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Pakistan's Year of Transition

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Pakistan is passing through a critical transition in its history. The forthcoming changes of top political, military and judicial leaderships and holding of parliamentary elections make 2013 an important year for Pakistan.

Commentary

FOR THE first time since its creation Pakistan is on the eve of seeing a democratic government completing its term in office in March 2013. National elections are due in Pakistan in April-May 2013. The President of Pakistan Asif Zardari will complete his tenure in September. In November, the army chief General Ashfaq Kiani's term will conclude. The chief justice of Supreme Court (SC) Iftikhar Chaudhry will also retire in December.

Notwithstanding the worsening security situation, slowing economy, rampant corruption and poor governance, Pakistan has made a steady progress consolidating the democratic process the past five years. The passage of the 18th constitutional amendment, which devolved maximum powers to provinces, and the 7th National Finance Commission (NFC) Award, which gave smaller provinces a bigger share in the national divisible pool, has expanded the scope of the parliamentary system in Pakistan.

Transforming civil-military relations

Despite enormous differences between the government and opposition parties on various matters, legislation on key national issues was deliberated in a bipartisan manner. The consensus with which the government and opposition parties passed the 20th constitutional amendment—detailing procedures about selection of the caretaker set up, composition of an independent election commission and holding of free elections—is noteworthy.

For the first time, the business of foreign policymaking was conducted in the parliament though in retrospect the Pakistan army took the foreign policy decisions. The key decisions like normalisation of relations with India, reviewing and rewriting the terms of engagement with the United States after the 2011 NATO/ISAF air raid on a border check post in Mohmand tribal region that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers were taken by the parliament.

The civil-military relations are also transforming in Pakistan. Despite corruption and incompetency of the civilian rulers the systemic compulsions have forced the military leadership to refrain from interfering in the political process. Addressing a gathering of military officers in Rawalpindi on 5 November 2012 the army chief said: "As

a nation we are passing through a defining phase.” However, he conceded: “No individual or institution had the monopoly to decide what was right or wrong in defining national interest and it should emerge only through consensus. We all agree that strengthening the institutions, ensuring the rule of law and working within the well-defined bounds of the constitution is the right way forward.”

Emergence of new power centres

It is during the incumbency of a civilian government that Pakistan achieved success against the Islamist militant groups in FATA and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. Two major military operations codenamed Rah-e-Rast (Path to Salvation) in Swat district in March 2009 and Rah-e-Nijat (Path of Deliverance) in South Waziristan Agency in October 2009 enabled the government to restore its writ in these areas. However, the fight against homegrown militants is far from over. The gains made in counter-terrorism operations are fragile and reversible. This fact has been acknowledged in the Pakistan army’s 2013 military doctrine. The new doctrine categorises the internal threat to Pakistan from the Baloch insurgents, sectarian outfits and Islamist militant groups as more imminent than the threat from India.

The strengthening of the democratic process in Pakistan has been augmented by the emergence of three new power centres – an independent media, powerful judiciary and a vibrant civil society. Their emergence has opened up a new dimension in Pakistan’s political culture.

The Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan has given various landmark rulings in the last few years. The SC has not only held politicians accountable for misconduct and corruption but it has also questioned the illegal practices of the powerful military. For instance, it has sought answers from the Pakistan army and the paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) regarding illegal detentions of youths from the insurgency-hit southwestern Balochistan province and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

The media’s role as a watchdog and opinion maker has enabled the masses to make informed opinions about different government policies. As things are evolving in Pakistan, at times both the SC and media have exceeded their limits as well. However, overall their presence has left a positive impact.

The vibrant role of civil society also gives hope for the future. The civil society organisations (CSOs) along with the media were at the forefront of the popular Lawyers’ Movement (2007-09). The lawyers’ movement not only ended the ten-year military rule of General (Rtd.) Pervez Musharraf but also succeeded in pressuring the government to restore judges of the Supreme Court who were unconstitutionally deposed by the Musharraf regime.

Civil society also played a key role in galvanising public support against the Pakistani Taliban when they attacked Malala Yousafzai, a teenage girls’ education activist from Swat, in October 2012.

Pakistan at a crossroads?

Most recently in January this year Pakistan’s civil society actively participated in the countrywide demonstrations protesting the brutal killings of members of the ethnic Hazara Shia community in Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan, by anti-Shia militant group Lashkr-e-Jhangvi (LeJ). On 10 January 2013 a twin bomb blast in Quetta left 87 people belonging to the Hazara community dead. The Hazaras refused to bury their victims and camped in freezing conditions with the wrapped bodies for days, demanding justice.

Pakistan stands at the crossroads of its history. Against all odds in the last five years democracy has consolidated itself in Pakistan. Despite many challenges which Pakistan confronts today it has all the right elements in place to muddle through the current disorder and instability. The continuation of the democratic process will allow state and society institutions to steer Pakistan towards peace and stability.

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