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HIGHLIGHTS

- Overview
- Developments in Pakistan
- Developments in Afghanistan

I Overview

Pakistan: Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's legal travails continued through the Accountability Court without this substantially diluting his posture of defiance against the judiciary mixed with broad hints about the unseen forces supporting it. So far, his party has held together and there has been no leakage of leadership although internal fissures are more visible. Political activity in anticipation of elections is however intensifying with numerous exploratory moves towards electoral alliances. In many of these moves observers see the mother brain of the Military to secure its minimum interest in whatever political architecture appears post elections. A long agitation in Islamabad by religious groups underlined the strength of a growing Barelvi political assertion in Pakistan. On the external front the principal development was the visit of the US Secretary of State to Pakistan (as part of a South Asia tour)- the first substantive Pak US engagement after President Trump's abrasive remarks with regard to Pakistan in announcing a new Af Pak policy in August.

Afghanistan: A regular stream of terrorist attacks meant that internal security dominated all narratives regarding Afghanistan. The first visit of the US Secretary of State to Afghanistan and Pakistan stirred hope that renewed US pressures may bring about some material change to the security situation. The first shipment of wheat from India through Chabahar Port in Iran underlined the potential and possibilities of regional cooperation bypassing Pakistan.

II Developments in Pakistan

Internal

A Barelvi Assertion in Pakistan?: Daily life in Islamabad has been disrupted for the past three weeks by protesters belonging to religious parties — including the *Tehreek-i-Khatm-i-Nabuwwat*, *Tehreek-i-Labaik Ya Rasool Allah* (TLY) and the *Sunni Tehreek* (ST) — demanding the dismissal of the Law Minister Zahid Hamid for a proposed amendment to the *Khatm-i-Nabuwwat* (Finality of the Prophet) oath in the Elections Act 2017. The controversy arose following a change in the language of declaration to be made

by candidates where the term 'declaration' was used instead of 'oath'. Protests thereafter followed from the religious parties who claimed that the 'Finality of the Prophet' was eroded intentionally and the Law Minister should be dismissed. The Government claimed a clerical error and the original form has since been retained. The protests have however continued spearheaded by this assortment of Barelwi groups in the form of a prolonged sit in and road closure of a principal arterial road into Islamabad.

Despite prodding by the Supreme Court and the Islamabad High Court and others demanding that the protesters should be cleared, the government has been reluctant to use force to end the situation. In large part this is so because it sees the situation as an attempt to erode its own base among the many religious groups and organizations which traditionally comprise and support the right wing of the PML(N) in Punjab. It may be recalled that that the Tehreek-e-Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY) came third in number of votes polled in the by election to fill former PM Nawaz Sharif's vacant seat in September this year. Although the PML(N) had won the election its margin was lower than what had been anticipated. The party has come into prominence using the large cult following now surrounding Mumtaz Qadri, the assassin of the Punjab Governor. As this newsletter goes to press the sit ins are being cleared by force with indeterminate consequences.

Emerging alliances and related activity: Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's legal travails continued through the Accountability Court without these substantially diluting his posture of defiance against the judiciary mixed with broad hints about the unseen forces supporting it. So far, his party has held together and there has been no leakage of leadership although internal fissures are more visible. Mr Nawaz Sharif himself has made a greater effort to maintaining the appearance of familial unity especially where his brother is concerned. Mr Shehbaz Sharif has been named the Party's potential Prime Minister after the elections in the event of the Party President (Nawaz Sharif) somehow being unable to occupy the post. Nevertheless, many in the Party are uneasy at the legal complications Nawaz Sharif is increasingly stuck in and the implications this will have on their prospects. The apprehension that the government may face a premature end and be replaced by a technocratic formation imposed by the Military have not abated. The PML (N)'s immediate objective remains of prolonging the life of the government till the elections of new membership of the Senate is over.

In anticipation of the general elections next year reports of attempts at cementing different electoral fronts and alliances have started proliferating. In most of them, some role of the 'military establishment' is posited or assumed as part of its regular interventions in Pakistani politics. What received most attention was the announcement by former President General Pervez Musharraf of a "grand alliance" of 23 political parties. The former military dictator lives abroad and is the subject of court cases in Pakistan. Despite some media attention the move is without much content as the proposed alliance consists largely of those parties and groups whose activity is largely confined to paper with virtually no presence on the ground. Rumors however continue that Musharraf remains a possible candidate to unite different factions of the MQM- a move which the Military would favour. In other moves the MQM-P led by Farooq Sattar and the Pakistan Sarzameen Party (PSP) led by a former MQM stalwart Mustafa Kalam announced the forging a 'political alliance' to contest the upcoming elections from the platform of a single party and on one symbol. This alliance soon fell apart but it is widely believed that the attempt to piece it together in the first place was at the behest of the intelligence agencies and no doubt the attempt will be made again. Altaf Hussain continues to play a key role behind the scenes in MQM related issues. Other moves of this kind include the announcement by the Jamaat-i-Islami chief Sirajul Haq that the original constituent parties have agreed to revive the now defunct six-party religio-political alliance Muttahida Majlis-i-Amal (MMA). The president of his own faction of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, Maulana Fazlur Rehman, Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan chief Pir Ijaz Hashmi and leaders of three other constituent parties were present on the occasion when the announcement was made. It will be recalled that Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) was a coalition of Islamist parties, formed in 2001 to contest that year's provincial and the following year's general elections. It had held power in the then NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkwa) and in Baluchistan till 2007 and was also a part of the central government, a coalition cobbled together to provide a civilian façade to President Musharraf's regime. The acronym MMA also fitted in with the pun 'Mullah Military Alliance' and the grouping was seen as the outcome of the Pakistan military to bring the Islamic parties together to add to General Musharraf's support in the National Assembly. The present coming together is therefore traced back to this impulse too. In Sindh an effort to bring all the anti PPP parties – apart from the MQM – under a common umbrella is being made by another stalwart of the military establishment the Pir of Pagara.

Other Developments: Cricket: There was widespread jubilation in Pakistan as a Sri Lankan cricket team played on 29th October a 20-20 match in Lahore as part of a series in which the rest of the matches have been played in Sharjah, Abu Dhabi and Dubai. The Sri Lankan team was in Pakistan some eight years after a terrorist attack on their team bus began a period of sports and cricket isolation with most international teams not agreeing to tour Pakistan. The match with Sri Lanka is seen as a definite sign that confidence in Pakistan as a secure cricket venue is now returning.

External

India:

Jammu and Kashmir: Commenting on the appointment of a representative by the Government of India to engage with different sections of opinion in J&K the Pakistan Foreign Office commented that "that the measure did not appear to be sincere and realistic". This formed part of a longer statement the thrust of which was that dialogue on Kashmir has to have three parties- India, Pakistan and the Hurriyat leadership.

Cross LOC Trade: Cross-LoC trade between Jammu and Kashmir and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) resumed (7 Nov) on the Poonch-Rawalakot axis after remaining suspended for almost four months. The LOC ceasefire on this axis had been repeatedly violated during this period- a principal reason for the prolonged closure. There are reports that the Trade Facilitation Centre on the Indian side was repeatedly shelled during the interregnum and has suffered heavy damage.

Kulbhushan Jadhav case: The Pakistan Foreign Office announced on 10th November that it had been decided "to arrange a meeting of Commander Kulbhushan Jadhav with his wife, in Pakistan, purely on humanitarian grounds." Evidently the move is directed towards the forthcoming proceedings in the International Court of Justice where a key legal issue is the denial of consular access to an individual during his custody and trial in a foreign country. The response from the Government of India conveyed that Jadhav's wife and mother would both like to meet him and an Indian diplomatic representative should be permitted to accompany them. India has also sought a "sovereign guarantee" from Pakistan that the Jadhav's family members would not be harassed or questioned when they visit him.

Death of Dina Wadia: The news of the death of Dina Wadia in New York- M A Jinnah's sole offspring- was received with sadness in Pakistan as the ending of the last living link with the founder of Pakistan. Mrs Wadia had never lived in Pakistan and visited it only twice- once to attend the funeral of her father and the second time in 2004 accompanied by her son Nusli Wadia. Incidentally the passing of Dina Wadia meant that the fate of Jinnah house is again in the news as question marks now appear over the case she had filed in the Bombay High Court against the GOI that the property belongs to her.

External

USA: Please see Afghanistan section below.

Iran: Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Tehran in the first week of November on a three-day official visit. This is the first visit by a Pakistani COAS to Iran in over two decades.

Russia: Mr. Leonid Eduardovich Slutsky, the Chairman of the State Duma Committee for International Affairs of the Russian Federation visited Pakistan in the first week of November.

III Developments in Afghanistan

Internal

Major terrorist attacks regularly continued to punctuate Afghanistan's political and security calendar. In Kabul itself a number of major attacks took place including on a military training academy (21st October) and in the diplomatic enclave (31st October).

External

India: India shipped its first consignment of wheat to Afghanistan by sea through Iran's Chahbahar Port. The shipment, an Indian grant, was sent from the western seaport of Kandla in end October and arrived in Afghanistan on the 11th November by truck from the Iranian port. This new trade and supply route follows an air freight corridor introduced between India and Afghanistan in June last year to provide greater access for Afghan goods to the Indian market. The sea route effectively bypasses the Pakistani port of Karachi which is the only designated route for Indian exports to Afghanistan through Pakistan. This traditional route had faced even greater vulnerabilities over the past year on account of the prolonged closures of Pakistan-Afghanistan border crossings. A statement by the Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj underlined that the shipment marked the convergence among India, Afghanistan and Iran to spur an unhindered flow of commerce and trade throughout the region.

President Ghani in India: The day long visit of the Afghan president to New Delhi on 25th October saw him speak with intensity and candor on security and trade related issues concerning Pakistan. In a speech at a think tank in Delhi the Afghan President spoke about Afghanistan refusing to join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that would provide Pakistan access to Central Asia if Islamabad refused to permit connectivity between India and Afghanistan and that in case Afghanistan was not given transit access to Wagah and Attari for trade with India via Pakistan, then Kabul will also restrict Islamabad's access to central Asia. The reference was to a longstanding Afghan complaint that their cargo trucks go through transshipment and do not have unhindered transit access to India through the Wagah Attari border crossing. In his speech the President also said that Afghanistan was fully capable of concluding a peace process on its own with forces opposed to it. An example he cited was the return of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the head of the Hezb-e-Islami militant group, by way of a peace agreement brokered by the Ghani government in May.

United States: The US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson paid a brief visit to Pakistan and Afghanistan on 24th October- as part of a South Asia tour- the first substantive engagement with Pakistan and Afghanistan since the announcement of a new Af Pak policy by President Trump. The halt in both capitals was short and in Afghanistan, limited to the Bagram Air base for a few hours. Expectedly the issues of terrorism and sanctuaries for the Taliban in Pakistan have attracted most attention in the analysis of the content of the discussions during the visit.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif briefing the Pakistani Senate about the visit said that a list of 75 wanted terrorists had been handed over by the US. He said that many of the individuals on the list were not alive, while others were shadow Taliban governors in different provinces of Afghanistan. He also said that while the Haqqanis were on top of the list, it "did not contain the name of a single Pakistani". This, and other statements, including from the US side, suggest that the Taliban in Afghanistan (and not terrorists acting against India) is currently the main focus of the discussions with and pressures on Pakistan. During his stay in Delhi on 25th October during the India leg of the visit Secretary Tillerson spoke of the threat that terrorist organizations pose to "Pakistan's internal stability" which is a new formulation in the expression of US concerns on the subject.

Speaking after his return to the US about his South Asia visit Secretary Tillerson said that he did not lecture or coerce Pakistanis but he did tell them that Washington is determined to eradicate terrorism from the region with their support or "in a different way"; and that "the entire South Asia strategy is a conditions-based strategy," In these remarks the Secretary also said he had offered to help Pakistan resolve its disputes with India, a suggestion that provided relief to some in Pakistan as providing at least some contrast to the overall US posture of pressure on Pakistan to deliver w. r .t the Afghan Taliban.

Following the visit in Pakistan, as in the past, public postures regarding US policy remain defiant and directed at assuring public opinion that Pakistan was not giving in to US pressure. The reception to the Secretary on arrival was low key and at an uncharacteristically junior level. This external posture of defiance was articulated best by the Pakistan Foreign Minister in his briefing to the Senate when he highlighted that the Afghan President had to meet Secretary Tillerson in the Bagram Air Base. The FM is quoted as having said: "Despite the US being present in Afghanistan for the past 16 years, their secretary of state could not go out of their airbase in Afghanistan and had to meet the Afghan president inside it", and; "This situation explains the complete story of American failures in Afghanistan," and "The Afghan president became a stranger in his own country after meeting Tillerson at the Bagram Airbase".

Notwithstanding such posturing the current US approach is the cause of deep concern in Pakistan and in the meetings with the US Secretary itself it would appear that the Pakistan government has tried hard to engage constructively with regard to security issues in Afghanistan in particular and also sought to dissuade the United States from bringing India further into the Afghanistan Pakistan interface in any way. In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the high expectations from the US following President Trump's new policy announcement are palpable and are relatively straightforward- stronger US military commitment plus a real and tangible pressure on Pakistan to put the squeeze on the Taliban to make them more amenable to engaging with the Afghan Government and to reduce the intensity if not end the cycle of violence and terrorist attacks.

(The views expressed are personal)
