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HIGHLIGHTS

- Overview
- Developments in Afghanistan
- Developments in Pakistan

I Overview

Pakistan: Amidst continuing negative trends of past months with respect to Afghanistan, India and domestic issues regarding terrorism, Pakistan stayed rivetted on the saga of Panamagate. Its final act was one reminiscent of the political history of the 1990s as Nawaz Sharif was disqualified by the Supreme Court and stepped down as Prime Minister. Pakistan appeared trapped in the past for other reasons also- a fresh eruption of the controversy regarding Raymond Davis, the tenth anniversary of the siege of Lal Masjid and most of all the 40th anniversary of Zia ul Haq's coup. US pressures on Pakistan, not unprecedented in themselves, were also evident during the month.

Afghanistan: Terrorism and internal security remained the principal issue as also the factor dominating political discourse. Pakistan military actions as well as the construction of fencing on parts of the Durand Line posed one set of issues. A low intensity water related controversy with Iran another.

II Developments in Pakistan

The End of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's third tenure as Prime Minister: The Supreme Court appointed Joint Investigation Team submitted its report to the Supreme Court and the court reserved its judgement on it after hearing further arguments of both sides. More than the content of the report its tenor and the aggressive style in which the investigation was conducted signaled clearly that this chess game was drawing to a close. Although suspense over the final verdict was immense and for many it had an inevitability to it. The Court in its verdict on 28th July declared Nawaz Sharif disqualified as Prime Minister on the largely technical grounds that he had not declared in his nomination papers an income he received in the past from a company in the UAE owned by his son. Some other members of his family were also indicted. By all accounts after a brief period when there will be an interim Prime Minister, the post will now be filled by Nawaz Sharif's brother Shahbaz Sharif who is currently the Chief Minister of Punjab. The interim period is to enable Shahbaz Sharif to get elected as a Member of the National Assembly.

The Public Discourse: The debate in Pakistan over July and leading upto the Supreme Court verdict can be briefly summarized. Pakistan oscillated between two diametrically opposed narratives. Accountability of even the highest and that the fight against corruption must begin from the top, formed one trajectory of discourse and argument. Not so, was the second trajectory since what is underway inside this camouflage of accountability and probity is a 'creeping coup' to engineer a regime change. Each of these two narratives was and is convincingly articulated and is internally consistent. For these arrayed against PM Nawaz Sharif, holders of highest office must be even more accountable, the allegations of a witch hunt are preposterous and the judges and JIT officials are performing their role independently and objectively. But there are equally powerful arguments against. A JIT into financial impropriety and undeclared assets having representation from Military Intelligence and the ISI is one. How a considerable volume of financial information, from within Pakistan and from third countries, spanning over three decades could be collected and converted into evidence in 8 weeks is another. The view that some- perhaps much- of this material are recycled versions of what emerged in similar exercises from the early 1990s and then after the Musharraf coup has therefore a widespread currency. The present situation may have emerged from the independent revelations in 2016 of the Panama papers but the substance of the allegations against many of Pakistan's principal political families including the Sharif's are hardly new.

A Civil Military Factor: Between these two diametrically opposed narratives is a middle argument. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is paying the price of his own hubris and arrogance in taking on the army- The Musharraf trail, siding with the Jang/Geo group in its tangle with a DG, ISI, the Dawn Leaks case in General Raheel Sharif's last months in office etc. That in each of these and other similar instances the Prime Minister persisted despite knowing the results of earlier encounters was no less than a form of lunacy and he will now have to count the costs. What he possibly did not take into account was how much the army had risen in public esteem after Operation Zarb i Azb and the decline thereafter in terrorist attacks within Pakistan.

A longer - term malaise: Nawaz Sharif's disqualification is to be seen in the longer cycle of Pakistan's history when there has been a civilian dispensation running the government. If the long periods of military rule have shown remarkable continuity in terms of the top post, the civilian interludes have been marked by sharp discontinuities- in the 1950s, the 1990s and even in the past decade. Pakistan crossed one milestone in 2013 when the PPP led government completed its full term (with two Prime Ministers) and there was smooth transition to another civilian government.

Notwithstanding numerous weakness and recurrent crisis in this period, this was still a significant achievement for Pakistan. A second milestone would have been if Nawaz Sharif had completed his full term and stayed on as Prime Minister till the elections sometime after the first quarter of 2018. He would be the first Prime Minister of Pakistan to do so. That this has not happened is a setback for Pakistan politics. In the longer term, many issues believed to have been closed after the exit of General Musharraf have been reopened. In the short and medium term, Pakistan's domestic instability will further intensify and whether a minimum stability will be able to prevail in the period upto the election remains to be seen as different sets of political actors mull over their options with the background dominated by the brooding presence of the Army.

Nawaz Sharif's exit sees the closure of the innings of another charismatic politician who tried hard to improve relations with India. Benazir Bhutto's biography is an even grimmer one. His past in the 1980s and early 1990s on support to Khalistani or Kashmiri terrorists cannot be forgotten but the fact is that he also changed with, in some ways, a changing Pakistan. The Nawaz of the Lahore Bus initiative and who courageously attended the swearing in of the present government in New Delhi is someone who did try and try hard to bring about some minimum stability in what is and has been a fundamentally unstable relationship. That the elections of 1997, 2008 and 2013 in Pakistan and especially in Punjab did not see a high intensity rhetoric against India owes something to his role also. That these efforts did not succeed has much to do with the structural problems of Pakistan's internal politics and relations with India. Nawaz Shari's exit in this manner means that these have only grown in magnitude.

Ghosts of the Past: The 40th Anniversary of the 1977 coup that toppled Prime Minister Z A Bhutto was

an opportunity for Pakistan to reflect on Zia ul Haq's legacy amidst the debate surrounding the Supreme Court proceedings on the Panama papers. The past however came to the fore through other reminders. The first of these was the 10th anniversary of the Lal Masjid siege whose bloody end was followed by years of major terrorist attacks in Pakistan. The publication of the memoirs of the CIA contract Raymond Davis revived memories of 2011- a kind of *annus horribilis* for Pakistan US relations with the Raymond Davis episode in January 2011, the Osama bin Laden Raid in May and the US led NATO air strike at Salala in November that year in which at least 28 Pakistan Army personnel were killed. The Raymond Davis episode in which a CIA contractor had killed two Pakistanis in Lahore had ended with his release from custody through the modality a Sharia court awarding blood money. This was an arrangement brokered by the ISI and demonstrated its reach into the Judiciary.

Relations with USA: Amidst reminders of this tangled history, relations with the United States remained strained. The US had announced an inter-agency review of relations with Pakistan in June and since then the issue had remained one high in public attention in Pakistan. In some accounts, the review would be a radical one and extend from Pakistan's non NATO major US ally status to the quantum of financial assistance and aid. Amongst Pakistan's deepest fears was that of an unpredictable US President and the possibility therefore, howsoever remote, of being declared a state sponsor of terrorism. Two developments in July enlarged these fears. The US state department country wise report on global terrorism mentioned insufficient action by Pakistan against the Haqqani network and the Lashkar i Taiba and that many such groups had a safe haven in Pakistan. Secondly, a 50 million \$ tranche of coalition support fund reimbursement due to Pakistan was 'reprogrammed' with the Defense Secretary not being able to certify action against the Haqqani network by the Government of Pakistan. Neither of these two steps was unprecedented but together they provide a pointer to thinking in the new US administration and added to Pakistani concerns about looming uncertainties in relations with the US.

Relations with India: Clashes on the LOC remained a regular feature. According to the ISPR, the Neelum Valley was now being regularly targeted by mortars from the Indian side. Both civilian and military casualties and fatalities have been reported from both sides. The Pakistan Foreign Office stated that Indian forces have committed 542 ceasefire violations in 2017 so far with 18 fatalities so far. The ISPR had separately issued comparative figures claiming 315 ceasefire violations in 2014, 248 in 2015 and 382 in 2016.

Regular statements on the situation in J&K from the Foreign Office also remained a repetitive feature. Nevertheless, the response to the 10 July attack on the Amarnath pilgrims stands out as the statement accused India of staging a false flag operation. The Foreign Office spokesperson had inter alia said in response to a question: "We condemn killing of innocent civilians. We sympathize with the bereaved families and the injured. Indian agencies have a track record of staging false flag operations. Chattisinghpura massacre of 38 innocent Sikhs in March 2000 is one of the cases in point." He also said : "In the context of Amarnath attack, the Kashmiri leadership in Indian occupied Jammu & Kashmir has condemned the killings. On social media, a number of Indians have highlighted that last time when Yatris were attacked was in August 2000, then also BJP was in government. Some have pointed finger at RSS and BJP government, who want to put the blame on innocent Muslims."

In the prevailing environment, it was unusual to find the Lahore High Court striking down an order of the Pakistan Electronic Monitoring Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) barring television channels from airing Indian content i.e. soap operas. The arguments and counter arguments bear brief repetition. In defense of the ban, PEMRA held that it was imposed in response to a restriction on broadcasting of Pakistani dramas in India and that the content of Indian dramas was found to be objectionable and contrary to the ideology of Pakistan. The petitioners on the other hand argued that the government was practicing selective patriotism by allowing Bollywood movies to be screened in cinemas, but not on television. The Chief Justice of the High Court had heard the case and in disallowing the ban had observed that the regulator needed to revisit its policy, as the world had become a global village and placing unreasonable restrictions was not sustainable.

Internal: A regular stream of small terror attacks regularly punctuated the chronology of this period. A major suicide attack in Lahore on 24th July was however different with 26 fatalities reported including 9

policemen. The attacker in a motorcycle targeted a group of policemen assembled at the location for an anti-encroachment drive.

III Developments in Afghanistan

Water Issue with Iran: AA candid expression of Afghan views against Iran took place following remarks reported in the Afghan media by the Iranian President. Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani while addressing a conference on desertification and dust storms expressed concerns about dam construction in Afghanistan playing a role in reduced water flows. This thereafter figured in the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament in the first week of July with some members criticizing Iran on various grounds including on the sensitive issue of river water sharing. It would be recalled that the construction of the Salma Dam by India on the Harirud river in Herat Province had been a sensitive issue in Afghan Iran relations till the final completion of the project.

Kabul terrorist attack: A reminder of the major terrorist attacks in Kabul on 31st May was a suicide attack in Kabul with at least 25 fatal casualties.

Pakistan Army Operation in Khyber Agency: On 16th July the Pakistan Army launched Op Khyber IV in the Rajgal Valley in the Khyber Agency. From details given by the ISPR it would appear that an Infantry Division had been tasked with clearing a 250 sq km area of 'terrorists' including those of the IS. The Rajgal Valley has in the past been described by Pakistan Army statements as an area not cleared of terrorists. It is opposite Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. According to the ISPR the Afghan army had been intimated beforehand of Op Khyber IV so that they could carry out supporting activity 'if they so wished'. Possibly the background to the coordination with Afghanistan lies also in the visit of a US Congressional delegation led by Senator John McCain to Afghanistan and Pakistan in the first week of July. Senator McCain had then announced that both Armies had agreed to coordinated operations which the US would monitor and verify. The Chinese too have been pressing for this after playing a major role in diffusing a Pakistan Afghanistan crisis in end June and which had seen the Chinese FM visit both countries. Nevertheless, the sensitivities involved were not slow in appearing and the Afghan Army spokesperson was shortly to respond that there had been no coordination before the launch of the Operation despite an earlier agreement to that effect. Both governments are wary of anything that smacks of a 'joint' operation regardless of the external pressures being brought to bear. In Pakistani Army statements, there are now frequent references to the fencing of the Pakistan Afghanistan border. For Afghanistan, this is a no-go area and regularly raised and condemned in the Afghan parliament. Underwriting all this is a deep distrust on Afghanistan of all Pakistani army moves and plans.

(The views expressed are personal)
