



## **The Political Impasse in Pakistan: Further Weakening of the Civilian Leadership**

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The Pakistani democratic establishment has again allowed itself to be dictated to by religious groups and the Pakistani Army. This has exposed the government's inability to deal with any sort of crisis by itself, thereby undermining its own legitimate position to govern.

The present conundrum was triggered with the amendment of the election laws. Through the Elections Act 2017, one of the amendments made was with regard to the oath/affidavit a candidate makes during election. This is a clause related to a candidate's belief in the finality of the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad (Khatm-i-Nabooat), which was made not applicable to non-Muslim candidates. As protests were made regarding the amendment, parliamentary leaders decided that the original form of the affidavit will be kept intact, without any amendment in that section.

However, religious groups considered this clerical error as an attempt to undermine Islam and demanded the removal of Law Minister Zahid Hamid. The protesters, who belonged to religious parties like the Tehreek Labbaik Ya Rasool Allah (TLY), the Tehreek-i-Khatm-i-Nabuwat, and the Sunni Tehreek Pakistan (ST), occupied the Faizabad Interchange paralyzing the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad for more than twenty days.

The government failed to either end the sit-in in the initial days (when it was much smaller) or to mediate. The courts made it clear that paralyzing the twin cities in such a manner, undermined the basic civil liberties of the people, and the government should immediately take action for the removal of the sit-in. The government was deterred from using force by the apprehensions that such an action might lead to a repetition of a situation that occurred in Lal Masjid in Islamabad in 2007, which was one of the reasons for the removal of General Musharraf from office. In the present crisis, the government spoke to religious clerics and scholars, and leaders of the protest, but failed to resolve the situation, as the protestors demanded that action be taken as per their terms and conditions. While the government made feeble attempts to solve

the problem, the Islamabad High Court made it clear that the government should take some action to break the logjam using "any means necessary"; and, even warned Interior Minister Ahsan Iqbal that he would be charged with contempt of court for failure to comply with the court's orders.

A deadline was given for the morning of November 25, after which a huge number of law enforcement officials tried to disperse the protestors with tear gas and rubber bullets, turning the Faisabad Interchange into a virtual war zone. It triggered nationwide clashes throughout November 26 and 27, resulting in the death of at least six people and injuries to scores of others, including law enforcement officials. The PML-N government asked the Pakistani Army, along with the Punjab Rangers, to assist local law enforcement officials in the removal of the protestors. However, the Army declined the use of force and stressed on a political settlement.

The government, with an interlocutor from the Army, was forced to negotiate with the protestors and accept a number of their demands in return for ending the protest. The government agreed to Zahid Hamid resigning as the Federal Law Minister. The government also agreed to make the Raja Zafarul Haq-led committee report public within 30 days (December 20<sup>th</sup>) as well as to release all the arrested protestors. The government agreed to include two representatives of Tehreek-i-Labaik in the panel assigned to decide changes in the textbook board. The document of the agreement ended by crediting Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa and his team for their "special efforts" which led to the agreement being signed with the protestors.

The political opposition, during the entire phase, played the role of stoking the fire to deliberately weaken PML-N's nationwide position, and its prospects in the 2018 national election. The Pakistan Army has emerged as the saviour of the democratic political establishment, which has been questioned by the judiciary.

The events have also strengthened the resolve and political standing of radical and extremist religious groups, seriously threatening the liberal space in Pakistan. Barelvi extremist groups, who have a obsession with 'blasphemy', gained more political and social space through this fiasco. Their rise has continued from February 2016 during the protests they carried out after convicted murderer and policeman Mumtaz Qadri was hanged for assassinating Punjab Governor Salmaan Taseer. He was assassinated by Qadri for speaking in favour of blasphemy-convicted Asia Bibi and against the blasphemy law. Such protests were always followed by serious lawlessness, violence and loss of public property. They carried out rallies again in the month of March 2017, defying bans, commemorating Qadri's death anniversary, portraying him as a martyr. These groups maintain bitter hostility against members of the country's religious minority, especially the Ahmadi Muslim sect and demand Shariah to be implemented throughout Pakistan. Their manifesto is to secure the sanctity of the Prophet (PBUH) and the death of anyone who commits blasphemy.<sup>1</sup>

The PML-N government helped create the crisis and then managed to aggravate it at every step. Until the very end, when the government used the appearance of a court order to try and

forcibly evict the protesters from Faizabad, it showed lack of planning and poor intelligence collected before carrying out the forcible eviction. The political opposition also played a miserable role, fanning a crisis for the most myopic of political reasons and searching for a pyrrhic victory. The government has been humiliated and the military leadership has further improved its standing with sections of the public for helping to end the protests. The sit in was called off on December 1, after the Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah was also removed from his post, which was a demand TLY later made.

The Islamabad High Court was critical about the role of the army during the entire sit-in, and the manner in which they acted as the mediator. Chief Justice Shaukat Aziz Siddiqui stated that the armed forces, being part of the executive of the country, cannot travel beyond its mandate bestowed upon it by the Constitution. He added that an impression is being given that the military is the panacea for all ills.<sup>2</sup> He later asked the Attorney General Ashtar Ausaf to place it before a joint session of parliament or the federal cabinet for scrutinizing the controversial agreement. The court termed the agreement surrender of the federal government to the protesters and stated its dismay the manner in which the government withdrew the FIR's against the violent protestors unilaterally.

The civilian government has gone to the level of blaming the chain of events targeting its own ministers of the federal government as well as blaming intelligence organisations of India. The lack of leadership and foresight and the unbridled power given to religious extremist groups further weakens Pakistani democratic polity, which also remain to be a major challenge to peace and security in the region.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Suleman, "The Rise of Barelvi Extremism in Pakistan", IAPS Dialogue: The Online Magazine of the Institute of Asia & Pacific Studies, University of Nottingham, September 21, 2017, <https://iapsdialogue.org/2017/09/21/the-rise-of-barelvi-extremism-in-pakistan/> (accessed on December 6, 2017); Kalbe Ali, "Who is Khadim Hussain Rizvi?", *Dawn*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1374182/who-is-khadim-hussain-rizvi> (accessed on December 6, 2017); Kashif N Chaudhry, Pakistan and the Rise of Barelvi Sunni Extremism, *The Huffington Post*, September 1, 2017, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pakistan-and-the-rise-of-barelvi-sunni-extremism\\_us\\_5874493ae4b08052400ee5bc](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/pakistan-and-the-rise-of-barelvi-sunni-extremism_us_5874493ae4b08052400ee5bc) (accessed on December 6, 2017)