
Pakistan's Long Tradition of Military Rule: Ayub Khan to Zia-ul-Haq

Gurmeet Kanwal

On March 25, 2008, Makhdoom Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani was sworn in as the 23rd prime minister of Pakistan. Thus, ended the most recent phase of military rule that had begun when, on October 12, 1999, the military jackboot had returned once again to crush Pakistan's fledgling democracy and the hopes and dreams of its oppressed citizens. The international community had wrung its hands in despair and watched helplessly as Gen Pervez Musharraf, the "Chief Executive", and his hawkish senior colleagues set about systematically undermining and, in places, even dismantling the civilian administrative structures and placing in supervisory positions junior army officers to extend military governance down to the grassroots levels. Bruised and battered into submission through a half-century of either direct military rule or the military's watchful oversight over national affairs through a proxy civilian government, the people of Pakistan simply resigned themselves to their fate. Perhaps, they reasoned that only Allah could question those who have proclaimed themselves to be above the law.

The militarisation of the Pakistani polity began soon after independence. A nation that chose to fight a war with its much larger and stronger neighbour even before finding its feet and consolidating its legally inherited territories, and in the bargain gave a major role to its army in national affairs, could not have hoped that the generals would ever again be content to play golf in their manicured cantonments and leave the politicians alone to play their dirty games. Ever since the evolution of the floundering nation-state, the Pakistan Army has projected itself as "the guardian of the nation's values and ideals and the protector of Islam."¹ Stephen P. Cohen has written that the creation of Pakistan on the basis of religion also led to the army having to "adapt to Islamic

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principles and practices.”² Since the inception of Pakistan, the army has always looked upon itself as the guardian of the nation’s ideological frontiers in addition to its responsibility to guard its physical boundaries.

Gen (later Field Marshal) Ayub Khan was for some time the commander-in-chief (1951-58) as well as the minister of defence (1954-58) before he finally overthrew the government and established Pakistan’s first military regime in 1958. At that time, the Pakistan Army was beset by numerous organisational problems, not the least of which was that it was split between the eastern (now Bangladesh) and western wings of the country, while having to sustain a large-scale deployment on the Ceasefire Line (CFL, now the Line of Control — LoC). Also, as Field Marshal John Harding wrote after a visit to Pakistan and India during the early 1950s, “The Army Headquarters, which carries out the functions of our (the British) War Office as well as direct command, (was) situated 800 miles from the seat of Government in Karachi.”³

Instead of concentrating his energies on improving the organisational structure, the standard of training and the level of preparedness of his army, Ayub Khan chose to dabble in politics and gradually learnt to enjoy wielding extra-constitutional authority. Ayub experimented with a system of “Basic Democracy” for Pakistan in which the people were allowed only a limited amount of participation. Military officers received many favours and were given plum assignments. Ayub’s 1962 Constitution provided that for 20 years, “the Ministry of Defence was to be entrusted to a person who had held a rank not lower than lieutenant general (and equivalent in the navy and air force).”⁴

Though Ayub Khan did try to keep the bulk of the army away from martial law duties, even handing over the post of Chief of Army Staff (COAS) to Gen Mohammad Musa (1958-66), he could not “save the reputation of the army as a professional, non-political institution from being greatly compromised.”⁵ Ayub Khan’s ignominious handling of the 1965 War with India also led to the lengthening of the shadows for his army chief, Gen Mohammad Musa (1958-66). Musa was

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followed by Gen Yahya Khan (1966-71) who retained the post of COAS despite being sworn in as interim president in 1969 when Ayub Khan was finally forced to step down after a popular people's movement. "He (Yahya Khan) beguiled himself into the wishful thought (*sic*) that his brush with absolute power would be only temporary and that he would be able to go back to his army command not a day later than necessary... The damage done to the army (during Yahya Khan's tenure) had been a body blow too stunning for words."⁶ Yahya Khan's fall from grace and power in the wake of Pakistan's humiliating military defeat at India's hands in 1971 and the birth of Bangladesh, led to the appointment of Gen Gul Hassan as the COAS (1971-72) by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had taken over as the president and chief martial law administrator. Gul Hassan was, in turn, replaced within three months by Gen Tikka Khan (1972-76), better known as the butcher of Bangladesh. To his credit, Tikka Khan kept himself scrupulously aloof from civil-political affairs.

Bhutto tried to rein in the unbridled power enjoyed by the military. In May 1976, he issued a White Paper outlining the government's defence and strategic policy and institutional arrangements for a higher defence organisation. The White Paper advocated an integrated approach to defence and national security, "with the ultimate responsibility of national defence resting with the prime minister."⁷ Bhutto formed a Defence Committee of the Cabinet, instituted a Defence Council to "translate defence policy into military policy", integrated the three Services with the Ministry of Defence, redesignated the Service chiefs as chiefs of staff, upgraded the naval and air chiefs to four-star rank and brought them on par with the army chief and created a new post of chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC). It turned out to be largely a ceremonial post as Bhutto gave the CJCSC no major functional powers.⁸ Bhutto's moves were primarily intended to dilute the power enjoyed by the army chief so that he would not pose a threat to him. However, this ploy apparently did not work as Bhutto was himself overthrown in a military coup by the COAS despite having appointed Gen Sharif as the CJCSC. Though Bhutto did much to transform the Pakistani armed forces from a defeated and demoralised lot into one of Asia's leading fighting forces, his initial shabby treatment of the military brass, particularly the dismissals of the army and air chiefs, "bred in the rank and file an innate distrust of his party and government." By the spring of 1977, "Bhutto had lost the support of a large part of his constituency and had totally alienated his opposition. The result was a political movement even more violent than the one that had dislodged Ayub Khan eight years earlier."⁹

On Gen Tikka Khan's retirement, Bhutto, by then prime minister, handpicked and appointed Gen Zia-ul-Haq as the new COAS (1976-88; till his death in an air

crash) over the heads of several senior generals and hoped that his protégé would tow the line of his civilian bosses and keep the army where it belonged – in the barracks. However, Zia had other ideas and not only overthrew Bhutto on July 5, 1977, and once again proclaimed martial law but also hanged him on trumped up charges and went on to rule for 11 long years without a thought for democracy. Zia ruled for eight years as the absolute ruler under martial law and for three years as a civilian president with absolute powers. Zia got the Pakistan Army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate embroiled in the Afghan War and commenced the Islamisation of the army. During the period 1983-85, after Bhutto's execution on trumped up charges, Zia began to seek ways to legitimise his military rule. He even tried limited local government in the four provinces but without much success. In domestic politics, Zia played the role of a consummate politician to the hilt despite having had an army upbringing. "Zia aided the growth of the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM) only in order to check the spread of the Jamaat-e-Islami in Karachi. The Sunni private armies of central Punjab were born during this time. And, both problems have continued to haunt Pakistan, because in their wake have appeared Shia militias, drug armies and all sorts of thuggish and criminal groups."¹⁰

It was only in 1985 that Gen Zia yielded reluctantly to a civilian regime but not before promulgating the dreaded Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, under the cloak of which elected civilian administrations could be, and were, repeatedly dismissed by Pakistan's presidents in collusion with the army brass, and democracy was not allowed to take root in Pakistan. In the last few years of his rule, Gen Zia continued to retain the two important posts of president and COAS. "Zia subordinated the civilianisation process to an almost permanent militarisation of his rule... he knew that the real source of his power lay in the military command he must hold on to under all circumstances (*sic*)." Zia introduced a structure in which the politicians were prepared to accept a political role for the military.¹¹ Zia soon realised that a parliamentary form of government could not coexist happily with a

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strong president and dismissed Prime Minister Junejo in May 1988. Had Zia lived, it is reasonably certain that he would have guided Pakistan towards a presidential form of government with an institutionalised role for the military, possibly through a National Security Council.

On the demise of Gen Zia, Gen Aslam Beg (1988-91) stepped into the power vacuum as COAS and Ghulam Ishaq Khan, a Pakistan Civil Service bureaucrat, was sworn in as acting president. Despite doomsday predictions by well known defence analysts in India and other parts of the world (expressing scepticism about the restoration of democracy in Pakistan, K Subrahmanyam is reported to have written that "... Pakistan has not only a tradition of military rule but also one of military conspiracies"¹²), this time the Pakistan Army took care to act wisely. Under Aslam Beg's leadership, the Pakistan Army General Headquarters (GHQ) carefully weighed the pros and cons of continuing with the prevailing martial law regime and magnanimously decided that a return to army-backed democracy would be more appropriate. It was at this stage (early 1989) that the concept of the ruling "troika" emerged.¹³ The troika was an informal grouping that comprised the president, the prime minister and the COAS. However, the army always made it quite clear where the real power lay and preferred to let the civilians bear the burden of governance so that it could concentrate on the qualitative upgradation and the modernisation of its fighting echelons and launch its 'proxy war' in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and elsewhere in India.

The ruling elite were said to have grudgingly accepted Benazir Bhutto as prime minister in 1988 only "under American pressure but, even then, they did so only when she agreed to their terms," which Anwar H. Syed writes were as follows:¹⁴

- Bhutto's party would support the election of Ghulam Ishaq Khan as president of Pakistan for a full term.
- Bhutto would retain Sahibzada Yaqub Ali Khan (a retired general) as foreign minister. The maintenance of a hard line position towards India was inherent in this demand.
- She would not interfere with the military's management of the government's Afghan policy, including its working relations with the Afghan Mujahideen and its oversight of their operations against the government in Kabul.
- She would not intervene in the military's internal administration (postings, transfers and promotions).

Bhutto also agreed to be guided by Ghulam Ishaq Khan and Aslam Beg in the development of Pakistan's nuclear and missile capability and tacitly accepted the arrangement that Pakistan's nuclear weapons would remain under the army

chief's control. She stated in June 1988, "The army is a very powerful institution – much more so than eleven years ago. Anyone thinking that after the elections the power of the army will automatically wane is being unrealistic."¹⁵ It was in these circumstances that the troika functioned and the army played a guiding role in steering Pakistan's fledgling democracy from the sidelines. RS Sasheen has written about the Pakistan military:¹⁶ "All our great 'saviours' who emerged from the military, including those not having any actual authority, were seen to actively

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exercise the role (*sic*) they had arrogated for themselves either by force or acquired as a legacy... (they) happily wallowed in power, thoroughly enjoying every moment of it. They were basically political animals, even if they were in uniform, and their acts were designed to make that clear." In Sasheen's words, "General Aslam Beg used to hold 'court' and politicians jostled with each other to get an 'audience'."¹⁷

Gen Aslam Beg also frequently dabbled in Pakistan's foreign policy and no civilian head of government was strong enough to stand up to him. Beg advocated a "strategic consensus" with Iran and Afghanistan and the "strategic defiance" of India, completely without Foreign Office approval. However, after making a few more dramatic statements about an imminent Indian attack, he handed over power gracefully on completing his term in 1991. He was followed by Gen Asif Nawaz Janjua (1991-93), the second army chief after Zia to be appointed by a duly elected civilian administration. Asif Nawaz was a no-nonsense soldier and found it difficult to get along with Nawaz Sharif, whom he considered a scheming politician. He died of a heart attack under mysterious circumstances¹⁸ and was succeeded by Gen Abdul Waheed Kakar (1993-96) after a massive confrontation between the president and the prime minister who was vehement that Lt Gen Farrukh Khan, whom the president had selected, must not succeed. Gen Waheed was apolitical and remained so. He did his best to wean the army away from politics. Gen Jehangir Karamat followed as COAS (1996-98) and continued the policies of his predecessor.

Acting on inputs provided by the ISI, during the period 1990-96, several civilian governments were dismissed by incumbent presidents in connivance with the COAS. The Benazir Bhutto government was dismissed by the president in consultation with the COAS in mid-1990 for "persistent and scandalous

horse-trading for political gain, breakdown of law and order in Sindh, corruption and nepotism and use of statutory corporations, authorities and banks for political ends and personal gain.”¹⁹ Bhutto blamed the army and the ISI for her dismissal. It was widely rumoured that she had been in the process of tinkering with the tenures of the CJCS and the COAS and the military establishment had not taken kindly to her attempts to gain control over senior military appointments. The president declared a state of emergency and appointed Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi as the caretaker head of government. After general elections in October 1990, the Nawaz Sharif-led Islami Jamoori Iltehaad (JI) coalition, believed to have been cobbled together and funded by the ISI to prevent Benazir Bhutto from returning to power,²⁰ won, and Sharif became Pakistan’s prime minister.

Sharif was young and inexperienced and failed to show any commitment to resolve Pakistan’s numerous problems. In April 1993, the president dismissed Nawaz Sharif and installed Balakh Sher Mazari as the head of an interim government. However, the Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of Nawaz Sharif as prime minister and an ugly situation was developing when Gen Waheed played a positive role. “By a combination of tact, forcefulness, honour and tenacity, he convinced the president and the prime minister that they should stand down” and they did. Moeen Qureshi, a World Bank economist, agreed to lead a caretaker administration. In army supervised elections, Benazir Bhutto managed to put together a working coalition and once again took over as prime minister in October 1993. This time she lasted for three years and was finally dismissed again in November 1996 by President Farooq Leghari as the nation was once again becoming ungovernable and was on the verge of financial bankruptcy. In elections held in February 1997, Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League was voted to power with 181 seats in the 217-member National Assembly. This time, the new prime minister was determined to show the nation who was the real boss.

Among the first few major initiatives of the Nawaz Sharif government was the 13th Amendment to the Pakistan Constitution that curtailed the president’s power to dismiss an elected government. The government then politicised the issue to appoint five new Supreme Court judges and sought to exploit the deep divisions within the judiciary. During October-November 1997, there was a standoff between the executive and the judiciary, with President Leghari openly siding with the judiciary and criticising Nawaz Sharif’s “personal dictatorship.” Nawaz Sharif publicly criticised the chief justice and he, in turn, initiated contempt proceedings against the prime minister. The Pakistan Supreme Court

suspended the government's anti-defection law and began hearing petitions challenging the Anti-Terrorist Act and the 13th Amendment to curtail the president's power to dismiss an elected government.

On November 27, 1997, unruly Pakistan Muslim League (PML) workers physically prevented a Supreme Court bench from hearing a contempt petition against the prime minister. Meanwhile, the prime minister threatened to initiate impeachment proceedings against the president. The Pakistan COAS, Gen Jehangir Karamat, who had been watching the sordid drama unfolding from the sidelines with growing consternation, finally intervened to broker a truce between the president, the prime minister and the chief justice. In an hour of constitutional crisis, the civilians had once again failed to get their act together and had to settle for military arbitration. It was widely reported that the COAS had at that time looked for an alternative candidate for the post of prime minister. The sons of Field Marshal Ayub Khan and Gen Zia-ul-Haq were said to have been the leading contenders! If there was anything that emerged clearly from this imbroglio, it was that the Pakistan COAS is the ultimate arbiter of power in Pakistan.

President Farooq Leghari resigned on December 2, 1997, following irreconcilable differences with the prime minister. However, Nawaz Sharif's high-handed rule continued. The Islamisation Bill, introduced by the government in the National Assembly on August 28, 1998, was increasingly seen as an attempt by the prime minister to use religion for political purposes. On September 7, 1998, top Pakistani opposition leaders, including Wali Khan, Benazir Bhutto and Sardar Ataulah Mengal, alleged that the prime minister's actions would destroy the Pakistani Federation and said that the 15th Constitutional Amendment Bill (Islamisation Bill) was an immediate threat. Nawaz Sharif then took the case to the *Ulema*, the clergy, and sought their support to help him in the implementation of the *Shariah*. Farooq Leghari, now in politics himself, accused Nawaz Sharif of attempting to establish a "fascist dictatorship" through the controversial 15th Amendment Bill. On October 11, 1998, the National Assembly passed the somewhat diluted 15th Amendment Bill. The army, bureaucracy and intelligentsia watched from the sidelines as Nawaz Sharif pushed through the controversial legislation despite the objection of several provinces and all the minorities.²¹ Sharif had accumulated so much power that his critics had begun to call him an "elected dictator".

Despite having gained almost unquestioned supremacy over virtually every aspect of governance in Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif was unable to rein in the military. In the areas considered critical by them, the armed forces continued to

call the shots and followed their own agenda. "Mr. Sharif, despite his newly acquired supremacy, was unable to influence the actions flowing from the deep-seated hostility towards India at various levels of the armed forces. There was a distinct orientation in their outlook and training..."²² Clearly, there was a message from the Pakistan Army in the brutal February 1999 massacres in the Rajouri and Udhampur districts of J&K, masterminded by the ISI to coincide with the Indian prime minister's bus ride to Lahore. The message was from the Pakistan Army-ISI-Jamaat-e-Islami combine to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and its essence was: "Shake hands, play cricket and hockey, open up trade and encourage people-to-people contacts if you wish; however, lay off Kashmir – that is our agenda and it is non-negotiable."²³ India has consistently chosen to ignore this duality of authority in Pakistan in its diplomatic parleys with that country.

In fact, far from venturing to rein in the military, Nawaz Sharif opted to keep the military at bay by leaning on it for administration. The armed forces were asked to assist in collecting unpaid electricity bills, building roads and fighting crime to hold the divided country together.²⁴ They were also given the task of conducting the national census and were asked to take over and run Pakistan's largest power company. In November 1998, civil rights were suspended and martial law was imposed in Sindh in an attempt to curb ethnic violence in Karachi. To administer swift justice, military courts were established. However, the Pakistan Supreme Court later ruled that these tribunals were illegal. A Western observer described Sharif's dependence on the military as a "coup by invitation."²⁵ Involving the army in running the administration, at a time when its commitments in keeping Karachi from burning were increasing and it was getting sucked deeper into the Afghan quagmire, was bound to result in the following:

- Its increasing politicisation due to its wooing by petty politicians at the functional level and party satraps at the decision-making level.
- A steady deterioration of its professional military capabilities as additional responsibilities left little time or inclination for long-term planning and hard training.
- Increasing proclivity to become corrupt like the rest of the body politic.
- Tendency to misuse power for personal gain.
- Inclination to behave with the civilian population in a high-handed manner, thereby alienating the people, and worse, a growing brutality in its execution of military operations.

The COAS, Gen Jehangir Karamat, was well aware of the falling professional standards and low morale in the Pakistan Army and as a concerned professional himself, he wished to set things right. He was extremely keen that the entire gamut of national security be seen in its wider perspective and decisions be taken holistically. It was for this reason that during a lecture at the Naval War College he advocated the setting up of a National Security Council. He said, "Pakistan cannot afford the destabilising effects of polarisation, vendettas and insecurity-driven expedient policies... While there must be a neutral, competent and secure bureaucracy, there was need for a National Security Council at the apex to institutionalise decision-making."²⁶

However, the media interpreted his recommendation as a veiled attempt to institutionalise the role of the Pakistan Army in governance. Perhaps the PML ideologues saw it

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that way and encouraged the media to make an emotive issue of it. Either way, Gen Karamat resigned. His resignation sent shock waves through the army as the Pakistan media suggested that the COAS had been asked to resign by the prime minister and had complied. Karamat himself has gone on record to state that he voluntarily chose to step down, as he did not wish to create an unnecessary controversy between the army and the civilian government. He wrote to Brian Cloughley: "The speech was wrongly interpreted as a bid for power by the military and a criticism of the government... I left at my own request, to save my institution from controversial and uninformed public debate... never did the prime minister ask me to leave."²⁷ This appears extremely plausible because not even a prime minister with Nawaz Sharif's majority in the National Assembly could have dismissed an army chief in Pakistan.²⁸ However, the military establishment was rather upset; the feeling was that Sharif's autocratic rule had gone too far.

The prime minister appointed Gen Pervez Musharraf (a Mohajir) to the post of COAS, superseding Lt Gen Ali Kuli Khan Khattak (a Pakhtoon) and Lt Gen Khalid Nawaz Malik (a Punjabi). Maj Gen Muhammad Aziz Khan was promoted to lieutenant general and appointed chief of the General Staff (CGS), an important post usually held by a very senior general. Aziz had not even

commanded a corps and was obviously handpicked by Musharraf for the sensitive job. As things turned out later, Aziz proved his loyalty to Musharraf when the latter was dismissed on October 12, 1999, and Aziz executed a well-conceived contingency plan for a coup. Till the Kargil conflict in 1999, Nawaz Sharif and Musharraf got along quite well. Musharraf was instrumental in establishing Special Military Courts in Karachi to try MQM workers. Also, it was during his tenure that the Pakistan Army took over the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA). At this time, Pakistan's economy was in a shambles, corruption was rampant and administration was characterised by extreme inefficiency. The rate of growth hovered between negative and one to two percent – a figure that was being derisively referred to as the “Islamic rate of growth”. Nawaz Sharif's ‘band-aid’ approach was deeply resented and many senior officers commented discreetly that “it is not the business of the army to become involved” in civil administration.

Nawaz Sharif, as was his wont, excelled in running with the hares and hunting with the hounds. Even as he kowtowed to the Muslim clergy for political gains and to the Pakistan Army by approving the Kargil excursion, he made overtures to India and invited Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Lahore in February 1999. Musharraf and the other two Service chiefs snubbed their own prime minister by staying deliberately away from Lahore on a flimsy excuse, ostensibly to refrain from having to salute the visiting Indian prime minister. Sharif himself was less than effusive in reciprocating Vajpayee's warm hug and friendly tone as he did not wish to be publicly seen to be endorsing a policy of friendship with India. However, he certainly wanted to pursue renewed ties, particularly to enhance trade in which he and his cronies had a vested interest. On March 2, 1999, the Pakistani opposition parties, led by the Jamaat-e-Islami and including a 16-party alliance, rejected the Lahore Declaration as anti-Pakistan and warned India that no future Pakistani government would honour it. They also asked Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to discontinue dialogue with India unless “India agreed to give the right of self-determination to the Kashmiris.”²⁹ It is clear with hindsight that the Lahore bus diplomacy was deeply resented by the Pakistan Army and the Islamic fundamentalists as moves for peace with India did not suit the vested interests of either of them. In any case, the Pakistan Army had by then gone too far with its planning for “Operation Badr” in the Kargil district of J&K and was not going to allow Sharif to ruin what the Pakistan GHQ thought was a bold plan to once again seize the military and moral high ground on Kashmir.

(This is the first in a two-part analysis of the Pakistan Army's role in governance and its implications for peace and stability in Southern Asia.)

Notes

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 28. In a conversation with the author on this issue at an international conference in 2005, Gen Karamat asked, "Do you think a Pakistani prime minister is in any position to dismiss the Chief of Army Staff?"
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ISBN 978-81-87966-64-7
Rs. 620.00 US \$ 18.00
Hardback

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