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Pakistan Army – Managing the Political Storm

Colonel Sushil Kumar Tanwar, VSM

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

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Image Source: Reuters



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On May 8, 2022, Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the Pakistan Army, issued a statement expressing its opposition to the attempts by sections of political parties, the media, and analysts to drag the armed forces into the domestic political discourse.¹

The extraordinary appeal from the military brass came in the background of the dubious role that General Headquarters (GHQ) had allegedly played in the toppling of the Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government. The reactions in social media, in particular, were brutal, with vilification campaigns like “#GoBajwaGo”, “#TraitorBajwa”, and “#BajwasoldtheNation” among the top trends on Twitter in Pakistan.²

For an army which, ever since Pakistan’s creation, has shown a remarkably insatiable thirst for power, and has practically ruled the country either through military coups or political manipulations, it must be an uneasy feeling to find itself in the line of such “friendly fire”.

This turn of events is even more ironic considering the fact that it was the Pakistan Army which is believed to have facilitated the victory of PTI in the 2018 general elections that led to the installation of a “hybrid regime” under Imran Khan.

However, this soft coup failed to deliver the desired results, especially on the governance and economic front. As the government increasingly became hostage to its internal contradictions and external pressures, the Pakistan Army pulled the plug, resulting in Imran Khan’s ouster from power through a no-confidence motion moved by the united opposition.

This tacit withdrawal of support under the cover of “neutrality” seems to have opened the floodgates for criticism of the Army, especially because the opposition parties themselves, led by the Pakistan Muslim League (N), had been accusing the Pakistan Army of playing ‘selectors’ and manipulating the 2018 elections. In a comic reversal of roles, Imran Khan and his political workers of PTI are now at the forefront of the anti-Army campaign with Imran Khan invoking the treacherous names of “Mir Jafar” and “Mir Sadiq” and even sarcastically remarking that “only animals are neutrals”.³

Playing Smart

By positioning itself as the ultimate guardian of the “territorial and ideological frontiers” of Pakistan, the Army has managed to create an unshakeable stronghold over the national polity. The relative inefficiency of other institutions of governance in Pakistan has, however, ensured that the military’s influence remains undiminished despite ignominious defeats against their arch-rival India, as in 1971. The Pakistan Army is therefore rightly termed as the “Centre of Gravity” of the beleaguered nation.

Although a key reason for this continued importance is the stellar role played by the Army in maintaining internal security, and ensuring that the state doesn't collapse or become subservient to radical terrorist organisations. Another critical factor in sustaining this dominant role has been the uncanny ability of GHQ to adapt itself to the changing political realities. The installation of the 'hybrid regime' and pretending to stay in the background is indicative of this smart strategy.

The Army, over the years, has also carefully cultivated a narrative that the political class in Pakistan is corrupt and unreliable, and any attempt to drag the armed forces into their political squabbling will affect the morale and dignity of the armed forces and ultimately harm the national interests.

The recent turn of events threatens to challenge the exalted sacrosanct status of the Pakistan Army, and the military establishment is in danger of no longer being seen as a holy cow. Although there have been earlier instances where the disproportionate role and power of the military were questioned by a few sections of the media and civil society, the current phase of public criticism is much louder and more widespread. This was reflected in the recent judgement by the Pakistan Information Commission (PIC), which directed the Ministry of Defence to reveal the perks and retirement benefits that are provided to the three-star rank officers of the armed forces.⁴

However, the Pakistan Army has resorted to its usual playbook for countering this latest assault on its image and reputation. It includes highlighting its achievements in the counter-terror campaign and the sacrifices being made by the armed forces while ensuring national security. It even took credit for the compliance on FATF action points and likely exclusion of Pakistan from the FATF Grey list⁵ and flaunted the award of the highest Saudi honour "King Abdul Aziz Medal of Excellent Class" to General Qamar Bajwa in recognition of "significant contributions to defence cooperation between the two countries."⁶

The Pakistan Military is also repeatedly reiterating its decision to stay away from political activities and electoral interference. In the recent by-elections for six constituencies, the GHQ refused to entertain the request of the Election Commission, which wanted the Army to deploy its personnel in the polling stations in view of the volatile environment and extreme political polarization.⁷ The Army also did not intervene even when the Governor of Punjab, Omar Cheema, wrote a letter to General Qamar Bajwa, seeking his help to end the political stalemate in the province.⁸

However, despite this deliberate posturing, no one in Pakistan or abroad is ready yet to believe these claims of being 'apolitical'. Instead, there are widespread apprehensions that 'tactical

retreat to barracks' will lead to even more sophisticated ways of political choreography by the military establishment.

The Power Struggle

The fall of the PTI government has brought to fore the speculation of possible differences within the hierarchy of the armed forces over this political change. The rumblings amongst the ranks and vehement voices of support for PTI within a section of the ex-servicemen's community can also prove to be potentially divisive for the armed forces.⁹

COAS General Qamar Bajwa, who was given an extension under uncertain circumstances by the same government, finds himself at the centre of political controversy. The public targeting of arguably 'country's most powerful person' raises uncomfortable questions about the motives and support cast behind this slander.



Graffiti against COAS Gen Bajwa was seen in many public places across Pakistan | *Source: Twitter*

Although the Pakistan Army is undoubtedly a highly professional and disciplined institution, the possibility of an internal power struggle at the top is being touted as one of the likely reasons for the current impasse. With General Bajwa due to retire in November 22 (presuming that he doesn't have any extension plans, as stated by DG-ISPR)¹⁰, the former chief of ISI, and the present commander of Peshawar-based XI Corps, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed is considered one of the leading front runners for the coveted job. His proximity to Imran Khan and the controversial move to Peshawar however might deter the current political leadership in power from supporting his case.

The process of appointing a new COAS will, therefore, not only put the delicate relationship between the Army and the government to the test but may also alter the power equations within the Pakistan Army.

However, despite this challenge, it should not be presumed that a change of guard will bring about a fundamental shift in the strategic outlook and ideological orientation of the military hierarchy in Pakistan.

Contemporary political developments in Pakistan have yet again demonstrated the perils of violation of the ambit of constitutional boundaries by the armed forces. As long as they remain focused on national security, the military in Pakistan will be both relevant and revered stakeholders. It has, however, unabashedly tried to exert its influence in almost every sphere of life in Pakistan and now finds itself in a quagmire of its own making. The Pakistan Army in particular needs to do an honest introspection and reflect upon its role and interests. If history is any indication, though, it may be too much to expect.

NOTES

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¹⁰ IANS, "General Bajwa doesn't want an extension: DG ISPR", *The Newsmen*, April 15, 2022, <https://thenewsmen.co.in/world/general-bajwa-doesn-t-want-an-extension-dg-ispr/69358#!>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.