

Back to the brink in Pakistan

S. Mahmud Ali argues the current protests in Pakistan are symptomatic of systemic dysfunction. Despite the peaceful democratic handover of power last year, the essence and purpose of the Pakistani state remain contested and an overarching national identity remains incomplete.

Pakistanis marked their 67th independence anniversary atypically. While tens of thousands ‘marched’ (in two motorised convoys) [from Lahore to Islamabad](#) to protest Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s leadership, millions of others worried about the outcome of this unusual outpouring of frustration. Led by two charismatic critics of Sharif, cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan and ‘moderate’ cleric Tahir-ul-Qadri, the marchers vowed to besiege Islamabad until Sharif resigned. Although pro-government activists clashed with the protesters outside the capital, security cordons ensured the latter’s progress remained largely peaceful.

Khan and Qadri, the leaders of the political parties Tehreek-e-Insaf and Pakistan Awami Tehreek respectively, issued similar demands. Since last May’s parliamentary elections, which Sharif’s Muslim League won handsomely, Khan has complained that the polls were rigged and the victors [corrupt in office](#). Qadri [has also urged](#) a ‘green revolution’ that would see moderate Islamist beliefs undergirding national governance and state behaviour. Until recently, the ruling party brushed aside all accusations, but as the convoys converged on the capital, leaders offered to investigate alleged vote-rigging. However, with Sharif’s vow to stay in office, and with little sign of compromise on either side, a protracted stand-off appeared inevitable.

Pakistan’s history has been marked by turbulence, as elected politicians vie with permanent bureaucracies — uniformed and civilian — for power and influence. [Abysmal governance](#), rigged elections, violent protests, military coups and separatist insurgencies have plagued national progress. Although democracy has been a useful framework for both governance and power transfers (even by military rulers), popular consent and aspirations have shaped policy only marginally.

So, what do these protests portend for Pakistan?

Firstly, they are symptomatic of Pakistan’s systemic dysfunction. One fundamental challenge is that it remains divided along myriad fissures, and the construction of a coherent, overarching national identity remains incomplete. Punjab’s overbearing political, military, demographic and economic dominance has [rarely been mediated](#) by political power-sharing among the various stakeholders. In 1971, the establishment’s refusal to address this led to East Pakistan’s secession and the formation of the state of Bangladesh. Non-Punjabi provinces remain restive.

Pakistan is ‘incomplete’ in state–society relations too. Dichotomies between the masses and the elite are apparent in many developing societies, but in few other post-colonial states has feudal predation been so deeply ingrained in the national landscape and psyche. The failure to democratise the national culture and mindset has repressed the masses, left Pakistan’s potential unrealised and bottled up its collective imagination and energy. Pent-up frustration has led to the emergence of numerous demons — Islamist extremism being the most lethally visible.

The essence and purpose of the Pakistani state remain contested. Carved out of Britain’s sub-continental colony as a Muslim homeland, Pakistan has struggled between an empirical-rational future, at odds its founding philosophy, and the restoration of the Islamist glory of an imagined past. Consolidated as an entity that was simply ‘not India’, Pakistan has thrived as a defensive challenge to India’s purported national philosophy and organising principles. The Pakistani elite’s reliance on South Asia’s binary dialectic meant that Pakistan posed an occasionally existential challenge to India, but little else. Against that backdrop, Nawaz Sharif’s landslide victory in May 2013 did nothing to resolve the fundamental malaise afflicting Pakistan.

Sceptics allege both Khan and Qadri are [pawns in the hands](#) of Pakistan’s military and intelligence organs

although both deny this and their critics present no evidence. Given how power belongs in Pakistan to both official and covert bodies, combined with the penchant for official secrecy and a culture of speculative commentary, it is difficult to separate conjecture from analytical rigour. Still, the irony of Sharif [deploying the military](#) to secure Islamabad's 'Red Zone' of official and diplomatic enclaves from these alleged military pawns was apparently lost on most observers.

The coincidence of several factors makes these protests more important than their forerunners. With young people comprising half the population, women increasingly engaged in political activism, and [rising unemployment](#) and [economic weaknesses](#), the marchers could represent the arrival of a perfect storm. Whether Pakistan's divided polity can forge a minimalist consensus, whether the military will allow a non-martial political culture to evolve, and whether investors feel secure enough to place their money in their nation's future are large questions, but ones that must be answered if Pakistan is to break with its tradition of violent agitation and rough justice, interrupted only by corrupt passivity.

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About the Author

Dr S. Mahmud Ali is an Associate at the East Asia International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS.

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