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Asia Programme Meeting Summary

Post-Election Pakistan: A Rocky Start?

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INTRODUCTION

This document is a summary of the panel discussion on Post-Election Pakistan, delivered on 18 November 2013 at Chatham House. The panellists were Mustafa Qadri, Pakistan Researcher at Amnesty International, Dr Farzana Shaikh, Associate Fellow of the Asia Programme, and Huma Yusuf, *Dawn* columnist. The event was chaired by Dr Gareth Price, Senior Research Fellow with the Asia Programme.

The speakers discussed how months after the elections that marked the first democratic transition between governments in Pakistan, there are few signs that the country is headed towards the pre-election promises of political stability and economic growth. Presentations assessed the political, economic and media landscape, including the debates around drone strikes in Pakistan as well as progress in tackling various types of militancy in the country and the media's place within the country's overall transition. The panellists also examined how the government and the military are responding to changing regional political dynamics in India and Afghanistan.

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POST-ELECTION PAKISTAN: A ROCKY START?

Mustafa Qadri

Mustafa Qadri began by explaining how his approach is shaped by his role as a human rights activist. As the Pakistan researcher at Amnesty International, he said his concern was how the Pakistani state can strengthen its institutional capacity to address human rights issues. Six months after the election, he said he was interested to see how the developments of the last few years (including growing religious intolerance, the situation of minorities, and legislation to help with violence against women) have translated into priorities for the new government. Recently, Amnesty International has focused on the tribal areas and Baluchistan. Though drone strikes have received the most attention, they have also investigated abuses by the military, the Taliban and private citizens.

Mr Qadri first addressed the situation in Baluchistan. He noted that political parties in other parts of Pakistan complain that Amnesty International spends too much time on Baluchistan. His response was that Baluchistan is important morally, but also as a mirror to Pakistan. The situation there shows how a

vicious cycle develops when the government fights violence with violence. For example, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi justified a bombing by claiming it was as a response to the killing of the family of one of its militants. Though this was inexcusable, it illustrates how there is no bottom line in such a cycle of violence – things can always get worse and even those who perpetrate abuses themselves become victims, feeding a victim narrative in which all sides see their violence as justified retaliation. The corollary of this argument is that, if the law enforcement situation in Baluchistan improved, this would be a positive signal for the rest of Pakistan.

Though it was encouraging to see the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appoint a Baluch nationalist as chief minister, in many ways, Mr Qadri concluded that, the human rights situation has gotten worse since the election. In what initially seemed like a positive development, some of the Baluch nationalist parties decided not to boycott the election as they had done in the past. However, it became clear that these parties, which have armed wings, are in fact pro-state militias and have committed abuses against members of separatist political parties, which have themselves also been implicated in abuses. The election campaign ended up pitting sections of the community against one another rather than addressing the problem of disenfranchisement.

Mr Qadri also noted that in the Makran belt in southern Baluchistan, there is an increasing trend of the relatively middle-class, educated, non-violent members of the nationalist movement being picked up and killed or going into exile to escape that fate. This trend has continued and increased post-election. Beyond the human rights implications, this is a political mistake for Pakistan. The government risks making radicalization a self-fulfilling prophecy if it gets rid of the more educated members of an already impoverished society. Mr Qadri added that it is telling that the government has been unable to bring to justice the perpetrators of abuses against Hazaras in Quetta. This has implications beyond the individual abuses, as it sends a signal of state weakness and impunity, emboldening those responsible for such violence.

Mr Qadri then turned to the situation in the tribal areas, where Amnesty International has recently completed a report on the impact of drone strikes. The report focused on North Waziristan, where over the last 18 months, Amnesty International investigated 45 strikes, and focused on nine where it was able to find detailed information. It concluded that some of those cases represented human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, and some were possibly war crimes, especially in the case of strikes targeting rescuers who arrived at the scene of previous attacks.

Mr Qadri argued that the drone programme sets dangerous precedents for the use of force globally, but also has serious implications for Pakistan. The government continues to be publicly critical of drones, though its internal position is less clear. Beyond its public stance, however, the state has given almost no assistance to the victims of drone attacks and their families. More generally, the state has no developed plan for post-conflict reconstruction in the tribal areas. It has a poor record of bringing Taliban perpetrators to justice and tends to instead use indiscriminate violence against suspected militants. In areas the military has taken over, security forces sweep in and arbitrarily detain men and boys, and this itself has undermined tribal society. It is commonly said that drone strikes are a recruiting tool for terrorists, but the behaviour of the military also produces this kind of effect, and is much less discussed.

Mr Qadri then asked how the situation in the tribal areas relates to the post-election transition. His biggest concern is the lack of a detailed plan to improve rule of law. No matter one's political view of the causes of these issues, there are practical steps that need to be addressed, such as preventing jailbreaks and increased prosecutions. Mr Qadri noted that officials often say that trying militants is impossible since the courts will set them free, but the government has made no attempt to fix this situation. Another concern is that with impunity, the public image of the militants becomes more powerful and they become almost superhuman figures. By subjecting militants to the justice system, the government would diminish their symbolic power.

Mr Qadri concluded that the lack of strategic planning hinders the state in its approach to Baluchistan and the tribal areas. Recently, there has been an obsession with peace talks, but without a detailed plan laying out the terms of the negotiation the state can only have a week-by-week response to each crisis.

Farzana Shaikh

Dr Shaikh began by asking, where does the Sharif government stand on the three crucial issues of domestic security, regional policy with regard to Afghanistan and India, and relations with the United States?

The major issue in domestic security is the prospect of talks with the Pakistani Taliban (TTP). Dr Shaikh noted the confusion and lack of public understanding about the terms of these talks. The government has never stated which issues it is open to negotiating over and what its terms would be. The TTP has stated their terms, particularly the establishment of sharia law,

and the termination of relations with the United States, but the government has not said if it is open to compromise on these issues.

It is also worth asking, since negotiations have now been called off, what *were* the chances of success? Given the past record of failed attempts, many thought the talks were doomed from the start. Dr Shaikh argued that the problem with negotiations is that the willingness to open unconditional talks without a ceasefire sends a message of government weakness and appeasement. The Taliban were not deterred from violence by the potential for negotiations. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan stated that the US drone strike against Hakimullah Mehsud was single-handedly responsible for killing off the talks; however there have been three major Taliban strikes, including an attack on the Christian church in Peshawar that killed 80 people, since the resolution to negotiate was passed. Why did these attacks not kill off the talks?

Dr Shaikh also raised the issue of who the government would negotiate with, given that the TTP consists of at least 40 sub-groups. The recent leadership change also complicates matters. The new leader, Maulana Fazlullah, is not a Mehsud and is not from Waziristan, but rather is a Yusufzai from Swat. There have been reports of internal dissatisfaction and tribal resentment over his leadership especially among the Mehsuds. Khan Said, who was designated as Hakimullah Mehsud's second-in-command, and who supported negotiations, lost out in leadership battle. Was this because he favoured talks, and if so, who was instrumental in deciding the leadership? Some suggest that Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban, played the deciding role. If this is true, what does this mean, especially for the government's hopes to control the Taliban in post-2014 Afghanistan? Dr Shaikh mentioned reports that government ministers were pressing for a rapid settlement with the TTP so that they could work on securing Pakistan's interest in Afghanistan with the aid of the Afghan Taliban. However, she said she believed that Pakistan's relations with the Afghan Taliban are far more problematic than they have been made out to be. Mullah Omar's possible involvement in the TTP succession struggle might be a signal to the Pakistani state that it does not hold all the cards in Afghanistan.

Dr Shaikh also mentioned the mysterious recent killing of Nasiruddin Haqqani. Although this might have been the result of a tribal vendetta, it is worth noting that both Hakimullah Mehsud and Mullah Omar had recently denounced the Haqqanis as Pakistani puppets. The Haqqani network is seen as one of Pakistan's key strategic assets in Pakistan, and no one in the government has yet commented on the killing.

The risks posed to Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan by developments that could spell civil war between rival groups involving the Taliban, factions of the Haqqani group, cannot be over-estimated.

If reports are true that the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban are becoming more aligned, this would significantly empower Pakistan's militant groups, and spell disaster for the Sharif government. In this event, Sharif would have two options: to tackle threat the head-long, which is unlikely, or to seek to divert militant groups to the eastern border with India. This may in fact already be happening, as over the last few months there have been more incursions along the Line of Control in Kashmir. Such a shift would have a decisive effect on Sharif's goal of improving relations with India.

Finally, Dr Shaikh addressed Pakistan's relations with the United States. It is no surprise that the prospect of civil war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the risk of war between India and Pakistan mean that United States still sees the region as a high priority. However, the transition for the United States from an occupying power in Afghanistan to a benign guarantor of regional stability is not likely to be easy. When Sharif went to the United States last month, there were hopes that this would signal a sea change in relations that, after the last few years, only have room to improve. However, this has not proved to be the case. The trigger was the drone attack against Mehsud, the immediate fallout of which was declared as yet another turning point for the worse. Dr Shaikh argued that the consequences, however, are likely to be felt not so much in US-Pakistani relations, which will continue as before in a kind of 'chronic dysfunctional stability', as in the effect on the body politic and social fabric in Pakistan.

Dr Shaikh concluded that populist politics, which thrives on anti-Americanism, is having corrosive effect on the social fabric. Parties use anti-American rhetoric to compete with one another in the aftermath of drone strikes, as seen in Imran Khan's party's threats to blockade NATO supplies in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, and in the dangerous debate over martyrdom launched by the Jamaat-e-Islami. This discourse adds to the climate of religious intolerance that is deepening its hold on Pakistan's institutions.

Huma Yusuf

Huma Yusuf began by describing how six months ago pundits predicted a 'watershed election'. This pre-election hype has led to two narratives. One restates the commonly held pessimistic view that Pakistani politics is a balancing act between the military and civilians, and that whenever civilians

get into power, they do a bad job of governing. This narrative is bolstered by the civilian-military disconnect on drone strikes, talks with Taliban and the security situation in Baluchistan. There has also been significant criticism of Sharif's weak leadership, especially on the much-promised economic reform, and the judicial branch is still meddling in politics.

However, there is also a more optimistic post-election narrative. The devolution of power passed in the 18th Amendment in 2010 decentralised politics, a trend reflected in election results in May 2013 when different parties coming to power in each province. A Baluch nationalist became chief minister in Baluchistan, which signals the recognition within the government for the need for greater political representation and compromise. Local government elections are on track, and most of the parties have agreed they should be held on a party basis, which is crucial for internal democracy. It is also positive that Chief of the Army Staff General Ashfaq Kayani has said he will step down when his term ends, and advised his successor to continue to supporting democracy.

These are contradictory narratives, but Ms Yusuf argued that both are partially true, and that this show that Pakistan is very much in the middle of its democratic transition. State actors are in the process of negotiating a new political balance and clashes between military, civilians and the judiciary – for example, the recent decision by the PMLN government to try General Musharraf for treason – should be seen in this light.

This political rebalancing is occurring against the backdrop of a demographic transition. 63 per cent of Pakistanis are under the age of 25, the country is rapidly urbanizing and the middle class is growing. These factors are transforming the social fabric. The young urban middle class is becoming increasingly important in the new political bargain, and its voice is being heard due to the explosion in media, which is more diverse and inclusive than ever before. The growth of regional language TV channels that cover local issues reflects the political trend of devolution. These newly empowered voices want a seat at the table, and there is a high level of respect for the media and its role in communicating grievances. In one poll, the media has 80 per cent favourability.

However, Ms Yusuf noted the transition is provoking a long-delayed conversation about national identity. The old state-controlled, top-down narrative of Islamic unity has lost ground to ethnic, linguistic and religious differences, and this has contributed to increasing political divisiveness and sectarianism. There is also growing disillusionment with the media as a driver

of change, as the grievances being expressed are not leading to change or a response from the leadership. For example, despite extensive media coverage, public opinion has had no leverage on the issue of drones.

While calling for political actors to acknowledge the public voice as manifest in the media, Ms Yusuf argued that it is naïve to assume that the media represents public opinion. It still faces surveillance and intimidation by the military and intelligence agencies, and Pakistan remains a dangerous place for journalists. The media also faces pressure from its own corporate owners, and has highlighted issues that serve its own interests. The media has focused on headline-grabbing conspiracy theories rather than on governance issues like the energy crisis that come up in polls as the major concern. Some have also argued that the media is driving fragmentation by airing the debate around martyrdom, or by promoting campaigns for new provinces. Ms Yusuf argued that the important question is whether the media will choose to stoke divisiveness, or promote diversity and compromise?

The state no longer has any control over the public discourse and political narrative, and the government tends to respond to the media rather than actual public demands. Ms Yusuf concluded that the government needs a new strategy to engage with the public, and one of the key questions in the democratic transition is how the state will react to the new issues and demands being raised by previously excluded parts of the population.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Dr Price thanked the panellists for their varied and complementary perspectives and opened the floor to questions.

Question

Can you talk to some portion of the Taliban? What will it take for drones to stop?

Farzana Shaikh

Dr Shaikh responded that the drone strikes may be morally wrong, but that militancy in the tribal areas pre-dates drone strikes, and would not stop if the strikes ended. She noted that the drones only operate in FATA, while militants operate more broadly, and argued it is impossible to separate the drones from the context: the real problem is the lack of transparency from both the Pakistani government and the United States. Mustafa Qadri added that the

discourse around drones is itself dangerous. When the TTP attacked the Christian church in Peshawar, Imran Khan said the United States was morally responsible because the attack was in response to a drone strike. This shifting of responsibility means that politicians ignore Pakistan's problems by blaming the United States, and the real underlying problems in FATA do not get addressed.

Question

What did the election results say about the role of the Islamic vote? Who is to blame for the rise in sectarian conflict and to what extent is this addressed in the media?

Huma Yusuf

Ms Yusuf responded that the religious parties once again received less than five per cent of the vote, and have found themselves crowded out by the centre-right parties which have adopted their core issues of social values and anti-Americanism. This, in turn, pushes the religious parties further right, and the whole political spectrum has shifted to a more extreme position, with a discourse unconnected to the governance demands of the people. On the issue of sectarian conflict, she argued that local actors need to be held responsible for their actions, and noted this issue has been a particular challenge for the media. In the early years of media liberalization in the early 2000s there was a trend for panel discussions on religious issues with Sunni and Shiite clerics, but these led to problematic incidents. The programmes were seen as promoting sectarian differences, and the media has since retreated, and is trying to minimize coverage of sectarian issues in order to avoid promoting violence. There is a serious debate within the media on what is a responsible approach to these topics.

Question

How does the government understand security, especially considering the rising insecurity in Karachi? What is the role of private actors?

Mustafa Qadri

Mr Qadri responded that all the macro issues have local dimensions. The major problem is that the political dynamic is always underwritten with violence. The more successful political groups are at using violence, the more powerful they become. In poor Pashtun neighbourhoods, the Taliban

improved on strategies borrowed from the Awami Nationalist Party, who learned political intimidation from the MQM. Impunity is a very serious long-standing issue in Pakistan, and it is literally possible for politicians to get away with murder. He also noted that security is a real concern for ordinary people. This is partially a result of demographic pressures in urban areas that have placed a burden on service delivery. As people flock to Karachi from other parts of the country, it drives the instability. Parts of Karachi have become no-go areas, and parts of Baluchistan and FATA are off-limits even to the state. Mr Qadri added that idea of private actors versus the state has always been a fiction, as the state is dominated by private actors. He emphasized that, even if you do not care about human rights, the broken police and court system hurt everyone, since development, including foreign investment, is impossible without the rule of law.

Question

Does the Pakistani Taliban have a media presence?

Huma Yusuf

Ms Yusuf responded that the TTP do produce local radio broadcasts and leaflets, which mainly serve for intimidation and political control. They also have a sophisticated media arm, which produces press releases and YouTube videos and is active on Twitter. They are able to have high-level debates with the Pakistani media, for example to justify the shooting of Malala Yousafzai. Their major impact, however, is through the straightforward intimidation of journalists and activists, and their families.

Question

What is the economic outlook?

Huma Yusuf

Ms Yusuf responded that even though there initially was optimism after the election, many have become disappointed by the lack of structural reforms and government paralysis. For example, the much-needed auction of the 3G spectrum has been delayed due to the inability to appoint officials to the Telecommunications Authority. The IMF bailout has also allowed the government to defer difficult political decisions. Dr Shaikh added that the bottom line is that unless the security situation improves, the economic

reforms will not matter, as no foreign investment will come with the country as dangerous as it is at present.

Question

Can organizations like Amnesty International work freely in Pakistan? What about foreign journalists? What is the situation with government surveillance of the media? What is the media situation in FATA?

Huma Yusuf

Ms Yusuf responded that the BBC Media Action team were unable to hold focus groups in FATA. Compared to the rest of the country, it is relatively media-dark. FM radio there is dominated by the army, who broadcast counterinsurgency programming. In terms of government surveillance, there continue to be restrictions, especially for journalists working in Baluchistan. Journalists are allowed to work in FATA, but access there is dictated by the Taliban. There is no strong stance from the government about censorship. There continues to be a lack of transparency about how the government plans to address regulation and media control issues, including internet censorship.

Mustafa Qadri

Mr Qadri added that, in addition to military surveillance, political parties and militant groups have organized networks of surveillance, which they use to intimidate journalists and activists. Activists, without the protection of an institution, are particularly at risk, and he cited Malala Yousafzai, and mentioned the three other education activists who were killed before she was targeted. In terms of regulation, he mentioned that parliament is discussing laws to create structures around state regulation of internet use, but good proposals that are brought up in parliament often fail to be implemented.

Comment

Mr. Mohammad Imran Mirza, Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan, noted that there have been improvements in law and order over the last three months in Karachi, even though problems remain. He also noted that, on the issue of drones, government officials are criticised whether they speak out or not. Currently, for the first time, the military and the civilians are on the same side, and he stressed that it is important for the West to give Pakistan the time and space to progress in its democratic development. He also corrected

Dr Shaikh about the three TTP attacks after the government stated its intention to negotiate, and said the prime minister did in fact strongly condemn the attacks as attempts by hardliners to derail negotiations. He also addressed the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud, adding that this was a specific target and the timing was very inappropriate. He suggested that 'in state craft, when high level assassinations occur, they are not random' and that the United States knew 'what stage the negotiations were getting to and what link had to be broken'. He concluded by emphasizing that although it is premature to say what the future will bring what Pakistan needs is time.

Dr Price thanked the audience and the speakers.