant power shift within Pakistan's civil-military relations. But the fact that Sharif replaced these three positions with Sharif's own favourites provoked much criticism, and only emphasised the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of his government. Due to his consequent unrestricted and unscrupulous search for absolute power, he weakened existing political institutions, especially the judiciary. Sharif, with his narrowly-based and personalized decision-making style, alienated most of his civilian allies in the provinces, leading to regional political destabilization and violent conflicts. Both made his government more dependent on support from the armed forces which subsequently gained more political influence.

Today it looks more and more like a *déjà vu* of the 1990s. Whenever he has the chance, Sharif turns back to his style of governance which is determined by the following features:

First, Sharif's leadership is characterized by an extraordinarily high degree of personalization with a strong focus on a few selected and loyal persons. It seems that Sharif has an interest in running

government affairs as if it were a family business. Nepotism in the current administration seems more widespread than in the 1990s.

Second, absolute centralization of power in the Prime Minister's office, more concrete under direct control of the prime minister. The most prominent example is that Nawaz keeps the Punjab (Pakistan's most powerful province), with the help of his brother Shahbaz, under his tight control. Furthermore, Shahbaz also has a strong grip on key federal state authorities and as such is helping his brother to micromanage most of the significant ministries. In this context, it should also be mentioned that Nawaz Sharif directly acquired four key ministries: defence, foreign affairs, communications and law. This must be seen as an indication that Sharif does not believe in any broader power sharing model. However, one cannot help feeling but investing so less in thrust into his cabinet colleagues and insisting in taking on personally most of the major responsibilities instead of delegating them, must be interpreted either as a lack of managerial skills or as a symptom of hubris.

Third, disempowering the cabinet. There is no doubt that Sharif's preference for monopolizing power happens at the expense of all other political institutions, foremost the cabinet. Instead of including the elected representatives of the people (civilians), Sharif relies on the bureaucrats

in running the ministerial affairs. As such, he continues the process of undermining the internalization of democratic procedures, norms, and values within the country's political-administrative institutional framework. In practice, this means that Sharif does not use the cabinet to exercise power. It seems that decision-making is done in other forums outside the given institutional structure and processes provided by Pakistan's constitution.

Fourth, Nawaz Sharif has the strong tendency of side lining the parliament. In theory Pakistan's constitution prepares for a parliamentary democracy. But until today parliamentarianism is not really a success story in the country. This is only partly because of the persistent military intervention into the political process. It is also a 'home-grown' problem within the sphere of (elected) civilians. Even a minimum level of efficiency of the lower house was for a long time not possible due of the absence of a constructive working relationship between the government and opposition as well as the subsequent extra-parliamentary activities like 'street politics', and/or disinterests of parliamentarians in many policy fields. But there were more unfortunate phenomena encroaching on the legislative sphere. Parliamentary work was significantly limited by an overactive judiciary which has frequently encroached on legislative prerogatives, foremost in constitutional matters. Additionally, the parliament was permanently hampered by

the executive (civilian and military), which has dominated the political agenda and the decision making processes. In consequence, most of the time the legislative was turned into a 'rubber stamp' body during the last decades. In other words, the activities of the parliament were more a matter of formality than of any substantial contribution to the political process. In this context, one must state that Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s contributed much to these negative factors avoiding the development of a functional legislative branch of Pakistan's political system. Today, the Prime Minister is apparently just continuing the traditional strategy of ignoring the parliament. He doesn't dare to attend the sessions of the parliament on a regular basis. Being reluctant to strengthen the role of the parliament in the political decision making, it is no surprise that also the cabinet, which is accountable to the parliament, follows the path of the Prime Minister by not taking the parliament as a place for political debate and decision-making seriously. Being deliberately downgraded into a body for briefing and ratification as well as to take on formal political ownership, the cabinet does not have many interests in parliamentary proceedings.

In sum, instead of establishing new rules of the game in order to make Pakistan more governable, ordered and peaceful, Nawaz Sharif is again following the patterns of politics that are responsible for the country's

overall bad governance. The latter is primarily a result of the Prime Minister's personal style of leadership. The impact of it on Pakistan's political landscape can be seen in the poor performance outcomes of his policies.

Taking into account the traditionally tensed relations between politicians and soldiers in general and the Prime Minister's own troubled history with the army in particular, one should shed some light on the current state of affairs in the country's civil-military relations first. By and large it can be stated that there is no visible improvement of civil-military relations towards the establishment of civilian control. The fact that the army did not intervene in the 2013 election process does not mean that they accept the supremacy of civilian governance. Rather, it seems that the army top brass maintains its control behind the scene and continues to dominate all relevant fields as well as to protect their corporate interests. Here, it seems Sharif is not willing or able to challenge the leverage of the soldiers within the country's economy. This is significant, since one of the major problems of all governments and the top reasoning for the poor performance, is the lack of funds. With view on the tremendous defence budget there is not much room to manoeuvre within the most fields of public policy. The fact that the combined losses of the largest state-sector enterprises (for example Pakistan Steel Mills, Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), or Pakistan Railways) and the energy

sector is more or less equal with the entire defence budget, showcases the urgency of the situation. But instead of cutting down the defence budget, the federal government has broadened the tax net and looks for further loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. Nevertheless, the defence budget remains untouched which underpins the high leverage of the military over Pakistan's finance policy. Also in other areas, it does not look like that Nawaz Sharif made any remarkable progress in gaining influence: Neither regarding the relations towards India and Afghanistan, nor internal security. The uncertainties regarding the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, cross-border terrorism and militancy in the tribal areas, a potential Hindu-Nationalist government in India, and an Afghanistan in transition after the period of Harmid Karzai presidency indicate that the soldiers will maintain their taps on these policy fields.

However, in the context of domestic affairs, there are no doubts that the security situation is worsening rapidly, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and urban centres such as Karachi. The increasing Taliban activities, in quantitative and qualitative terms, and growing violence against the country's ethnic and religious minorities are some of the most dramatic examples of this trend. Nawaz Sharif seems to have chosen accommodation and reconciliation towards the perpetrators of the past and ongoing atrocities as his

priorities. However, this approach only works when all actors involved have the political will to function as stakeholders in state and society in order to work towards better governance and democratic consolidation. Here, Sharif was at least able to forge political arrangements with Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaf to set up a provincial government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) as well as with political forces in Balochistan to keep the region relatively calm. But in the case of dealing with the Taliban, Sharif's 'reconciliation mantra' turns out into a disaster because of two simple reasons. First, the Prime Minister did not have any comprehensive strategy to deal with the Taliban and affiliated terrorists. Second, the Taliban as anti-systemic forces are not interested at all in any peace arrangements with any non-Islamic fundamentalist or democratic governments. Nevertheless, Sharif seems reluctant to accept that the Taliban are neither amenable for peace nor willing to compromise on their radical ideology and deeply held beliefs. Political accommodation and consensus politics are alien concepts to them. The Taliban consider democratic processes as a threat that can weaken the power and efficiency of the ideology that holds their movement together. Democratic contestation would deteriorate the Taliban movement's coherence and give room for fragmentation. Hence, it is in the nature and a matter of survival for the Taliban to fight democracy. Subsequently, militant Islamic

fundamentalism and development can't go hand-in-hand. As long as the Sharif is still undecided either to fight or to appease militants and religious fanatics, Pakistan will be far away from having peace and stability. The Nawaz administration should also be aware that the withdrawal of foreign troops from the region will not bring about any change in this direction. In result, foreign donors and investors are not willing to increase their engagement in the country.

Basically, besides achieving the GSP+ (Generalized System of Preferences) status with the EU (which grants Pakistan certain trade benefits) no major enhancement regarding the miserable economic indicators were achieved. Furthermore, the GSP+ benefits are accompanied by obligations and responsibilities, especially towards good governance and human rights. Indeed, the Pakistani government signed the necessary international conventions which are essential for obtaining the GSP+ status. But the more important puzzle remains untouched: will Islamabad commit to these conventions by incorporating them into national law? Here, the government was not able to deliver any remarkable outcome, especially not towards ending or at least containing sectarian violence or militancy towards the country's religious and ethnic minorities. Also regarding labour rights or environmental protections no initiatives were started indicating a sustainable betterment of traditionally disadvantages

regions and communities. If Islamabad does not comply with these key human rights and labour conventions, it might lose the GSP+ benefits. The EU created a precedent in this case by temporarily revoking Sri Lanka's trade benefits after Colombo failed to commit to these treaties. Losing GSP+ marks an uncalculated risk to the political reputation of the 'Sharif administration', not only at the national level but also in Punjab. As a result, it would be a tremendous, additional challenge towards the stability of the government. Islamabad is not only under stress because of the Taliban, but also because of the unpredictable and severe power load shedding. Here, beyond GSP+, Sharif was able to get some homework regarding the energy crisis done, but still it remains insufficient to function as a significant boost for the country's deteriorating economic conditions. The country's economy continues to suffer from slow human development, endemic corruption, a weak administrative-institutional framework, a lack of professionalism among its bureaucracy, tremendous budget deficits, draining foreign exchange reserves, and a political will unwilling to carry out necessary major structural reforms (especially those which would limit benefits and other prerogatives of their own profession).

To sum up, Pakistan's problems run broad and deep, and an approach that expects to solve the myriad issues tackling the underlying consequences as well as the

causes is most likely for many observers only a wishful thinking. The quality of law and order as well as the country's capacities for progress appears at a pathetic level. However, remaining in the old traditional patterns of 'muddling through' for political survival is obviously no option anymore for the political establishment, especially not for Nawaz Sharif if he wants to finish his tenure. Far reaching reforms in all governmental spheres as well as a national consensus on how to deal with the most crucial, pressing challenges are needed. However, after assessing close to one year of Nawaz Sharif's third attempt to run the country one can't help but feeling that it does not look like he learned many lessons from his previous time in office. Rather, it seems that old habits die hard, unfortunately for Pakistan and its people.