

# MAKING THE ELEPHANT DANCE:

## NEGOTIATING POWER DYNAMICS WITH THE ESTABLISHMENT

Ayesha Siddiqi

9

November 26th brought an emotional relief to Pakistan as the government appointed the new army chief, General Asim Munir. The anxiety over the choice was due to the perception that the selection would determine the future direction of politics in the country. Successive governments have pinned their hopes with the army chief as someone who would ensure longevity and health of their government. Though the history of the relationship between the head of the largest service of the armed forces and the prime minister's office is rife with disappointment and often utter failure, lessons were never learned to change the approach. The continued pursuance of dependence on the army chief by political governments, especially the politically significant Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PMLN) group is not just a matter of odd choice but peculiar political strategizing and the manner in which the relationship between the two core power centres of the country have evolved.

### INTER-INSTITUTIONAL RIVALRY

To understand the peculiar obsession with appointment of the army chief it is necessary to look back at the evolution of inter-institutional relationship dating back to General Ziaul Haq's third military coup that not just overthrew a popular government but also decimated the institution of a powerful prime minister. In 1985, the Zia regime with the help of a selected parliament and prime minister brought the notorious amendment to the 1973 Constitution. The article 58(2)(b) gave the power of removal of the government to the president who was also made the supreme commander of the armed forces in place of the prime minister. The objective was to disempower the head of the government.

The constitutional change was then used repeatedly to remove successive political governments, and in the process, keep political stakeholders unstable. Though the amendment was revoked later in 1997, the power balance did not tilt in favour of the civilian government, which led to the struggle by the political class to find a method to dominate the army. Despite that the PMLN government appointed army chiefs even earlier (1991 and 1993), a conscious effort towards finding a favourable army chief begun to be made in 1998 and after. General Pervez Musharraf was selected to replace General Jahangir Karamat, who resigned that year over an altercation with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif regarding the former's suggesting during his speech at the Naval War College advising the government to establish a National Security Council and make military commanders partners in decision-making. Interestingly, the Nawaz Sharif government adopted this suggestion much later in 2013. Sources suggest not only that Musharraf sought to ensure the Sharif family of his allegiance, the PMLN leadership made the choice thinking that the general being from an ethnic minority would remain subservient.

Although the formula did not work, it was tried repeatedly - 2013 and 2018. The intention remained the search for a friendly army chief. Despite that Nawaz Sharif and his party drew a lot of criticism for using the same approach, the formula was not abandoned and, in fact, seems to have guided the selection of the latest service chief, General Asim Munir. Interestingly, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf did not learn from the PMLN's past failures and used a similar approach of wanting an army chief of its choice that could guarantee the party's power. This obsession with investing in a particular personality indicates three aspects. First, the army chief is central to the political strategy of a party due

to the role he plays in ensuring survival of a government, thus, the desire to build a relationship of allegiance between the office bearer and the government. Second, the political strategy is very personality oriented. Third, the inability of political players to negotiate power through institutional means.

Apart from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) that tends to vacillate between personalized versus institutionalized approach to power negotiation, most political players have demonstrated little capacity to adopt latter kind of approach in checking the military's power. The 18th amendment to the 1973 Constitution passed in April 2010 by the then PPP government financially empowered federating units of the country. In the process it was viewed as a push back to the armed forces as the federal government no longer had resources to feed the military sufficiently as it did in the past. The army's annoyance with the constitutional change echoed through the media as General Bajwa often spoke against the amendment. The establishment's discomfort is probably what resulted in the PPP abandoning this approach and returning to the traditional way of dealing with the armed forces.

The PMLN and PTI, on the other hand, have remained tied to the traditional formula – targeting selective members of the establishment by building personal ties but also keeping relationship with the non-civilian power centre intact through providing financial sweeteners or enhancing its power. Resultantly, the 2013 – 2022 period is a journey of both vertical and horizontal expansion of the establishment's power. The PMLN government elected in 2013 was, for example, quick in abandoning the agreement signed between Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif called the 'Charter of Democracy' in May 2006 that endorsed the idea of empowering the parliament by bringing back the old system of the Cabinet Committee for Defence (DCC) for national security decision-making and removing General Musharraf's National Security Council. While the 2008 – 2013 PPP government implemented the agreement, the PMLN government, which followed, changed the method of engagement with the establishment. The DCC was replaced with a Cabinet Committee for National Security and that too without any debate in the Parliament. Later the nomenclature was changed to National Security Committee (NSC) and its role also revised from advisory to decision-making. Unlike the DCC, the new NSC gave membership to the four-star generals and made them partners in national strategic decision-making. The National Security Division (NSD) that was created to assist the NSC did not empower the parliament but was meant as one of the many bureaucratic institutions that brought the establishment centre-stage rather than pushing it back. The Imran Khan government brought to power in 2018 further enhanced the establishment's participation in decision-making taking it beyond military security to economic planning.

## EMPOWERING DEMOCRACY

Thus far, the political process is geared towards stability of the electoral process. This is a departure from the era of instability of the 1990s and a matter of relative improvement. However, the political system remains unstable due to the electoral process remaining unreliable, as demonstrated by the 2018 elections, and its dependence on commitment from the establishment not to intervene. There is little evidence that the political players are ready to meet the challenge to the political system by reducing the establishment's interference in overall governance of the state and strengthening the parliament and political institutions so that any external interference becomes difficult. In fact, the establishment's presence in civilian institutions grew rapidly after 2013, which was commensurate with its shift from establishing control over government to a more constant intrusion in everyday governance of the state. The formula of political instability also seems to have changed whereby while parliaments were able to complete their terms the same could not be said of prime ministers. Every electoral term saw two prime ministers to ensure that respective parliaments completed their time.

There is a definite need for the political stakeholders to move upwards from stabilizing the electoral process to political process. It will be an incremental journey that starts with ensuring that prime ministers do not fall victim to contestation with the establishment and can complete term to gradually reducing its role in governance. Taking this route itself is very complex and its efficacy will depend on the level of investment in building institutional mechanisms, which, while pushing back the establishment, does not make it excessively nervous. Unfortunately, there is little thought given to beefing up the parliament's capacity to engage with the national security establishment. Unless civilian control over the Ministry of Defence is strengthened and parliamentary committees on national security are taken more seriously by political actors the change in relationship is not likely to happen. The formula is not as simple as it sounds because it also requires strengthening of the political party system. The building of political party cadres and changing the entire mechanism of political debate within the parties including reducing patronage would probably require a new generation of politicians. Until then, the political process will continue to flirt with the establishment. The political future will remain dependent on the personality of the army chief and his intent to stay out of politics rather than shifting of gear by the political actors.

*The author is a Senior Fellow at the Department of War Studies, King's College, London and author of two books on Pakistan's military decision-making and political economy.*