



PAKISTAN'S DEMOCRATIC OPPORTUNITY

Citizens Prefer Elected Governments to Army Rule,
but It Remains for Politicians to Deliver

By Madiha Afzal

Pakistanis have shed blood for democracy. The country's most recent election in May 2013 was its bloodiest. It was held during the height of the Taliban insurgency that has killed tens of thousands of Pakistanis. The Pakistan Taliban, known as the Tehrik-i-Taliban, made the election an explicit target, calling democracy un-Islamic, "an infidel system." During the campaign, the Pakistan Taliban targeted candidates and political party supporters at rallies, killing more than 130 people. At first, the targets were secular or left-leaning parties—the Awami National Party (ANP) from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the Karachi-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), and the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The week before the election, terrorists struck the Islamist Jamiat-ulema-e-Islam (Fazl) (JUI-F) as well, killing at least thirty people in two attacks. The Taliban told people to stay away from the polls, warning of more violence on election day.

The election was ultimately a success. The targeted parties curtailed some of their activities, but they did not stop campaigning. Rallies were held in a carnival atmosphere, especially in the urban areas, and mobilized many who had been unmotivated to vote in previous elections. There was a palpable energy in the air. Pakistanis were ready for a turnaround after years of insecurity and bloodshed, an energy crisis, an economy that seemed in free fall, and continued misgovernance. Citizens had become terribly disappointed with the governing PPP. According to a national Pew poll in 2013, 83 percent of respondents had an unfavorable view of the party's leader, President Asif Ali Zardari (widower of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto). Yet Pakistanis placed their hopes for change firmly in elected government. A Pew poll in Pakistan in 2012 found that it was important to 88 percent of respondents that people choose their leaders in free elections.

◁ Prime Minister
Nawaz Sharif after
voting in local
government elections,
Lahore, Oct. 31, 2015.
Mohsin Raza/Reuters

On election day, turnout was 55 percent, despite threats of terrorist violence. This was significantly higher than voter turnout in Pakistan's previous six elections from 1988 to 2008, when it ranged between 35 percent and 45 percent. Election-day attacks did occur: at least thirty-eight people were killed in Karachi and Balochistan, but the violence was contained relative to the Taliban's threats. Veteran politician Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) won an impressive mandate, capturing 188 out of 342 seats in parliament (a tally that includes nineteen independent candidates who switched to the PML-N post-election). Former star cricketer Imran Khan steered his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) into national prominence alongside the PPP and PML-N. The PPP was routed, especially in Punjab, winning only forty-six seats; and the PTI emerged as a solid third party, winning thirty-three seats.

In the three years since then, trends have been less sanguine. The election that brought Nawaz back as prime minister for the third time had been marred by anecdotal evidence of electoral rigging. Despite the finding of international election observers that the election was by and large fair, in the fall of 2014 Khan's PTI launched a protest against the government, calling for Sharif to resign (with slogans of "Go, Nawaz, Go!") and for fresh elections. Khan called off the protest only after the December 2014 terrorist attack in Peshawar that killed more than 130 schoolchildren demanded national unity in the face of extremism.

Sharif Versus Sharif

Khan's challenge significantly weakened Nawaz Sharif's hold on power. After the Peshawar attack, the need to improve security was vital, and the civilians were (rightfully) not deemed up for the task. This gave the military an opportunity to appropriate total control of security policy and set up military courts for terrorism cases.

Sharif suffered a further blow in 2016 when he was implicated in corrupt activities by the so-called Panama Papers, some 11.5 million documents from a Panamanian legal firm leaked to journalists revealing how the world's rich and influential use offshore entities to avoid paying taxes and hide ill-gotten money. In Sharif's case, the papers showed that his children own offshore companies and assets that he had not declared as part of the family's wealth. He countered that these companies and assets were technically not in his name and that the money was legal, but has been unable to offer a credible explanation on the source of the money. Sharif said he would form an independent inquiry commission to satisfy his detractors, but proposed a vague mandate for the body, which opposition parties rejected. The squabbling over the terms of reference for the commission continues.

While Nawaz Sharif's approval ratings have taken a hit, he remains popular. As of June 2016, 54 percent of respondents in a national Gallup Pakistan poll said they were

satisfied with his performance. This is lower than the 73 percent approval rating on his performance in his first two years in power found in a poll run by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) in June 2015, but is still high.

But the army is also very popular: the June 2015 PILDAT poll found a 75 percent approval rating for the army, and a 69 percent approval rating for Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif. Throughout his troubles, Nawaz Sharif has had the misfortune of being widely and unfavorably compared with his more popular namesake. This must hurt, given Sharif's personal grievances with the army. During his second term as prime minister in 1999, his army chief, Pervez Musharraf, sacked him and took power in a coup, forcing Sharif to go into exile for years.

The army is basking in the success of its Zarb-e-Azb operation against the Pakistan Taliban that began in June 2014 and is considered responsible for reducing terrorist attacks in the past two years. The army's operations in Karachi, led by the Rangers, have also reduced violence in that city, although the army has also meddled deeply in the city's politics.

The army has an aggressive public relations machine, headed by an exceptionally media-savvy general, Asim Bajwa. Its publicity blitz now includes television dramas, music videos, and documentaries. No one benefits more from it all than Raheel Sharif. Posters with his face are plastered all over Pakistan—even as rickshaw art—and he is constantly in the news. A hashtag #ThankYouRaheelSharif became ubiquitous on social media last year.

Nawaz Sharif, on the other hand, still makes old-school speeches from behind his desk, beginning them with “my dear countrymen,” always somewhat whiny and listless. He does not wield a compelling narrative. The public perceives him as weak and ineffectual, while Raheel Sharif exudes competence and efficiency. Nawaz and other politicians are considered as out to enrich themselves personally while the army is considered to work only for Pakistan's interests. This perception is partly warranted (the army delivers in spite of its corruption; the politicians do not deliver because of theirs), but it also follows from the army's successful command of the national narrative.

As the Panama Papers scandal unfolded, Raheel Sharif weighed in. He dismissed six military officers, including two generals, for corruption—making his army look better than the politicians through a relatively superficial move. He also publicly called for a crackdown on corruption, saying that “enduring peace and stability [will not be established] unless the menace of corruption is uprooted.” In a country where the civilians and the military are constantly compared, harping on the worst weakness of the civilians—corruption—was especially effective.

The media issues harsh criticism of the government while largely sparing the army (the army makes clear that it does not tolerate criticism). According to a Gallup

analysis of eight prominent television talk shows in May 2016, governance was the main topic discussed, and the majority of the guests were politicians. The media obsesses over political corruption, while sidestepping the army's hegemony and appropriation of national resources.

It is a particular feature of Pakistan's democracy that the army chief, a figure who inhabits the background in most democracies, dominates the country's imagination more than its popularly elected leader. This dominance is no accident, as the story of Pakistan's democracy cannot be told without reference to the army. Pakistan's birth as a Muslim nation amid the partition of India in 1947 led to a sense of deep insecurity vis-à-vis its powerful neighbor. This has led to the disproportionate strength of the institution that defends the country and enables it to exercise dominance in politics, and ironically undermine the very democracy for which Pakistan was created. The army has ruled Pakistan for more than half of the seven decades of the country's existence. During crises in democratically elected governments, the army is viewed as the ready alternative, a savior for the beleaguered country. Accompanying each army takeover was a heady feeling that things would be fixed; in reality, army rule left the country worse off every time. The pendulum of public opinion would swing toward democracy again, only to be followed by disappointment; the democracy-army cycle would repeat itself.

A popular observation during bad times for elected governments is that Pakistan is not suited for democracy—an argument related to the notion that Islam is incompatible with democracy. This is linked to a Pakistani insularity. Pakistanis consider the country's problems as particular to it, as not comparable with other countries. As a result of Pakistan's split from and great enmity with India (and the fact that Pakistan defines itself in opposition to India), Pakistanis have not learned from the nation most similar to their own country. Not surprisingly, they have not looked to the West either. Pakistanis prefer non-democratic success stories—the so-called Asian Tigers, for example—for their models. As a result, they don't grasp the ups and downs of democracy, that its benefits are found in the long term, that it is sometimes a slog. The (military) savior in the shadows confuses people. If Pakistanis had no military alternative to civilian rule, they might think differently about their politics.

Despite the army's prominence and popularity in Pakistani life, President Pervez Musharraf's troubled rule from 2001–08 seems to have dealt a severe blow to any return to direct military rule. In 2007, as Musharraf's fortunes were sinking after he sacked the chief justice of the Supreme Court and engaged in a violent military operation against a militant madrassa in central Islamabad, a Pew poll found that 77 percent of respondents thought it important that honest elections be held regularly with a choice of at least two political parties.

That shift in public opinion in favor of democracy has persisted despite crises in the post-Musharraf PPP and PML-N terms in office and the army's current popularity. In the June 2016 Gallup poll, 84 percent of respondents said they preferred democracy to dictatorship. In the PILDAT poll the prior year, 64 percent of respondents said that democratically elected governments constitute the best system for Pakistan, and 66 percent of respondents looked favorably on the quality of democracy in the country. Only 20 percent of the respondents said that another military takeover would be beneficial for Pakistan—while not an insignificant figure, a clear minority.

In the post-Musharraf period, the major political parties are united in opposition to another army takeover. The PML-N and PPP essentially function as a “friendly opposition” to each other, protecting each other over corruption allegations and the like (although the PPP has been more aggressive this year with the Panama Papers inquiry). This is a useful strategy against the military's ambitions—a lesson they seem to have learned from the repercussions of their hostile relationship in the 1990s—but it undermines accountability. Only Imran Khan's PTI functions as a true opposition to the government, but instead of opposing it on substance or policy in parliament, Khan leads populist rallies and calls for the prime minister's resignation. While Khan generates significant support (he had a 49 percent favorability rating in the PILDAT poll in 2015) and has loyal followers, the majority of Pakistanis do not seem to agree with his tactics. In the June 2016 Gallup poll, 68 percent of respondents said that it was wrong for Imran Khan to demand Nawaz Sharif's resignation over the Panama Papers scandal. Pakistanis seem to have reconciled themselves to a corrupt democracy, because that seems to be the only kind they can get.

The army knows that popular and political opinion does not look favorably on a military takeover. It sent a clear signal during Imran Khan's protracted protest in the fall of 2014 that it would not move against Sharif's government, though it will gladly appropriate all the power it can, as it did with security matters following the Peshawar massacre. But the army still promotes its image as a savior, actively and through surrogates. This July, posters popped up all over the country, pleading *Khuda ke liay* (for God's sake) for Raheel Sharif to take power. The army denied any involvement in the stunt.

Ultimately, Pakistan's democracy will not be complete unless the army stops meddling in political matters and stops projecting itself as Pakistan's savior. In order for faith in democracy to persist, citizens' belief in the fairness of elections will need to increase. Most elections in Pakistan have been marred by allegations of some kind of rigging. A sizable minority continues to think that the 2013 election was rigged. In the 2015 PILDAT poll, this number was 30 percent (lower than 37 percent in 2014).

On the other hand, 59 percent of the respondents in 2015 thought the election was “free and fair.”

The army also needs to cede its control of security and foreign policy. This may be almost impossible—it goes to great lengths to maintain this control. To be fair, it is also unclear that the civilians are competent enough to assume this control. This month, a front page article by a respected journalist in *Dawn*, Pakistan’s premier English daily, recounted an unprecedented showdown between Nawaz Sharif and the head of the country’s spy agency, the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), in which the prime minister asked the ISI to end the protection it gives to Kashmiri and Afghan jihadists. The prime minister’s office—which likely “leaked” the story—issued three vociferous denials of the story, and after a meeting between Prime Minister Sharif and General Sharif, immediately placed a travel ban on the journalist and announced an inquiry into the matter. The military’s Inter-Services Public Relations said that the leaks that led to the story were “a threat to national security.” It seems two matters are at stake: the projection of a shift in the civil-military power equation over security matters, and the reference to an internal acknowledgement of the ISI’s cover for jihadists. The reaction from the military has been intense—although most of it is behind the scenes and can be inferred from the actions of the prime minister’s office. It underscores how difficult a shift of power in the military-civilian equation on security is going to be.

Serving the Citizens?

Elected governments through the 1990s were consumed with paranoia. For them, the best outcome (never achieved) was survival through the completion of a full term. Politicians make poor decisions when they are in survival mode. They focus on the short-term, become circumscribed by crises, and are reactive rather than proactive. While Pakistan’s two main parties, the PPP and PML-N, ostensibly differ in their platforms—the PPP is left leaning and favors the rural poor, the PML-N is right leaning and pro-industry—there was little difference in how they ended up governing in the 1990s. They did not invest in improving governance, or in dealing with Pakistan’s myriad development challenges by broadening the tax base, removing barriers to public services like education and health, and improving the rule of law.

The paranoia and survival mode have been evident in the PPP’s recent term and the PML-N’s current term even as the army’s overt threat to democracy has receded. The biggest achievement of Asif Ali Zardari’s presidency between 2008 and 2013 was simply that he completed his term of office. At different points in his three years in office Nawaz Sharif has shown a resolve to adjust to the changed political climate. He has leaned less to the right than ever before, a positive development for Pakistan,

but has suffered from setbacks. He has made overtures to India, only to have them voided after the January 2016 Pathankot attack on an Indian air force base that was blamed on Pakistan-based terrorists. He has taken bold moves like hanging Mumtaz Qadri, the killer of provincial governor Salmaan Taseer, a man supported by Pakistan's Islamists—only to have Qadri sympathizers camp out in front of parliament for days and wreck the capital's infrastructure in angry protests. Most recently, he seems to have tried to begin the process of wresting back control of security policy from the army, only to be put in his place.

Sharif has spent too much of his time putting out fires, and his policies have felt interrupted and selective. He invests in big, urban infrastructure projects—easily visible to voters—but has not invested in systemic governance reform, or in improving the lives of the rural poor. He has also shown an inability to ideologically counter extremism.

It is unclear whether Sharif will take such steps; with the PPP significantly weakened in Punjab and the PTI experiencing limits to its political ambitions, the PML-N may be able to win the next election even without doing so. But it would be unfortunate if Sharif does not make use of his political advantage. If democracy is to prevail in Pakistan, democratic regimes will have to start delivering for the average Pakistani.

Juncture of Opportunity

In large part due to the repeated interventions of the military, Pakistan's democracy remains underdeveloped. That condition dents its effectiveness and perpetuates the cycle that makes military rule attractive at times. Pakistan's political development needs time and protection from interruptions, whether from the army or from extremists.

By some measures, Pakistan's democracy can be described as vibrant. A total of 333 parties are registered with the Election Commission of Pakistan. In each general election, 272 constituencies hold direct elections to the National Assembly; the other seventy seats are reserved for women and minorities. For each of the direct election constituencies, parties can field one candidate each, and candidates can run independently as well. Reserved seats are then allocated proportionately to parties that have won more than 5 percent of the vote. The party with the majority of seats in parliament forms the government; if it does not have an outright majority, it needs to form a coalition with smaller parties.

In reality, Pakistani democracy operates with many constraints. Just six out of the 333 parties hold more than ten seats in parliament (out of a total of 342), and only eighteen parties hold any seats at all. Pakistan has four provinces, Punjab, Sindh, KPK, and Balochistan, with 183, seventy-five, forty-three, and seventeen seats in parliament, respectively (the tribal areas and the federal capital hold twelve and two seats, respectively). As the numbers indicate, any party that can dominate Punjab can

hold sway over national politics. This means that voters are only left with a couple of choices of political parties that are nationally viable.

Then there is the dynasty problem. The three main parties—the PML-N, the PPP, and the PTI—are all personality- and family-driven. The PML-N is associated completely with Nawaz Sharif (it is no coincidence that Nawaz is an element of the party's name); the PPP with the Bhutto family; and the PTI with Imran Khan. There is a lack of internal democracy. It remains to be seen whether Imran Khan will succeed in transitioning the PTI into a party that is not completely tied to him.

There are barriers to entry at the candidate level—contesting elections requires wealth. In rural areas, large landowners typically win elections; in return, they use their political power to provide patronage to their constituents. It is not clear that many of them have national-level policy interests—it is patronage that helps them win votes, not their voting record in the National Assembly. The practice of horse-trading, in which politicians switch parties to ally with the party with the greater chance of winning the next election, is widespread in Pakistan—evidence of a candidate-party policy disconnect. By and large, party trumps candidate identity, at least once the candidates pass a threshold level of prominence. Thus it seems that politicians' policy convictions are malleable. This constituency-federal level disconnect is harmful to the country's interests. It also means party platforms are not well developed or implemented.

Institutions remain underdeveloped as well. Parliament is rowdy, and accomplishes little. It is a part-time job—if that—for most parliamentarians. Nawaz Sharif's government has undermined it. Instead of using parliament to discuss issues of national concern—such as peace talks with the Taliban—the prime minister has called “all parties” conferences, forums with no legal basis, to discuss such topics.

Democratic governments in Pakistan tend to rely on a cadre of loyalist advisors instead of professionals, limiting their own effectiveness. The PPP and PML-N are both guilty of this. Nawaz Sharif has been especially loath to appoint advisors beyond his tight inner circle (he has appointed many of the same men this time around that he did in his previous two terms in the 1990s); he even holds the foreign and defense portfolios himself.

It is also unclear that voters understand the responsibilities of parliamentarians versus bureaucrats, or the differences in the roles of national-level parliamentarians relative to provincial and local elected officials. The decentralization of many matters from the federal to the provincial level via the eighteenth amendment to the constitution in 2010 only confuses citizens further. For voters to hold the politicians accountable, they require good information. But accountability is difficult in an environment where the division of responsibilities is murky (sometimes even to the politicians themselves).

Pakistan's democracy is at a juncture of import. Its citizens have shown faith in it, despite continued corruption and poor governance, and in defiance of long-held narratives that undermined democracy in the country. The army has also indicated that it will not seize control of the government, although it continues to meddle in politics, and commands power over internal and external security matters.

All this gives Pakistan's democrats space—not complete, but enough—to ensure progress in political development, governance, and delivery of public services. How Pakistan's politicians choose to behave now will determine whether democracy persists, or whether there is another slide toward disillusionment that emboldens the army to take over once again. The democrats need to let go of paranoia, to stop governing in survival mode, and invest in Pakistan's long-term development. They eventually need to reassume civilian control over security matters, command a compelling narrative for Pakistan's future, and ideologically counter extremism—though this will take time and enormous effort. They must hold back on self-indulgence. The critical question facing Pakistan today is whether Nawaz Sharif's ruling PML-N will seize the opportunity before it.