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Pakistan: The Army's Growing Political Role

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THE CARNAGE in Pakistan on the weekend of May 12 and 13 was extremely perturbing. The most worrisome was the situation in Karachi, which saw its worst bloodshed in two decades. Since the unconstitutional ousting of the Chief Justice of Pakistan by the President, General Pervez Musharraf, the country has been engulfed in political turmoil. Opposition parties, already discontent with the political situation, have jumped on the opportunity and are offering support to the former Chief Justice by mobilising against the government. The former CJ has been traveling around the country, and has been welcomed enthusiastically by rallies launched by the opposition parties.

Musharraf's Growing List of Troubles

While the resulting bloodshed is of extreme concern, what is more disturbing is the longer-term implications of the political affiliations of the Pakistan military, which has by far emerged as the strongest political force in the country. The recent alliance between the federal government, that is the President, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement comes as no surprise given MQM's ambitions to secure seats, particularly in urban Sindh, in the upcoming elections. The General is desperate for something to go right in his world. With the recent killing of a NATO soldier on May 14th after the meeting with Pakistan and Afghanistan, the list of Musharraf's troubles seems to stretch endlessly. Reinforcing this is the declining political reputation and popularity of the pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League (Q), which was formed in 2001 by the President himself.

Thus, in a time like this, Musharraf is welcoming any form of support, at home or abroad. On a more macro scale however, the opposing stances of the Pakistan Army towards MQM are particularly worrying. The strategic U-turn in the military's policy towards MQM since 1997 comes as particularly disconcerting, as it casts doubts on the sincerity of the sole institution in Pakistan that the average Pakistani, or at least the average Karachiite, trusted in terms of ensuring stability. Also alarming is the potential of Musharraf returning MQM's favour in the next elections, which would inevitably lead to greater political participation of MQM in urban Sindh, particularly Karachi.

Between 1988 and 1992, Karachi's municipal government was MQM-dominated. Originating as a students movement in 1978 led by Altaf Hussain, this party gained great political influence in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most of this influence was limited to Karachi, as the party claimed to represent the rights of the Urdu-speaking community, who had migrated to Pakistan, mainly Karachi, at the time of Partition in 1947. Rights representation, however, was far from their agenda after winning a landslide victory in the 1988 municipal elections. Soon after coming into power, the MQM-led municipal government adopted the face of a local mafia. Violence and urban terrorism has ever since been a part of the political activities of MQM. After practically ruling Karachi for a number of years, the political party became the target of a military operation in 1992, which sought to curb the militant

activities of MQM. The tough actions of the military led to Karachi returning to normalcy, at least partially.

Military's U-Turn

Fast forward to 2007, what Karachi witnessed recently was a complete U-turn in the military policy. On 12 May, MQM launched a rally against “political jugglery in the name of independence of judiciary”. This rally was launched against opposition parties, which, in MQM’s opinion, are using the current constitutional crisis in Pakistan to forward their own political agendas. The President’s removal of the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, MQM claims, is being overplayed by opposition parties, who are converting a constitutional issue into a political one to disrupt the country’s political climate. This is a tune similar to the one being hummed by Musharraf himself. In addressing his party members in Pakistan prior to the rally, Altaf Hussain who continues to reside in London, called on supporters to remain peaceful but to show these derailing elements whose city Karachi really was. The rally was launched on the same day when the former Chief Justice flew into Karachi to address the Sindh High Court Bar Association. Unmasked, yet “unknown gunmen,” who are believed to be part of MQM’s armed militia opened fire on a number of media organisations, while military and police personnel stood idly. In addition, street violence marred Karachi as armed men took control of the city, resulting in a death toll of 46 civilians. Consequently, the former CJ was not able to step out of the Karachi airport. Opposition leaders are blaming the federal government, which had been asked twice in the House to convince MQM, its ally in Sindh, to hold the rally on a different day.

This reversal in the military’s policy stance towards MQM -- from 1997 when the military launched an operation to hunt down MQM militants to 2007 when the Pakistan Army is now embracing MQM as a political affiliate -- has left many wondering as to the future of Karachi. An MQM-dominated Sindh is bad news for the province, with Karachi being the worst hit, as it remains MQM’s country headquarters. The economic consequences of such an eventuality are a source of particular concern as the city is the commercial and financial nerve centre of Pakistan. Moreover, this will only add an ethnic flavour to the terrorism scene in Karachi, which is currently dominated by forces of religious extremism. In addition, past experience suggests that MQM’s coming back to power in the province can also lead to the reemergence of provincial politics in Sindh’s context, the consequences of which can be gauged to some extent by the current crisis that engulfs Baluchistan.

The Army as a Political Player

A source of greater concern, however, is the larger political situation at hand. The military has always been highly politicised in Pakistan since 1958, when the country witnessed its first military takeover. However, the political affiliations that General Musharraf is attempting to establish in order to remain in power since the removal of the CJ is putting the Pakistan Army’s earnestness and sincerity towards the country at stake. The line between a political party and the military is becoming increasingly blurred. Instead of being the typical last resort in times of political fragility in Pakistan, the military is now coming across as a political contender for power just like the other political parties in the country.

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