**[A velvet glove](https://www.dawn.com/news/1691255/a-velvet-glove)**

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THESE days, the memories of 2006-07 seem rather vivid. Those days of upheaval were, to quote Dickens, “the best of times” and “the worst of times”.

Marked by great violence and loss, they also presented a moment when the people appeared united, motivated and strong enough to throw out a military dictator. Those who didn’t experience them personally may find it hard to believe that in those crazy days, it did seem as it wasn’t just Musharraf who was on his way out, but that we would also, finally, correct the civil-military imbalance. Since then, we have learnt better.

However, in a period marked by the decisions of many an individual who seemed larger than life — Musharraf, BB, Iftikhar Chaudhry — the one who stands out the most for me was Gen Ashfaq Kayani.

The chain-smoking, ‘thinking general’, as he was known, didn’t have an easy task when he took over, but in retrospect, he managed it rather well, considering what the Pakistani military sees as its role in our polity. He knew what he was facing and what was needed, especially from the point of view of his institution.

**Read:** [*Kayani — his words mattered as much as actions*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1059031)

He reduced the military’s footprint in governance by calling back officers who were serving in government departments. Just as public was the announcement that the military was stopping work on GHQ in Islamabad’s E-10 due to the financial crunch the country faced, a decision which has since been reversed. He also added a few more lines to the one-line defence allocation in the annual budget in a bid for transparency. His choice of spokesmen included Athar Abbas (perhaps the most soft-spoken man to have held the position) and then Asim Bajwa. They were able to understand the changing nature of the media and public relations after the advent of news channels. Their ‘light’ touch allowed the industry to also maintain a modicum of independence, which helped the state build up support for the war against militancy.

Gen Kayani had solid reasons to try and put a perceived distance between himself and politics.

Additionally, Kayani ‘s intervention in politics took place, away from the public eye. Cabinet ministers still drove to GHQ for meetings; he held meetings about the strategic dialogue with the US and is even said to have influenced important decisions about cabinet choices. But most of this was behind closed doors. That he is the one who called Aitzaz Ahsan to call off the 2009 long march didn’t become public till after his [extension](https://www.dawn.com/news/852503/kayani-to-stay-on-as-coas-till-2013-the-night-of-the-quiet-general).

**Read:** [*2009 — army’s role in long march conclusion*](https://www.dawn.com/news/634414/2009-armys-role-in-long-march-conclusion)

Despite bitter and public rows over the [Kerry-Lugar fracas](https://www.dawn.com/news/916031/myths-and-facts-about-kerry-lugar-bill) and [Memogate](https://www.dawn.com/news/674146/memogate-scandal-reveals-civil-military-splits), civil-military ties did not seem as dysfunctional as now. Neither did governments seem entirely powerless.

In this, the open activism and hostility of the Chaudhry court helped Kayani. The former was only too willing to appear as the most lethal opponent of the government with its decisions and suo motu actions, keeping the government constantly looking over its shoulder.

Kayani had solid reasons to try and put a perceived distance between himself and politics.

After eight years of overt military rule, the institution’s image had taken a hit. For an institution which sees itself as the guardian of state and society and which believes it enjoys the people’s support (in the more central areas), this was worrying. Hence, not only was there a distancing from Musharraf, but the overt political role, too, was successfully passed off as Musharraf’s legacy rather than the institution’s.

Kayani was not just aware of these subtle distinctions and semantics but also willing to take steps so others too believed in these distinctions. In the process, the institution healed some of these ruptures with parts of society.

Perhaps he was also motivated by the looming threat of militancy, which didn’t just require the military to have the will to fight, but to do so with public support. For this, he had to win back some of the lost space. And he managed to do it. Of course, even here, one can critique how the operations were carried out and how the state’s relationship of violence with Balochistan and parts of KP saw no change. These are issues we need to debate. But elsewhere, his efforts allowed the military to catapult back to its earlier primacy.

But the ‘subtlety’, which became evident only after his departure, did not outlast him.

By the time his successor was taking forward the battle against militancy, officials’ speeches in apex committees carried not just comments about politics but also made it to the press. If the 2009 long march appeared to be about society’s mobilisation to pressure its own government, the [2014 dharna](https://www.dawn.com/news/1154293) had no such idealistic fig leaf. By 2018, the meddling had become rather obvious and heavy handed; it continues to be so, despite affirmations of detachment.

Was it simply a matter of personalities? In a country such as ours, personalities tend to dominate institutional policies and perhaps Kayani was unusual in our society where loudness is admired. Or as Omar Waraich, writer, journalist and rights activist, says, the Potohari subtlety is no match for the Jatt bluntness.

But let me now come to the reason for this nostalgic recounting.

Fifteen years after those troubled times, we seem to be facing a similar moment of political uncertainty — political times in which transitions are being decided on the streets and behind-the-scenes negotiations rather than scheduled elections; political players are at loggerheads; institutions are being critiqued rather than respected; the financial situation is fragile and so is security.

It is hard to say what the elections will throw up. The next political transition as well as the one in the military will not be easy. More than anything else, Pakistan will need steady hands at the helm. The military too needs someone who hopefully finds his inspiration in Kayani among his predecessors.

I wish it was possible to say that we need to let the political process proceed unhindered. But I believed this in 2007; now I am not so naive. Hence, in the reality that is our polity, a more cynical wish is to simply ask for a velvet glove. As the lyrics go, “Dil hai chota saa… .”

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*Published in Dawn, May 24th, 2022*