

Panic in Pakistan: Makings of a meltdown?

IFTEKHAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

PAKISTAN has been careening from crisis to chaos at a bewildering pace over the past week or so. This has surprised even those who are used to chronic instability in that country. This has also been arousing justifiable concern among the international community.

Pakistan is a major global actor with 180 million people, with over 700,000 in arms that render its conventional military forces one of the largest in existence, possessing one of the fastest-growing nuclear arsenals in the world. It is ridden with internecine strife, bloody insurgencies, and extremist fundamentalist beliefs. At the same time it enjoys vast intellectual and economic potential.

Geographically, it is most strategically located bordering India, China, Afghanistan and Iran. It is friendly to some and inimical to others, both friendship and animosity running deep. Its role in the world in contemporary times is defined by its relationship with the sole superpower, the United States, which is one of supremely inscrutable love-hate pattern. Pakistan today may often appear to defy rational analysis, but one must take it into account because it is there. The worry that looks us in the face today, however, is that we may be seeing in the happenings there today the makings of a meltdown. If so, what is there to be done?

The crisis build-up was slow, but inexorable. In July 2010 almost the entire country was inundated by a flood of near-biblical proportions. The Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led coalition headed by President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani failed to secure public confidence in addressing the issue. Indeed, Zardari's ill-advised foreign trip at that time, which reportedly included a visit to a family-owned chateau in France, was much criticised.

Terrorist attacks continued to bleed Pakistan, while groups of them actually were said to be receiving support from the army's all-powerful Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) in shoring up a possible friendly succession to the Karzai regime in Afghanistan, particularly in the aftermath of the announced United States (US) withdrawal in 2014.

Meanwhile Pakistan's economy began to flounder and growth plummeted to merely 2.4%, in dismal contrast to the 7-8% of its arch rival India! The Pakistanis, whose country was once seen as the centre of the "Asian Drama," found this a bitter pill to swallow!

Then insult piled on injury. In May 2011, its main ally in "the war on terror" conducted a raid on Pakistani soil to eliminate Osama bin Laden right under the nose of the Pakistan army, which remained bafflingly oblivious. An angry Pakistan began to make overtures to China.

For the common Pakistanis, who placed great store by the valour and capability of their soldiers, many a myth was exploded! Maybe, the army was not that invincible after all! Maybe the Emperor had no clothes on! Even the civilian government took note, and somewhat emboldened, brought the army and ISI chiefs, Ashfaq Kayani and Shuja Pasha respectively, to testify before the Parliament, a rarity in Pakistani governance!

The last straw on the camel's back was the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers in November 2011 by the US and Nato on the Afghan border. The Pakistani government and army cried "betrayal most foul," closed down the Shamsi air base in Baluchistan used by the US for drone strikes on suspected terrorists as well as supply routes to Afghanistan, and

reviewed the total gamut of bilateral relations with the US. By now, the reputation, vis-à-vis the public, of both the army and the government was in mud!

Unsurprisingly, mutual suspicions between the two began to grow rapidly. It was reported, that, fearing a possible military coup, Zardari encouraged his confidante Ambassador Hussain Haqqani in Washington to approach the US

authorities to rein in the Pakistani army, through an unsigned "memo."

But alas, the conduit, a wealthy Pakistani-

American businessman called Mansoor Ijaz, blew the whistle on Haqqani, and spilled the beans to the ISI chief Shuja Pasha. To the army this was treason, and much more! It forced Haqqani to resign, with America's pleas for his gentle treatment (for Haqqani was well-liked by them), likely to fall on deaf ears. However, Zardari and Gilani are being kind to him, and, now unemployed, he is said to be enjoying the premier's hospitality! But the "memogate" issue became a stick (or baton) for the army to beat the government with!

Not just for the army. It appears that every segment of the Pakistani community loves a share of publicity, their fifteen minutes of glory, in the vibrant Pakistani media! The judiciary appears to be no exception. To start with, there was no love lost between the charismatic Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Iftikhar Chaudhry, and the Zardari-Gilani duo. The Court made a two-pronged move last week; first it, via a five-member bench, threatened to take action against Gilani for failing to comply with the court's orders to open up the corruption cases against Zardari. (In response to his

colleagues' request, Chaudhry has expanded the bench promptly to seven judges).

Justice Asif Saeed Khosa, whose elevation to the Supreme Court itself was not without some drama, warned of consequences "not pleasant" if action was not taken by Monday, January 16. (This would involve a letter by Gilani to some Swiss bankers). Indeed, in an oratorical flourish he exceeded the restraint of Shakespeare's Mark Antony by describing Gilani as "dishonest" and "not honourable."

The second move was in the form of an aggressive pursuit of the "memogate" case by a judicial commission. Earlier, the defence ministry directly forwarded to the Court the army's submission, a strange one in any democratic set-up, that it was not under the "operational control" of the civil government. This was not bounced off the Prime Minister's Office, and Gilani reacted by immediately sacking the defence secretary, a friend of Kayani's, and a retired general, Khaled Naem Lodhi. (As was to be expected, this removal order has also been challenged in the Court). He was replaced by Nargis Sethi who, some said, would be more amenable

to signing Kayani's and Pasha's dismissal letters, should matters come to such pass!

They may not. Right now the political dichotomy would place the Supreme Court and the

army on one side, and the civilian government and the Parliament on the other. The army, unlike on occasions in the past, does not enjoy the kind of mass popularity to topple the government directly. A "judicial coup" is possible if somehow the prime minister or the president is forced out through "rulings" such as contempt or disqualified in other ways (the Pakistani judiciary can also be surprisingly innovative!).

In fact, a "contempt" ruling has been awarded and Gilani was asked to appear before the Court on January 19. But the government still has a majority in the Parliament, likely to be buttressed by a win in the Senate in March. A direct confrontation between the Supreme Court and the Parliament would be unhealthy. As for the civilian government, while Zardari has been behaving somewhat erratically by his curiously frequent departures to Dubai for various lengths of time, for reasons as diverse as medical treatments and wedding feasts, Gilani appears to have stuck to his guns not without a measure of courage, almost ready, as if it were, for possible political martyrdom.

But when push comes to shove, it is possible that none of the key players in this intricate game, the Supreme Court, the civil government and the army would behave irresponsibly. Indeed, each, by turn, has spoken against "unconstitutional methods" of effecting governmental change, as has the formal opposition, the Pakistan Muslim League of Mian Nawaz Sharif.

The Pakistanis have too much at stake: the failing economy, the burgeoning terrorism, the need to engage in the Afghan end-game, the relations with the US and India, and, even if it now seems somewhat distant, the restoration of a sense of pride that has always been a hall-mark of the Pakistan psyche. Yet this impasse cannot continue, and something has got to give!

The answer may lie in early elections, before the scheduled 2013. There is someone waiting in the wings for just that: Imran Khan. He has prepared for fifteen long years, building his party, Tehrik-e-Insaaf, (the path of justice), from scratch with caution, care and commitment, and with patience that would match the tenacity of Robert Bruce. Many see him as a budding morrow at Pakistan's midnight. A cricketing hero, he wants to replicate his actions in the political arena, in a nation buffeted by the vicissitudes of misfortune, but thirsting, and indeed dreaming, for some glory. Imran Khan has understood that well.

He has been carefully nurturing and feeding these sentiments, yet not going overboard with commitments that he would be palpably unable to deliver on. Initially, he appeared to be fired with a sense of idealism, proclaiming a "tsunami" against corruption and misrule, even proposing specific administrative reforms. He did that to pull crowds in Lahore and Karachi.

Now he seems more chastened by reality. He has toned down his anti-American rhetoric; and on India, confined himself to the routine articulations on human rights in Kashmir. He has sacrificed some pristine postures by accommodating politicians from various spectra, for he needs them for his parliamentary support.

A possible understanding with former President Pervez Musharraf may irk Tehriki purists (such as Shirin Mazari), but the path to power will be through pragmatism, and Imran is, understandably, positioning himself to achieve that goal. For the army, right now, he is its best bargain. Also, perhaps, for the Pakistani people and the global community. We should, indeed must, be able to tell soon, for time now in Pakistan, is very much of the essence!

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Plight of the people in the south

SHAVEENA ANAM

BANGLADESH'S southern coastal belt is a beautiful and surreal place; trees on either side of the road and beyond them, a completely flat and waterlogged landscape. I had the privilege of traveling to Khulna to see the projects run by some NGOs. The trip left a bittersweet aftertaste. The entire coastal zone is prone to daunting natural disasters; violent storms, cyclones and tidal surges. It is a particularly vulnerable area and the extreme poor beneficiaries there are constantly battling with nature to survive. It is a difficult battle to endure when you have little to begin with.

The first thing I noticed about the beneficiaries, at least the ones we had the pleasure to meet, was that they are very clever at diversifying their livelihoods. Once they received the primary support, they used their profits to start up something else. For example, Milon Pal received Tk.8,000 to start up his clay pot business; he bought the right clay and the utensils needed and was linked up with a good buyer. With the profits from his business, he bought a sewing machine and his wife now sews and sells blankets. Milon has managed to install a sanitary latrine, employ two other people and is now building a brick house on his land.

We also met Naher Begum who received land support; she planted rice and sold it. She then started a business weaving nets, bought hens and ducks whose eggs she consumes or sells, and her days are going well now. She had been destitute and helpless when her husband had left her, but now she is independent and headstrong, sending her daughters to school, determined to secure a good life for all of them.

It was heartening to see that with a little assistance, they were determined and savvy enough to lift themselves out of poverty. It was also interesting to see the reaction of others in the community about the support given to the extreme poor. No one is particularly rich in the area, but they are surprisingly sympathetic to the situation of extreme poverty and understand that the households were especially vulnerable and needed the livelihood support because they were really suffering for food, or their primary income earner became disabled, etc, etc, etc.

But the picture was not so rosy for everyone. To meet the beneficiaries, we went to an area

that looked in shambles; broken mud houses and bits of wood everywhere. Around August, sudden flooding surprised an area that usually isn't hit so badly. Their mud houses were not resilient to flooding, and much of their livelihood their cows, goats, vegetable gardens, fishing ponds was destroyed. For three months afterwards they struggled to survive, living in horrendous conditions with no sanitation, little clean water, under the open sky, dodging poisonous snakes. (Three women from the community had died of snake bites.)

"Words can't explain the devastation," said one of the inhabitants of the area. "I would lie awake at night with my arms around my goat so that it wouldn't drown or run away," said Zohora, another flood victim who depended on her goat for money. They had to live like animals. It's hard to imagine how one can go through that for one day, let alone three whole months. The beneficiaries in the area were

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doing really well with the support given to them, they were on track to graduation as planned ... till the floods hit. Though they did receive some training on what to do before and after a disaster, they have been deposited back to their situation of extreme poverty.

As always, reactionary measures were taken to provide relief to the victims. When the floods hit, two NGOs helped households safeguard some of their moveable assets to high land or other protected premises. They installed communal hand tube wells and make-shift latrines and distributed polythene sheets and food packages. Valiant and sincere efforts, but obviously not enough as the inhabitants in the areas were suddenly standing amidst ruins that once used to be their homes, unsure about how to move on.

This brings to the forefront a topic that is much talked about at the moment; precautionary measures and disaster management

for climate change. How do we ensure that people living in environmentally vulnerable areas won't be sent back to the Stone Age every time a disaster hits? There is a lot of talk, but little action and we're ignoring the urgency of situation. We need to come up with a solid plan to equip people who live in potentially dangerous areas, to make their homes durable or secure capacious places to house them during the floods. Higher level efforts to fix embankments and rehabilitate coastal folks are needed.

Bangladesh will be one of the worst effected countries due to climate change. The fact that areas that were normally safe but were badly ravaged this year is an indication of what is to come.

A World Bank study on the impact of the rising water level states that a 100 cm rise in sea level within the next 100 years will inundate 15% to 17% of the country's land area, displacing around 20 million people making them climate change refugees. We're bursting at the seams as it is; we already don't have enough land to accommodate our large population. Losing even more land, and so much of it, we won't be able to accommodate such a large number of uprooted people. The coastal areas have already been facing problems of rising salinity, which is likely to increase due to climate change and the rise in sea level. The floodwaters bring about disease and hunger.

Environmentalists have been screeching the same warnings for the past few years; we are in serious trouble. But it looks like we can't hear them over the noise of the traffic; because we're still polluting our rivers, grabbing land and initiating deals that will have adverse effects on our environment. We have a history of acting only when something bad happens. Do we really want to wait for half our country to drown before we decide to take action?

We might not be able to prevent the oncoming of the storms but we can reduce the level of damage they cause by building the capacity of the inhabitants to face the difficult times with the appropriate knowledge rather than being completely devastated by them. There could be better warning mechanisms, cyclone shelters, and initiatives to increase coastal forestation to reduce damage. There are a lot of possibilities, a lot of ideas, a lot of talk, now we just need to take action.

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Mr. Jam's technology special



Nury Vittachi

ASCIENTIST wowed the media last week by showing how a slime mold, "a simple creature with no brain," can navigate a maze to find its way home. Big deal. I was not impressed by the press release from Professor Toshiyuki Nakagaki of Japan.

I mean, even Mel Gibson can get himself home from the bar in one piece without trouble, on occasion. Apologies in advance if my comparison of a slime mold to Mel Gibson is considered offensive to slime molds.

No, when it comes to tech-y news, I was much more taken with the "Iran building its own Internet" headline in several newspapers the other day. A spokesman said Iran's replica World Wide Web would be ready "within a few weeks." If so, Iran must have 100 million people composing rambling blogs, another 100 million setting up cat-picture websites and a further 100 million producing bad porn. I just wouldn't want to be the poor schmuck assigned to write Iran's version of Wikipedia: "One article down, 19.9 million to go."

Meanwhile, a reader showed me a neat tech trick you can do at any mobile phone shop. You go in, pick up the iPhone 4S on display and reset Siri, the talking assistant.

When it asks you for your name, you say something funny. Suggestions:

- 1) "Eww! My sensors detect a disgusting substance on your hands."
- 2) "Wow, you're hot. Press my love button, baby."
- 3) "Help! I'm being stolen!"

Siri starts by saying what it thinks is your name, so everyone who tries the phone after you will hear whatever phrase you put in, for example: "Man, you ugly! Put me down!"

ANNOYED to have seen so many criticisms of SOPA, a plan to stop people robbing the companies which pay artists, filmmakers, actors, writers etc, and not one of them offers an alternative. Shame.

MALAYSIAN AIRLINES staff are working on a scheme to let customers check fellow passengers' Facebook pages to learn about each other. I love this plan. Imagine walking up to someone on the plane and saying: "The rest of us in the cabin note that you press the 'like' button for every reference to Justin Bieber, so I'm afraid we must ask you to leave this aircraft at once." Of course, we may show such a person a measure of leniency in certain circumstances, such as if he's the pilot.

DOGS HAVE social skills similar to children, scientist József Topál of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences told reporters last week. What is he talking about? Dogs have way better social skills than children.

When was the last time a child rewarded you for coming home from work by licking your face? When was the last time a sullen dog demanded money?

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