

# Democracy and the army

*Democracy  
The Nation*

There is a near-universal misconception that the army keeps interfering in the political process in Pakistan. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Pakistan army, all 500,000 of them, have never been involved, nor been consulted, nor their views taken, whenever the military has interfered in the political system.

Each and every one of the dozens of interventions and the four successful military coups have been carried out solely by the then Chief of the Army under extraordinary circumstances, supported by a handful of close and loyal subordinates. On several occasions other officers of different ranks have attempted to overthrow governments. Such attempts have always failed. Therefore it is necessary to recognise the distinction between the army as an institution and the Army Chief as an individual faced with peculiar situations.

The basic system of the Armed Forces of Pakistan is extraordinarily efficient. There are Standard Operating Procedures. There is a very disciplined chain of command. At every level a soldier reports to somebody above him. From the lowest rank upwards he always has someone above who approves of all his actions; to the extent that even as a Lt. General commanding a corps he cannot take a day off or leave his command area without the knowledge and consent of his boss. The entire lifetime training of military officers is based on that principle that his decisions and orders are always under review and approval from above.

When he reaches the supreme rank of Command of the Army he has the Defence Ministry and/or a Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff to whom he is accountable and responsible. This principle applies to every military force in the world. More so in every

democracy, where he is perfectly comfortable in his job and in his decision making, with the full knowledge that there is a hierarchy above him to approve, modify or reject his decisions. History is full of examples of brilliant military commanders being removed when their decisions (even if correct) were not in line with those of their civilian superiors.

In Pakistan this basic principle has gradually eroded. Ayub Khan was appointed Commander-in-Chief in 1951 for four years. In 1952 during the Ahmadi riots in Lahore the military was given complete control, rather than the task of only assisting in aid to civil power, because of weak leadership at the centre and in the province.

Despite that taste of power, as late as 1954 Ayub Khan remained a very good soldier, albeit a very worried man, due to retire shortly and desperately seeking an extension. Governor General Ghulam Mohammad granted him the extension and that too for another four years. With the musical chairs in the federal leadership following the death of Liaquat Ali Khan, Ayub became an anchor in a turbulent political sea. Finally, Pakistan's democracy was struck a fatal blow by the Governor General making him Minister of Defence while retaining his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

The ramification of this bizarre arrangement has never been truly recognised by Pakistani politicians nor, indeed, by the vast majority of the country.

Ayub's appointment as Minister of Defence, while simultaneously being Army Chief, brought about a total reversal of military discipline. Here was an honorable officer who had spent his entire career, including his first four years as C-in-C, reporting to

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somebody above but now no longer having the cushion of the Defence Ministry to oversee his work. Consequently a disciplined army man suddenly was out of his depth in doing something he had neither the training nor the ability to do to act independent of supervision in the minefield of Pakistani politics. It was therefore not surprising that as Minister of Defence Ayub Khan got deeply involved in political manipulation, finally leading to his dismissal of the President and assuming power. It was the inevitable result of the Army Chief not being subordinate to the Ministry of Defence.

One outcome of Ayub Khan's legacy was that Army Chiefs who followed him reported only nominally to the Defence Ministry. All activities of the army, including promotions, transfers, appointments, etc., for every rank became more and more the Chief's prerogative, with no involvement of the bureaucrat or the political leadership of the country. The last nail in the coffin was parliament's decision to make the Defence budget a one-line item, never to be studied or commented upon by any member of parliament.

The army became a virtual fiefdom. A weak mechanism was left in place at the Ministry of Defence to oversee the functioning of the military. But

this itself was negated by the appointment of serving or retired Generals in the ministry, who no longer acted as overseers but became facilitators for the Chiefs who appointed them. Even the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee was toothless. The concept of oversight of the army completely evaporated.

Since Ayub Khan's days the Army Chief finds himself with powers inconceivable in any civilised country in the world. That makes him the focus of sycophants, time-servers and out-of-favour political manipulators. No wonder, then, that everyone turns to him for security in the bureaucracy, the judiciary and in Parliament. Politicians out of power, some representing defeated political parties, others only themselves, repeatedly approach him to "Save the Country". They always cite corruption, mismanagement, economic crisis, law and order problems, internal and external threats, etc, which are always there to support their pleas. An upright and honourable officer himself, the Chief comes under growing pressure "to do his duty".

Having no one effective above him (Chairman Joint Chiefs, Defence Secretary or Defence Minister) to turn to for guidance, support or orders he takes the plunge that his conscience genuinely dictates, totally clear that he is doing the right thing. Such scenarios led to Ayub's overthrow of Iskandar Mirza; Zia's overthrow of Bhutto; Yahya's overthrow of Ayub; Musharraf's overthrow of Nawaz Sharif; Aslam Baig, Kakar, Asif Nawaz and Jahangir Karamat's overt and covert interfering in political affairs - acts they all had never even contemplated doing until they became Chiefs of a very powerful and disciplined army, with no checks and balances on

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their personal actions.

This system of an Army Chief being totally independent, financially and administratively, is the sole and fundamental cause of the failure of democracy in Pakistan. Other reasons often cited for this failure - lack of education, feudalism, wealth concentration, corruption, inefficiency, religious intolerance, sectarianism, ethnic divides, etc., are irrelevant. They exist to varying degrees in most democracies of the world. And yet their democracies work.

Generals are not politicians. On the contrary they are pledged to stay out of politics. The greatest disservice to this nation is done not by them but by those out-of-power politicians and misguided leaders who loudly beg and plead with Army Chiefs every two or three years to intervene in the political process to "Save the Country". It is about time our politicians are denied this option for changing governments. They should have learnt by now that no such intervention has ever improved the lot of the common man and the country has never been "saved" through the scores of interventions by Army Chiefs over the decades.

Today President Pervez Musharraf and other leaders are sincerely grappling with the issue of introducing (not restoring - it never was there) democracy in Pakistan. But no matter what is the new political dispensation, what constitutional checks and balances are introduced, what judicial reforms take place, democracy cannot flourish until future Chiefs of the Army come under the same type of supervision and control as prevails in every democracy in the world. How that can be done gracefully, honorably and effectively, without acrimony or recrimination, particularly in these extraordinary times, is another subject altogether.