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Egypt Post-Mubarak: Will it be the Next Pakistan?

By Moonis Ahmar

Synopsis

The lesson from the launching of popular movements in Egypt and Pakistan is that in both cases, the military subverted the aspirations of the people by seizing power and sustaining its rule through political suppression.

Commentary

WHEN THE anti-Mubarak uprising broke out in Egypt, analysts wonder what the implications would be on Pakistan. While Pakistan is currently under civilian rule, has a free press and an independent judiciary, the situation is ripe for a popular movement against a regime which is perceived to be corrupt and incompetent. The intervention by the military and its resolve to hold democratic elections within six months prove that the Egyptian trajectory may well follow Pakistan's. Since 1958 till 1999, the military seized power in Pakistan four times (1958, 1969, 1977 and 1999) and on all the four occasions, despite its promise to restore democracy, it tried to prolong its rule. Even while out of power, it exerted its influence on the fragile democratic regimes.

Parallels

Four parallels could be drawn between Egypt and Pakistan as far as the role the military is concerned.

Firstly, following months of popular agitation against his authoritarian regime, in March 1969, Pakistan's President Field Marshal Ayub Khan handed over power to General Yahya Khan, commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The military regime of General Yahya imposed martial law, abrogated the constitution of 1962, dissolved assemblies and promised to transfer power to elected representatives by holding free and fair elections. While general elections were held in Pakistan in December 1970, the military regime refused to hand over power to the majority party which represented the erstwhile province of the then East Pakistan. The outcome was the outbreak of bloody civil war in East Pakistan and the subsequent disintegration of Pakistan in December 1971.

Secondly, the Egyptian military, like its Pakistani counterpart, controls the military-industrial complex and wields considerable power in the decision-making apparatus. Both militaries have vital economic and commercial stakes. Out of 63 years of Pakistan's history, the military has been at the helm for 35 years. Likewise, since the military coup of 1952, Egypt has been ruled by the military while giving a semblance of civilian control. If the Egyptian military, like the military of Pakistan remain pro-status quo, it will not give up its privileged status in favour of a democratic regime.

US influence

Thirdly, like the Pakistan military which has been the beneficiary of enormous military aid from Washington since 1952, the Egyptian military is also a recipient of huge American military assistance since the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. The US influence in the militaries of Pakistan and Egypt is quite visible and entrenched.

Finally, the Egyptian military considers itself as the custodian of national security and a deterrent against Islamist extremist groups. Likewise, the Pakistan Army portrays itself as a guardian of the country's strategic and security interests and a major ally of the United States in its war on terror.

While critics argue that Jihadi groups are patronised by the Pakistan Army, the launching of military operations in Swat and in the tribal areas of Pakistan against Taliban and Al-Qaeda groups are driven by the looming threat that the Pakistani state may be taken over by radical Islamist groups. The Egyptian army and the security agencies in the past several decades brutally suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood and various Islamist radical groups.

Flirting with Democracy

The military's flirt with democracy is not an unusual phenomenon in many post-colonial states. After four months of agitation led by the right-wing opposition parties against the oppressive, albeit civilian rule of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the alleged rigging of the March 1977 elections, the Bhutto regime was toppled by a military coup led by the Chief of Army Staff General Zia-ul-Haq. Martial law was imposed, assemblies were dissolved, the constitution was suspended and political activities were banned. Immediately, after seizing power, General Zia promised the restoration of democracy and the holding of free and free elections within 90 days. But he failed to honour his commitment and Pakistan experienced the longest spell of martial law.

Egypt should not follow Pakistan in terms of perpetuating military rule. The assumption of power by the Egyptian military and its pledge to arrange free and fair elections in six months is similar to what the generals in Pakistan used to promise after seizing power.

The lesson from the launching of popular movements in Egypt and in Pakistan is that in both cases, the military subverted the aspirations of the people by seizing power and sustaining its rule through political suppression.

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