



PAKISTAN'S POLITICAL IMBROGLIO - YET AGAIN!

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Pakistan's most recent political imbroglio entered its 11th day today with Nawaz Sharif refusing to take accept Imran Khan's proposition that he should quit his position as the Prime Minister for 30 days to be able to allow an independent probe into the May 2013 elections. The two parties have had three rounds of (unsuccessful) talks and according to Sharif, there is no justification for the protests after he has accepted all the constitutional demands of the protesters. Expectedly, the demand for Sharif's resignation for the period of 30 days has been rejected by PML (N).

Cricketer turned politician Imran Khan, head of the country's third-largest political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and Canada based cleric Tahric ul- Qadri, head of Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) who has influence over a network of Islamic schools and charities, launched protests on August 14th to dislodge the 15 month old Nawaz Sharif government (PML-N), which enjoys a majority, having 190 members in the House of 342. Imran Khan and Qadri who initiated the protests have accused the Sharif government of rigging 2013 general elections and of corruption.

Both Imran Khan and Qadri have been holding protests and rallies in Islamabad drawing support from thousands of people. The protesters even entered the "Red Zone" which houses the embassies, Parliament and also, Sharif's residence. The protests have certainly imposed massive pressure on the existing government which is struggling to cope with a number of challenges, the most important of them being daily power cuts, high unemployment and raging Taliban insurgency which has not allowed the country to settle down.

The so-called civil disobedience movement has certainly managed to stun the world and more importantly, the Pakistanis. More than 35,000 Pakistanis marching into the high security Red Zone, and threatening further to march into the Prime Ministers residence is not a normal occurrence. The judicial intervention has led to the issue of Supreme Court summons to Imran Khan and Qadri for organizing the 'civil disobedience movement'. The business community in the country is very unhappy with Imran's movement and the Pakistani dailies have been critical of PTI's Azadi March. The general opinion in Pakistan does not favour derailing of democracy in Pakistan at this point of time.

The Army is in favour of talks and has called for restraint and a negotiated settlement. Sharif has undoubtedly added to the displeasure of the military by entering into unproductive peaceful talks and delaying actions against the Taliban. Also, putting the former Army Chief General Musharraf on trial for treason did not go down well with the Army's institutional prestige, given that Pakistan is a country, which has been primarily run by men in Khaki. Sharif's efforts and agenda of working on improving relationship with India independent of the military also, did not fetch support from the military. The entire episode of civil disobedience, which talks of the rigging during elections after good 15 months is derisory and not at all impressive, given the fact, that the issue of corruption is not new to the Pakistani leadership and obviously, can be used anytime against the regime. The protests add tremendous pressure on Nawaz and it would not be incorrect to believe that the entire episode has Pakistan Army's support to be able to keep Sharif in his place. Pakistan Army might have decided to stay out of direct power, but would certainly not allow any erosion of its stature and ability to wield power itself.

Pakistan cannot afford this chaos in the middle of exiting tenacious economic challenges and also, serious security concerns, especially with the US drawdown from the region. The protests have affected the market and stock exchange and Pakistan has reportedly suffered a loss of 10 billion rupees due to strikes and protests. The political instability will provide additional space to the TTP for acting against the regime. Although, Sharif has his own share of culpabilities and is not guilt-free, destabilising the government at this point would not be in the interest of anyone, least of all the nation of Pakistan. The episode yet again proves the fragile democracy and politics in Pakistan, and also the vested interests of various stake holders. The Army in Pakistan would never allow the civilian leadership to intervene in its interests (and domain) in any form.

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