

# EYEING THE GENERALS

Parsing the Civilian-Military Struggle for Influence in Pakistan

*By Shuja Nawaz*

Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif's government took office in June 2013—with a sizable parliamentary majority—and amidst raised expectations that his party, the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz party, or PML-N, for short, would be able to create a positive change on the political and economic scene. But the fractious polity of Pakistan has threatened his tenuous hold on power and thrust his party into a confrontation with the powerful military establishment, even as Sharif is under attack from his civilian political opponents. Nawaz 3.0, his third time in office, has started looking more like Nawaz 1.0. And rumors have begun circulating of an “Egypt on the Indus”—the possibility of a soft coup perhaps leading to the real thing.

First, the political crisis. As Pakistan celebrated its sixty-seventh independence anniversary on August 14, at least two political forces converged on the capital Islamabad to press for change in the government. One challenge came from the relatively liberal Tehreek-e-Insaf of cricketeer-turned-politician Imran Khan; the other from the right-wing religious evangelist Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, a resident of Canada who brought his Minhaj-ul-Quran followers to bear on the teetering and confused government. Khan had accused the Sharif government of stealing last year's elections, which left his party with just thirty-four seats in parliament. The irony of a democrat demanding an extra-constitutional change in the government was lost on Khan and his followers. But the government's ham-handed approach to his earlier

demands for a recount in four districts and then ten districts is partly to blame for Khan's move to step up his opposition to Sharif. Much more is behind the general and rising unhappiness with Sharif, however. He presides over a sluggish economy and a country that has been hit with severe energy shortages and

▷ Pakistani army chief General Raheel Sharif attends military exercise, Bahawalpur, Nov. 4, 2013. *Qamar Pervez/Reuters/Corbis*



flooding. Then there is Sharif's dynastic style of governance, which relies on a kitchen cabinet rather than state institutions to deliver the goods.

Against the backdrop of a growing political crisis, tensions have been rising between the civil and military institutions over an apparent assassination attempt on one of the country's most popular journalists. Hamid Mir, a reporter for the Geo TV news channel, is a leading critic of the country's military-intelligence complex. When Mir accused the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate of being behind the attack, well-organized public demonstrations quickly erupted in favor of the head of the ISI, Lieutenant General Zahir ul-Islam. Mir claimed that the ISI was unhappy with his criticism of the intelligence agency.

Nawaz Sharif paid Mir a visit in the hospital where he was recovering from six bullet wounds. At the same time, Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif visited ISI headquarters in a show of support for ul-Islam. The following day, the Pakistan Ministry of Defence called for Geo TV to be shut down for smearing the ISI. After veiled critiques of the military continued from within Sharif's government, General Sharif responded during a conference of corps commanders: "While our country is faced with multiple internal and external challenges, Pakistan Army upholds the sanctity of all institutions and will resolutely preserve its own dignity and institutional pride." Defence Minister Khawaja Asif issued his own rejoinder noting that the parliament was supreme and that no institution should violate the sanctity of another, implying that the army had trespassed into civilian territory. Then, inevitably, the corps commanders weighed in to express their "displeasure" over Asif's remarks.

### **To Coup or Not to Coup**

Prime Minister Sharif has gone out of his way to repeat the mantra of previous civilian governments that the government and army are "on the same page." Yet he has spawned a full-blown crisis by allowing events to escalate into a public slanging match with a military whose public opinion ratings were rising—even as the prime minister's were shrinking. Rumors have surfaced of an imminent coup, but this may not be as easy to achieve as in earlier instances of a military takeover. Pakistani politics has reached a stalemate. The army cannot mount a coup without support from the people or without another political party waiting in the wings that is allied to the military and has a strong enough base to justify and uphold the military's actions. Nor does it have the latent support of the judiciary or large parts of the mass media that shape public opinion. For its part, the government has a powerful base in the Punjab but not in Pakistan's other three provinces—Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan—and so it too must contend with a newly empowered judiciary and civil society, and media. Consequently, the posturing persists but no serious breach



of constitutional norms will occur unless some major economic or political crisis erupts that demands immediate action.

Within his first year in office, Nawaz Sharif was in a position to select a new army chief, historically the most powerful military position in the land. Given his bad luck with previous choices and clashes with past army chiefs when he was prime minister in the 1990s, there was speculation that he would seek to alter the balance between the civil and military in a substantial way. But, his performance indicates that though much has changed inside Pakistan's polity, much also remains unaltered. The military continues to dominate discourse on key issues of national interest that properly lie in the purview of the civilians, namely internal security, foreign relations with neighbors and the United States, and nuclear policy. This is not likely to change.

Time is limited for the civilian government to exert its constitutional supremacy over the military; to do so, it must improve governance and partner with the strengthened positions of other national institutions: the media, civil society, parliament, and the judiciary. If it does not achieve supremacy rapidly, the army chief is likely to acquire greater power within his own institution as he selects his new crop of senior generals to fill slots vacated by retiring officers.

This dynamic can be explained by the principal-agent theory. The civilian government (as principal) could impose itself on the military (as its agent) if it employs closer monitoring of the military's actions, and brings the military under public scrutiny via other actors in Pakistani society that have established themselves as autonomous actors in the past decade or so. The key would be a modulated oversight of the military that is not too intrusive. The patterns of past civil-military conflicts in Pakistan appear to bear out this theory. Benazir Bhutto's attempt to take over the ISI by appointing a retired general backfired, as did her husband Asif Ali Zardari's attempt to bring the ISI under the Pakistan Ministry of Interior. Nawaz Sharif himself suffered in his earlier tenures the ill-effects of trying to influence army chiefs to promote some of his favored officers, thus treading upon a purview that army leaders were prepared to defend.

### **No Blueprint for Change**

Sharif's third time as prime minister shows that he has not progressed much on the scale of governance. His team remains largely the same as in his previous terms in office, which ended in October 1999 with the coup d'état of General Pervez Musharraf. Returning to power, his immediate instinct was to consolidate key ministries under his direct control: defense, foreign affairs, commerce, among others. Only reluctantly did he let go of the defense and commerce ministries to meet the demands of the courts, and the need to engage in trade talks with India at the ministerial level.

Sharif continues to rely on a Punjabi cabal of advisors to make key decisions. A flurry of meetings took place with the military on the need to move against militants in North Waziristan but the prime minister, under advice from his ministers, chose to open talks with the militants instead. The military was dumbfounded by this change of tactics. In the end, the military launched the attack in North Waziristan and succeeded in destroying the bases of the militants in that border region. But this tactical gain may be hard to sustain nationwide without civilian planning and participation in the counterterrorism campaign.

The absence of direct and disciplined civilian oversight of the military contributes to an imbalance in how the military perceives civilians. Moreover, on governance, no major bill has been passed in parliament. Trade negotiations with India have ground to a halt. U.S. relations are moving slowly and Afghanistan has been left largely to the military to manage. The Sharif circle did not appear to bring a blueprint for change, for example on broadening the tax net or integrating the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), despite having been out of government for fifteen years and having ruled the Punjab for the previous five years.

The only major sector in which the Sharif government attempted to move rapidly has been energy. It paid off the accumulated circular debt that was contributing to a downward spiral in energy output. Energy users, including the government's own agencies, refused to pay their bills in return for which energy producers cut back on production. But the public criticism centered on the fact that the creditors were largely the oligarchs, who supported this government, and that there has been no visible increase in energy production since that initial payout and instead, a steady increase in the circular debt yet again. What could have strengthened the government's claim of good governance ended up being criticized by its opponents in the civil and military as crony capitalism.

### **War on Terrorism**

Most opinion polls in Pakistan place terrorism and militancy high on the scale of public concerns, second only to economic concerns. According to a Pew Research Center poll in May 2013:

Roughly nine-in-ten Pakistanis believe the country is on the wrong track, and about eight-in-ten say the economy is in poor shape... Meanwhile, concerns about extremist groups have increased markedly. More than nine-in-ten Pakistanis describe terrorism as a very big problem, and about half now say The Taliban are a very serious threat to their country. For the first time since the Pew Research Center began polling on these issues, the Taliban are essentially considered as big a threat to Pakistan as longtime rival India.

In the Punjab, the Sharif family bought off its Islamist opponents with strategic electoral alliances in central and southern Punjab. As the *Economist* subsequently noted in an interview with Punjab chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, Nawaz Sharif's younger brother, on February 3, 2014:

Mr. Sharif does not confront the terrorists directly, while vociferously attacking "America's war"; they return the favor and leave Punjab alone. Were he to take on the Taliban now, that deal would obviously break down, threatening to bring high levels of violence back to Punjab.

The Sharif government's talks with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, using a changing team of interlocutors, were marked by a lack of public clarity of aim and remained largely focused on the FATA bordering Afghanistan. No direct discussions took place on the Punjab, Balochistan, or Karachi, the three other hubs of militant activity. The military is concerned about operating against the Punjabi Taliban, most of whom come from the same region in Central and Southern Punjab where the bulk of the military's own recruits originate. Military leaders therefore have to be careful in continuing to use Islamic and nationalistic rhetoric to define their aims in order to keep internal discipline intact, even while they adopt a more pragmatic policy towards terrorism.

If the Sharif government can more sharply define the war against terrorism and militancy and work with the military to bring it on board, it may be in a good position to let the military take the initial lead as a willing "agent" of the civilian "principal" in this effort. Over time this should help establish civilian leadership in this field.

The drafting of the first National Internal Security Policy under the Interior Ministry seemed to be a chance for the civilians to show their ability to lead. But the draft, released in February, appeared less comprehensive than expected and did not define the respective roles of the civilian government and the military. By socializing this policy among other civil society actors, the government may be able to muster support that would help in its negotiations with the military. A challenge will be to help the military in owning the strategy, at least in its early stages, allowing the civilian principal to exert greater control over time as it prepares to take over governance of cleared territory from the military. A key weakness of the new strategy is the absence of a clear policy toward the future of FATA and the restoration of civilian administration to the territory under the same principles as apply to other autonomous territories in Pakistan's control. The army has maintained a studied public silence on this policy and needs to be drawn much more into its discussions so that better coordination on intelligence can be organized at the federal government level while building up civilian capacity in this field.

## Foreign Policy Files

The military continues to regard relations with the United States, China, Saudi Arabia, and immediate neighbors India, Iran, and Afghanistan as its major interest. This is a legacy of years of military rule and the willingness of civilian rulers to allow the military an unduly large role in foreign policy formulation. The Sharif government has continued to cede a virtual veto to the military in foreign relations without taking the lead itself. This old habit has made it hard for the Sharif government, like its predecessors, to exercise full control over key foreign relations. Hence military intrusion in this domain continues.

The relationship with the United States remains an important one. Strong anti-Americanism and suspicion pervades the junior and middle ranks of the Pakistan military even though their superiors need and demand better U.S. weaponry and continued assistance. But as Aqil Shah noted in *Foreign Affairs*, “By continuing to treat the Pakistani military as a state above the state, the United States only reinforces the military’s exaggerated sense of indispensability and further weakens civilian rule.”

Civilian-military differences remain on the issue of India. The civilians under Sharif want improved ties. The military favors ties and the absence of hostilities, but wants resolution of key disputes including Kashmir to remain high on the agenda and it seeks to keep the public on its side on these matters. Prime Minister Sharif wishes to engage with India on trade but will have to convince the military of the benefits to its own commercial enterprises and logistics operations of open borders with India. The government has failed to educate the military or the general public of the issue behind these negotiations and even on the issues pertaining to water cooperation and climate change on which much groundwork has been done already. A new Indian government under a strong prime minister, Narendra Modi, will be in a better position to deliver on trade and other agreements, while keeping the threat of force to punish Pakistan for any deviation from the path of cooperation or if it foments terrorist activities across the Kashmir or Indian border. If Nawaz Sharif succeeds in building trade and boosting the Pakistan economy by working with India, he will be able to create a huge vested interest group among the Pakistani business community and general population that will fortify him against the military’s recalcitrance.

Afghanistan remains a major issue for the civilian and military institutions in Pakistan. A powerful vestige of the past remains the role of the ISI in Afghanistan and FATA and in treating some Taliban elements as assets. Though the agency does not have the assured control that it seeks or imagines, it continues to use that aspect of its relationship with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban as influence against any potential government in Kabul that might turn against Pakistan. The absence of any overt Pakistani involvement in the recent Afghan elections may be a good sign that reflects a partial victory for the civilians who see Afghanistan as an opportunity rather

than a threat. Sharif sees trade and economics as key to changing the situation with Afghanistan and through it with Central Asia. The army still sees threats of Afghan nationalism, and an Afghanistan-India axis to support Baloch separatists and sandwich Pakistan between two hostile armies to the east and the west. The emergence of a powerful Indian nationalistic government in the shape of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party will validate the army's fears.

### **Sharif Against Sharif?**

What might precipitate a conflict between the two Sharifs? Poor governance and lack of tough decisions on the economy might send the economy into a downward spiral, reducing the resources available to the government and the army to continue the fight against domestic terrorism and potential external threats. Street unrest resulting from energy shortages or spiraling inflation may bring the army out in aid of civil power, as was the case in August 2014 when the army was given legal cover to operate in the capital region under Article 245 of the constitution. Afghanistan-based guerrilla attacks on Pakistan may provoke a major incident on the Afghan border. Similarly, jihadi attacks in Kashmir or inside India might provoke sharp Indian punitive actions under a muscular Modi government responding to its right wing base, leading to a potentially wider conflict. A successful jihadi attack on the Pakistan army may lead to a sharp military response, broadening the war against terrorism beyond the boundary of FATA. The military could provoke a crisis under such conditions and orchestrate enough public support to justify a coup along the Egyptian model.

The trial of former army chief and president Musharraf is often cited as a potential flashpoint in the civil-military relationship. Many among the senior ranks of the army feel Musharraf refused their advice in returning from exile to Pakistan. There are murmurings of unhappiness among the younger officers and soldiers that a former army chief is being humiliated. But the army has no leg to stand on in opposing this trial. Nawaz Sharif has handled the issue deftly. The court can let Musharraf go and continue with the trial in absentia. Or it can convict him and allow him to appeal the sentence. This all may take time. But Musharraf's trial is unlikely to produce widespread public unrest.

Civil-military relations will remain tenuous at best for the next year or two. Both sides have to do well in their respective fields to avoid conflicts between them. There remains a faint hope that civilian supremacy will become a reality over time, provided it is accompanied by good governance. Nawaz Sharif's performance to date does not inspire confidence in his ability to manage the civil-military relationship successfully. So long as he dithers in taking strong decisions in the national rather than personal interest, the betting will grow stronger against him.