

## The Signals Soldiers Pick

When and why do soldiers stage coups d'etat? Ironically in Pakistan, which has been the scene of multiple attempts at both successful and bungled attempts at coups, this complex question has not been fully addressed. It is impossible to answer it in a newspaper column. So what follows are a few observations:

Military intervention in politics definitively ends only when the civilian polity has tamed the warrior class. That happens when the legitimacy of the civilian system of power is established over a period of time; when the principles of governance as embedded in the constitution, laws, and conventions of contemporary statehood are observed by governments and politicians; and when the civilian system of power is regarded by citizens normatively as just, appropriate, and authoritative.

It is precisely this process that has not taken its due course in Pakistan. We have been lacking both the political framework and leaders capable of investing the civilian system of government with authority, and taming the warrior class. Our first decade after independence witnessed the early death of the founding father, disintegration of the founding party (the Muslim League), disputes and confusion over the constitutional framework, squabbling among politicians, isolation of the majority province (East Bengal), and the alignment of West Pakistan's landed elite with the military-bureaucratic oligarchy.

Ayub Khan's coup was a product of this distorted environment. Hence, despite his initially moderate and modern instincts, his regime did not institute the reforms which this country had so badly needed. The relationship of land, labour and capital remained what it was in the colonial times. The state continued to function without meaningful links or accountability to civil society. Typically, the oligarchy intervened in 1953, 1954, 1958, and 1977 to offset an actual or imminent affirmation of popular power. Each time, Pakistan's feudal elite applauded and collaborated with military rule. This state of affairs contributed decisively to the alienation of East Pakistan.

A new beginning was possible after East Pakistan's separation. The army's role in politics was discredited. Under Z.A. Bhutto, a popular and avowedly reformist leader, the country reached a rapid consensus on the 1973 Constitution. The army yearned for and was provided rescue and rehabilitation under civilian rule. But then Mr. Bhutto proceeded to systematically squander his assets, turning the parliamentary into an autocratic government, enfeebling the constitution with harmful amendments, rendering the bureaucracy vulnerable to political and personal manipulation, hounding and alienating his parliamentary opposition, weakening the judiciary, making a mockery of rule of law, and using the army to suppress the resulting discontent. Tragically, he was executed by his creature, a disloyal putschist who inflicted lasting damages on this country. These included another 'constitutional amendment' which infected also sections of the officers corps.

Only once before, during 1972-73, since its founding had the promise of Pakistan appeared greater than it did in 1988. Before the restoration of civilian government there had been a sustained period of resistance to military rule led bravely by Begum Nusrat and Miss Benazir Bhutto. A significant number of citizens had demonstrated their commitment to democracy by taking risks, bearing harsh punishments and prison terms to resist military rule. When parliamentary government was finally restored its legitimacy appeared finally secured. Hope had returned to this land, and it was linked to the promise of constitutional rule and reformist policies under a leadership which had paid its dues in a struggle for democracy.

The powers of Ms. Bhutto's first government were limited under a diarchic arrangement; and her tenure was cut short by a dubious presidential intervention. Hence, the public deemed her failings as forgivable. In 1993, she returned to office with enhanced powers, her term secured by the election of a party member as president. Yet, at mid-term her government drifts as the country drowns in violence and corruption, and sinks deep in economic crisis. Rule of law has receded further as such extreme violations as torture and murders in government custody continue to take place without attracting judicial action. The window of hope is being shut on us again, and simple folks in villages and towns are starting to talk of authoritarian alternatives. What should worry us is that the men who were apprehended last month had merely picked up the signal which soldiers do when civilians fail.

Sense of failure in war or protracted frustration in achieving a strategic objective often induces military officers to blame the political system and leadership. Occasionally, resentment transforms into revolt. The officers who staged coups d'etat in Egypt and Iraq in the 1950s had deeply resented Arab defeat in the 1948 war with Israel and blamed the corruption and mismanagement of their civilian governments for the loss of Palestine. The French generals who revolted in 1960 were frustrated by their inability to defeat the FLN in Algeria, deemed the government responsible for their failure, and envisioned a perfect conduct of war under their own government. The colonels who overthrew the government of Salazar in Portugal were similarly frustrated by their inconclusive engagement in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissao. But they had wanted to make peace, not more war, and did negotiate their way out of those colonies.

The first officers' conspiracy in the Pakistan army, discovered in 1951, was caused by their frustrations in the 1948 Kashmir war. Humiliation in East Pakistan is said to have inspired the conspirators of Attock. And Kashmir is reported again to have contributed to this latest unrest. The prognosis for Kashmir - caught between Indian brutalities and Pakistani blunders - remains grim.

An environment of ideological confusion is hospitable to putschist tendencies. The characteristics of such an environment are fluidity of values, confusion over institutional norms, and opportunistic styles of politics. The mix can induce ideological zealotry no less than political adventurism. Pakistan has been a textbook example of an ambivalent ideological environment. We have yet to resolve, in theory and practice, such fundamental questions as the relationship between state and religion, authority and accountability is the executive and the judiciary. The resulting instability greatly augmented by the behaviour in power of civilian leaders no less than military usurpers. Thus, successive governments have tampered with the judiciary; by executive fiat changed rules and violated the conventions of the civil services, and manipulated promotions and transfers in the bureaucracy and the army. Cynicism and contempt of civilian order is also promoted when power is exercised not merely opportunistically but also without regard to rules, the national interest, and outside a moral framework. Similarly, a chief executive who publicly opposes sectarian politics and enters into partnership with sectarian groups does long-term harm to country and government.

Several politicians have remarked in recent weeks that a military putsch is a thing of the past. Invariably they have mentioned an 'unfavourable international environment', meaning primarily American disapproval, as the decisive inhibition against coups d'etate. This line of thinking reflects the deep sense of dependency which invests the United States with an omnipresent interest in shaping Pakistan's future and an omnipotent ability to do so. America is a great power. Where its interests so require Washington is still friendly with dictators; Suharto and Mubarak are but two prominent examples. Moreover, in the past internal conditions, not foreign preferences, were the decisive stimulant to warrior ambitions in Pakistan. Worst yet, our politicians have had an uncanny ability to reproduce those conditions.

I do not wish to be misunderstood as arguing the imminence of another military adventure in Pakistani politics. On the contrary, an overwhelming majority of military officers are wary of getting into power again. They recognise that military governments have failed at least as badly as civilian ones, and that the exercise of power damaged the army more than it benefited the country. Many of them know also that professionalism and politics do not mix and armies in power almost always lose wars. On the few occasions that I have met military officers, a certain yearning has been noticeable for civilian leaders of integrity and stature, men and women a good soldier can salute with pride and honour. Only when these latter appear on the national scene shall the menace to men in uniform riding into power become a nightmare long past.

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