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Pakistan

A ‘soft’ military coup? – “The army has earned lost ground and is being presented by the media and the government as a saviour of the system”

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Claims and counter claims by Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf (PTI), Mullah Tahir Qadri’s Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) and the governing party of Pakistan, the Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN), of who contacted the army chief first for “mediation” or “facilitation” have puzzled the vast majority of people in Pakistan.

Late-night August 30 meetings by Khan and Tahir Qadri with the army chief General Raheel Sharif have been severely criticised by members of parliament as showing the weakness of the PMLN government. The government then came up with the excuse that it was the wish of the two “protesting long marchers” to meet the army chief.

Since August 20, a few thousand supporters of the PTI and the PAT have been occupying the main road leading to the parliament, Prime Minister House and the Supreme Court of Pakistan in Islamabad. Both right-wing parties were unable to mobilise a “million” people as promised to demand the immediate resignation of the prime minister on charges of rigging the May 2013 general election.

Despite claims and counter claims, it is an established fact that the government has allowed the two protesting leaders to have direct contact with the military. They both are expecting and wanting a military coup after their occupation of the main road, which is being televised live 24 hours a day by all main commercial media. It showed the extremely weak nature of Nawaz government’s democratic credentials.

In fact, a soft military coup may have taken place. The army has earned lost ground and is being presented by the media and the government as a saviour of the “system”. Thirty-four out of 65 years of Pakistan’s independence has been under military rule, the last ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, left power in 2009 after a mass campaign against him by lawyers and most political parties.

The military will be able to dictate all its terms to the PMLN government if it survives a hard military coup, a remote possibility that cannot be ruled out. The civilian government that has dared to show some independence from military domination for over year and half with its policies of peace talks with India and the trial of Musharraf may have to abandon these defiant policies.

The occupation of the main road by the PTI and the PAT has fizzled out. It has not spread all over Pakistan. The deadline set by the two parties’ leaders for the final show down has been extended over a dozen times. Imran Khan’s appeal for mass civilian disobedience was opposed by the majority of traders and businesspeople. His party has submitted the resignation of some 30 parliamentarians. However, the provincial government of Khaiber Pukhtoon Khawa, formed by Khan’s party, has not resigned, a double standard that has not gone down well with the people of Pakistan.

Khan launched his long march on August 14 to protest against the rigging of the general election last year. He is demanding that Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif resign to pave the way for a fresh election. The PTI’s Azadi March (liberation march) caught the imagination of many in Pakistan in its initial stage, however the expectation that 100,000 motorcyclists would lead the “million march” were not realised. It failed miserably.

A few thousand marchers left Lahore, from the residence of Imran Khan at Zaman Park, riding in expensive cars.

The Azadi March is being complemented by the Inqilab March (revolution march) called by the PAT. The PAT is a

religious political grouping active in the fields of education and health and has a worldwide network of charities. The government allowed the “Revolution March”, led by religious scholar and chief of the PAT Mullah Tahir Qadri, only after an initial bid to repress it. Tahir Qadri, a Canadian citizen, has talked about changing the system and replacing it with a more progressive set-up. The PMLN government's strategy to arrest workers and cordon-off the provincial capital Lahore and the federal capital Islamabad with large containers worked well.

The left-wing Awami Workers Party has characterised the two marches led by rich politicians and mullahs as reactionary and appealed to the working class not to participate. Both marches had reached Islamabad separately at the time of writing. The unity of the two actions was hit hard by the big egos of Khan and Tahir Qadri, who could not agree who would lead the rallies.

In the meantime, PM Nawaz Sharif has been repeatedly asking: “Why the march and what is our fault?” He asked the question in his long-awaited nationally televised speech on August 12.

Imran Khan says that the May 2013 general election was rigged and is demanding a new mid-term election under a government of technocrats. He later made a U-turn on the issue of a technocrat-led interim government after the president of the PTI, Javed Hashmi, objected and refused to be part of the long march.

The issue of rigged elections came a “little” — 14 months — late. During that period, Imran Khan formed the provincial government in Khayber Pukhtoon Khawa province and the PTI is still in power there.

Imran Khan was at ease with the federal government and started negotiations with the religious fundamentalist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As expected, the talks did not go very far and a military operation was launched by the federal government in June 2014.

Initially, Khan raised questions about the operation; his main objection being that he was not consulted. Later, it turned out that the interior minister Choudry Nisar, from the ruling PMLN, had not been consulted either. Khan endorsed the military operation reluctantly and offered help from his Khayber Pukhtoon Khawa provincial government.

Within a month of the launch of the military operation, Khan announced that he would march to Islamabad to finish the rule of a “corrupt royalist” government. Many commentators were puzzled about the real motives of the long march.

It seems that Khan, who has always tried to please the religious fundamentalists, is again on the same path. A military operation could not be opposed publicly, so he started a campaign against the PMLN on the issue of election rigging.

It is worth noting that during the 2013 general election campaign political parties like the Pakistan People's Party, the Awami National Party and the Muthida Qaumi Movement were attacked by suicide bombers. They were not allowed to canvass in public by the fanatics. Both the PMLN and the PTI were not attacked. The reason was simple: both were seen as sympathetic towards extreme religious groups.

Now the conservative right-wing parties are at loggerheads on the issue of power sharing. Both are in power, one in the centre and other in Khayber Pukhtoon Khawa province. Imran Khan wants power at the centre just 14 months after the general election. It seems an untimely decision as the PMLN has not lost all the popularity it enjoyed after the Pakistan People's Party failed miserably during its 2008-13 term.

The PAT and the PTI have presented the most serious challenge to the PMLN government in its one and half years in office. Both are using a revolutionary vocabulary to attract the masses. Azadi (independence) and Inqilab (revolution) marches are an insult to the real meaning of the two slogans. Khan’s PTI is supported by and joined by the rich of Pakistan. It has become a right-wing conservative capitalist party. The PAT is a counterrevolutionary party using revolutionary slogans. It wants religion as the dominant political force to guide the state.

These parties are gaining popularity because the Nawaz government has failed miserably to do anything to lift the poor.

The PMLN is overseeing a fast implementation of a neoliberal agenda. To fulfill the conditions of the International Monetary Fund for a US\$5 billion loan, the PMLN government has doubled electricity prices and increased the prices of gas and other services. A wholesale privatisation of major public-sector institutions has been announced despite massive opposition by several political parties and trade unions.

The issue of election rigging is just a cover for Imran Khan. His real motives include covert opposition to the military operation against Tehreek-e-Taliban, opposition to the PMLN’s attempt to put Musharraf on trial and to cover-up the performance of the PTI’s Khayber Pukhtoon Khawa provincial government.

The real question is: what will happen after the dharna (sit-in) in Islamabad? The PMLN has made it clear that it will not give in. The Lahore High Court has declared these dharnas unconstitutional. Imran Khan says that he will not come back without securing resignation of the prime minister. Tall claims have been made by both Khan and Tahir Qadri. It seems both are expecting some sort of military intervention. There is no other way to remove this government. However, direct military intervention seems unlikely at present:

â€¢ The two marches lack support in Sindh and Balochistan. That is an important factor why the military might not move to take power.

â€¢ There is a total opposition, at least in words, by all major political parties (except the PTI). Even the PTI leadership is paying lip service to the cause of democracy.

â€¢ There is still a vibrant lawyers’ movement and an activist judiciary that is totally against a military takeover and they are not going to validate a military coup as was the case in the past.

â€¢ Social movements, organisations and peasant and trade unions will oppose a military takeover.

â€¢ The present civilian government is not unpopular to the extent that a military coup would be accepted.

Imran Khan is in haste. His “rigging formula” is not being accepted by the majority of the people. His appeal is still confined mainly to Punjab. He has used very dogmatic language. He has made a bad case against the PMLN government. It might have been different if he launched his campaign a year or so later.

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