**Lost charisma, missing ideas**

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Pakistan’s political parties might ostensibly be gearing up for elections, but all eyes remain focused on the ‘apolitical’ institution that most Pakistanis have seen as the guarantor of their country’s security and integrity for most of Pakistan’s life as an independent country.

Instead of outlining their own plans and policies for the country, political leaders seek power by holding on to the military leadership’s coattails or by criticizing generals to mobilize popular support.

The consequence of decades of political intervention is that much of the country’s politics now revolves around what the military leadership might be doing or thinking. Politics, by definition, leads to controversy, while the military, as an institution, works best when it has wide public support in doing its job of protecting the country. After relentless attacks from various politicians, the Pakistani military’s institutional interest would best be served by its orderly withdrawal from politics.

For that to occur, politicians would have to agree on their rules of engagement instead of trying to increase their leverage by attaching themselves to, or attacking, the national security apparatus. That could help lay the foundations of a functioning democracy. On the other hand, if Pakistan is to continue to be a national security hybrid state, it may have to abide by what German American Philosopher Hannah Arendt described as the only sure rule of a totalitarian state.

That rule is that “the more visible government agencies are, the less power they carry, and the less is known of the existence of an institution, the more powerful it will ultimately turn out to be.” There is a widespread belief that Pakistan is run by invisible hands. But the effectiveness of those invisible hands depends on their being even less visible. Democracy requires greater transparency and a willingness to compromise among politicians. But Pakistani authoritarianism has also become less effective because its instruments of control started seeking public recognition and publicity.

According to Major General Sher Ali Khan, who served as General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan’s Minister for Information and National Affairs (1969-71), the influence of Pakistan’s military over the country’s politics and policies stems from the military’s ‘charisma’ – an invisible attraction of the Pakistani people to their armed forces. In a letter to Yahya Khan that eventually led to holding of Pakistan’s first general elections in 1970, General Sher Ali noted that the reason the military was able to snatch the initiative from politicians after the fall of Ayub in March 1969 was not because of its fire power.

“If we had to shoot our way through Nawabpur Road (the main road in Dhaka) we would have had a conflagration on our hands that no amount of firepower in our control could have handled,” his letter said, adding “The strength of the army which enabled it to seize the initiative from incompetent politicians in March 1969 lay in its charisma.

“This was a precious political resource that once lost would not be easily retrieved. It existed because the mass of the people had not actually encountered the army directly. For them it was a mythical entity, a magical force, that would succor them in times of need when all else failed. In the minds of the people, unlike the bureaucracy and the politicians with whom they had daily contact and whom they knew to be corrupt and oppressive, the army was the final guarantor of Pakistan and its well-being.”

Each period of direct rule by a military commander – Ayub Khan 1958-69, Yahya Khan 1969-71, Mohammed Ziaul Haq 1977-1988, and Pervez Musharraf 1999-2007 – ended with the return to power of politicians whose alleged incompetence and corruption invited military intervention in the first place. But none of the ruling commanders could figure out a way to prevent diluting the charisma that depended on the army being a mythical entity. To retain its charisma, the army has to rule without being seen to be ruling, or to work out a functioning compromise with politicians that results in a semblance of democracy.

General Muhammad Musa, commander-in-chief of the Pakistan Army (1958-1966) once explained that politics baffled him because he was trained to “locate the enemy and liquidate the enemy.” He was trained to obey his superiors and command his subordinates but did not know how to deal with “my own people” whose beliefs and convictions made them defiant.

Politics is about choosing between alternative solutions, ideas, and policy options. It requires compromise and adjustments, and it involves persuasion, not decreeing, to get support or obedience. It is evident that a soldier’s training does not prepare him for politics. But Pakistan’s political class has also proved inadequate to the task of providing real leadership. Beyond an endless chess game of outmaneuvering their rivals, Pakistani politicians – and the media that covers them – hardly discusses policy prescriptions.

Pakistan needs a foreign policy that goes beyond slogans about Kashmir, hatred of some neighbours and the West, love of the Ummah, and admiration for China. It needs clear plans for sustained economic growth, attracting investment, building human capital, and generating employment for a fast-increasing population. It needs civil service and police reform, military modernization, and integration of all nationalities and ethnic groups. But none of Pakistan’s political actors have clarified how they differ from one another in tackling any of these challenges.

The next election will still be about dynastic and factional rivalries, victimhood, and who did what to whom and when. There will be the usual (and justified) complaints against the invisible government and conspiracy theories about foreign hands. But the real issues will remain unaddressed. The country would do better if the military regains its charisma by withdrawing from politics, but can Pakistan’s politicians rise to the occasion and start discussing policy options and talking to each other meaningfully?

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