Sharif Out: What’s Changed In U.S.-Pakistan Relations?

PUBLISHED August 2, 2017
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The Supreme Court of Pakistan’s July 28 decision to remove Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from office is a gamechanger for the country’s political system, especially for the fate of the nation’s two rival political dynasties. Contrary to what one would expect, this event is unlikely to have an immediate impact on the country’s relations with the United States, given the Pakistani’s army’s predominant role in issues that matter most to Washington. In the short term, the type of political regime that emerges is largely immaterial to core US security interests. In the long term, however, a robust parliamentary
democracy is key to Pakistan’s stability – a matter that will remain an enduring US national interest.

The ousting of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif for not disclosing income from his chairmanship of a Dubai-based company is undoubtedly a critical development in the country’s domestic politics and the ongoing process of democratization. Even though he did not collect the income – the position was likely used merely to obtain lawful residence in Dubai – the court deemed that he had failed to meet the constitutional requirement that elected officials be “trustworthy” and “honest.”

Pakistan’s Wild Card Judiciary

Pakistan’s judiciary has a checkered history. From the 1950s into the early 2000s, the courts largely validated the army’s extra-constitutional interventions via the so-called ‘doctrine of necessity’. In 2006 the Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry, adopted an activist role and began challenging many executive actions, including the secret detention of alleged terrorists. Chaudhry’s sacking during March 2007 triggered a lawyer-led movement to restore him, which contributed to the downfall of the then-serving military ruler President Gen. Pervez Musharraf and the eventual reinstatement of the ousted top judge in March 2009. In 2012, the Chaudhry-led court disqualified then-Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani after convicting him for contempt of court.

Since Chaudhry’s retirement in 2013, the superior courts have played a more muted role. Sharif’s dismissal due to a controversial constitutional clause came after a prolonged investigation into his family finances. The investigations were sparked by the 2016
The Future of the Sharifs and Pakistani Democracy

Sharif’s dismissal is a serious (though not necessarily existential) blow to the family, one of the two most powerful clans that have dominated the country’s politics for the past generation. However, the dynasty’s political future is now in question because it is facing not just an antagonistic military, but also an assertive judiciary. The Prime Minister’s younger brother, Shahbaz, who is the current chief minister of Punjab, Pakistan’s largest province, is due to succeed him as prime minister this fall. Thus, the dynasty’s fate now rests on Shahbaz’s ability to stay on the good side of both the army and the judiciary, in addition to keeping the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party together.

The PML-N faces a strengthened opposition in the form of ex-cricketer Imran Khan’s party, Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI). General elections are a year away, and it is far too premature to predict the outcome. But judicial pressure on Shahbaz and other family members could trigger a PML-N splinter group or defections to the PTI. After all, such opportunistic games of musical chairs are all-too-common in pre-election Pakistani politics. This reality naturally stunts the development of political parties, allowing for a set of
opportunistic political “notables” to freely circulate from one party to another during each election cycle.

Sharif’s removal will have no immediate impact on the core issues of the US-Pakistan relationship. Washington is heavily dependent on Islamabad in the effort to combat terrorism in South Asia and achieve broader regional stability. But a change in leadership, government, or even regime may have a limited effect on core US interests in the country, given the army’s prevailing strong role in shaping foreign and national security policy.

Why Pakistan Matters…

Pakistan is important to the US for three main reasons:

First, the country is a critical partner in the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan; it provides ground lines of communication into the landlocked country and is the major route for non-lethal supplies for coalition forces combatting the Afghan Taliban, al-Qaeda, and Daesh. Pakistan’s long porous borders with the country, combined with the large presence of Afghan refugees, also make it a factor in the Afghan Taliban insurgency. Although Pakistan’s control over the Afghan Taliban movement is not what it used to be, its leadership remains based there and rank-and-file militants often retreat into “safe havens” on Pakistani soil.

Second, Pakistan has been home to a number of transnational terror networks since the 1990s, including Lashkar-e Taiba (LeT), al-Qaeda, and now Daesh. Its counterinsurgency operations and urban counterterrorism campaigns, combined with US UAV (Unmanned
Aerial Vehicle) attacks and the draw of the Syrian civil war, have sharply reduced the presence and capability of such networks inside Pakistan.

Third, both Pakistan and neighboring India are nuclear powers, and the US has an interest in preventing any conflict on the subcontinent from crossing the nuclear threshold. Washington seeks a stable government in Islamabad, one that is committed to developing and strengthening a conflict prevention and management framework with New Delhi.

...And Why Regime Type Might Not

Core American interests all expressly relate to security issues and Pakistan’s relations with neighboring states as regional power dynamics evolve. Ever since 2007, US policymakers have viewed growing civilianization of the Pakistani polity as a means to bolster Washington’s security objectives in the region. Consequently, the US has tried – and failed – to support a civilian leadership that could take the lead in launching a full-fledged joint counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaign.

A nominal civilian government has been a feature of Pakistan’s post-2007 makeup, which was birthed in part by Washington as one component of an ill-fated attempt by the George W. Bush Administration to set up a coalition between Gen. Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008), a military ruler in decline, and Benazir Bhutto, a self-exiled secular politician who had served two terms as prime minister (1988-90; 1993-96). At the time, the popular but exiled Sharif was an
afterthought, if not an obstacle. Washington viewed him as a conservative challenger to the potential ‘liberal’ Bhutto-Musharraf alliance. With the assassination of Bhutto in late 2007, U.S. policymakers began to gradually reconcile themselves to Sharif’s importance in Pakistani politics.

Sharif’s PML-N returned to power in 2013. It was preceded by Bhutto’s Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), which had strongly aligned itself with Washington. In July 2008, four months into its term, the PPP government attempted to put the powerful military’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate under the control of the Interior Ministry – a move that quickly backfired and was reversed due to intense opposition from the generals. The PPP was also extremely permissive in allowing US intelligence operatives inside the country, which may have served as the ground network that enabled the May 2, 2011 raid on Osama Bin Laden’s compound.

Today, many view Sharif as a counterweight to the army. Washington’s post-9/11 crop of South Asianists has embraced him, mainly due to his strong personal belief in the need to normalize ties with India. Importantly, former Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, viewed by many as the de-facto deputy prime minister, was the main point of contact in the Pakistani administration for Washington’s National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster. The two met while Dar was in Washington during April 2017 for the International Monetary Fund and World Bank spring meetings and have spoken on the phone on at least three occasions since then. It is noteworthy that McMaster did not reach out to his Pakistani counterpart, Nasser Khan Janjua, a retired three-star general.
Since 2007, the prevailing opinion in Washington has been that more democracy in Pakistan will result in less extremism and a better counterterrorism partner. While democratic rule has aided US security interests to some extent, former military ruler Musharraf also enabled the US military and intelligence community by, for example, allowing US troops into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas after the 9/11 attacks.

Furthermore, while the civilian leadership in 2009 helped provide political backing for counterinsurgency operations in Swat and South Waziristan, the PML-N government was the main force blocking a North Waziristan operation in late 2013 and early 2014. The PML-N pursued talks with the Pakistani Taliban as the militant network increased attacks across the country. As a result, the army essentially began Operation Zarb-e Azb in North Waziristan in June 2014 without a green light from the civilian government. The PML-N has also pursued a mixed policy toward extremists in Punjab, which it has ruled since 2008. Although the provincial police’s Counterterrorism Department has hit terrorists hard, often eliminating them through extrajudicial killings, many sectarian extremists have evaded justice.

**Responsive Democracy Matters in the Long-Term**

A robust and more accountable parliamentary democracy is critical to ensuring Pakistan’s long-term stability, given its multiethnic society. In fact, political regionalism is on the rise to such an extent that after next year’s elections, the country might have no single party with a national reach – a development that would only further restrict the
three major parties to single provinces. While beset by corruption and ineptitude, the PPP-led coalition government that ruled from 2008-13 nevertheless managed to push forward three major constitutional amendments that weakened ethno-nationalist and separatist forces in the country. Virtually every major political party has had a stake in one or both of the past two federal and provincial governments. Democratic rule in Pakistan, for all its flaws, has actually strengthened the country’s federation.

But as the case of Sharif demonstrates, the ongoing endemic corruption weakens governance in many ways. Tax evasion, for example, denies the public exchequer billions of dollars that could be used for essential services and to reduce the debt of the Pakistani state. As it now stands, the Supreme Court’s disqualification of Sharif amounts to mere political decapitation. Another elected prime minister has been removed from office before the completion of his or her term. But if the Supreme Court, which has ordered the National Accountability Bureau to investigate Sharif and his immediate family for corruption, moves for accountability across the board – targeting not just politicians, but also bureaucrats, business tycoons, and military officers – then a more equitable and responsive democratic government could lie ahead for Pakistan.

Thus 2018 marks an important transition year for Pakistan as an anti-corruption drive potentially moves forward amid what is promising to be an extremely contentious, if not brutal, election season. Free and fair elections that produce an unprecedented second consecutive transition of power from one democratically elected government to another will be an important milestone for Pakistan, potentially
reinforcing the sanctity of the ballot box and democratic institutions. While this may not matter to Washington in the near-term, at some point in the future a consolidated democracy in the world’s second largest Muslim country – in which secularists and Islamists both participate – would be an important victory in the fight against violent extremism.

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