**A successful conclusion**

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Pakistan’s 23rd prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, has appointed Pakistan’s 17th army chief, Lt-Gen Asim Munir. In Pakistan’s power politics, army chiefs have traditionally outlasted prime-ministers. It would be the opposite if the country’s business of state ran according to the constitution; the three year term of the army chief would mean Pakistan would have had far more army chiefs and fewer prime ministers. But, either via grabbing power through dictatorship or by securing extensions from weak and blundering prime ministers, this powerful position ends up running anywhere between six and ten years.

In the recent past, prime ministers, despite having been directly or indirectly ousted by those they have favoured by ignoring generals senior to them, have tended to expect loyalty. Former prime minister Imran Khan, a man who like his predecessors willingly gave his patron-general an extension and offered another one in March 2022 to avert his own ouster, learnt the hard way that such power play generates unintended and unanticipated consequences.

So, with all this power and authority hugely tilted in favour of the army’s top commander, his nomination would always acquire huge significance. The appointment of Gen Bajwa’s successor generated unprecedented excitement, speculation and political wrangling. It became exceptionally significant for multiple reasons.

For some time it had remained unclear to many if the outgoing COAS would actually doff his uniform. Hence the process had begun with many questions even about its relevance. There were widespread speculations – based on conveniently spun anecdotes and indeed some publicly known facts – that perhaps Gen Bajwa was here to stay. Imran Khan, while having attacked the outgoing army chief as unpatriotic, even comparing him to figures like Mir Jafar and Mir Sadiq, had also paradoxically called for his extension. Unconstitutionally challenging the current prime minister’s constitutional authority to nominate the new army chief, Imran advocated that Gen Bajwa continue as army chief until the next elections so that a newly elected PM could nominate a new army chief. Several among those who met Gen Bajwa believed his departure was perhaps not imminent – that some form of extension was still a possibility. In the digital age where desperate and coordinated efforts are made to create facts through social media posts, in people’s minds speculations continue to trump facts, and unsurprisingly most believed that the general would stay on. Yet within the current government and the PML-N – Mian Nawaz Sharif especially – there were no takers of an extension.

Imran Khan tried his utmost to make the new appointment controversial by insisting that the so-called ‘imported government’ would not be allowed to appoint a new chief. He perhaps banked on street support and his own rhetoric to sway support from within the institution to weaken the prime minister’s authority to appoint the new chief. He then moved to making the seniority list of the generals controversial. Once he recognized that he would probably not be able to abort the PM’s authority to nominate, he sought to botch the process itself. The PM, he argued baselessly, would appoint a controversial general, one who would ban Imran’s politics and allegedly protect the Sharif family’s ill-gotten wealth. In his irrational rhetoric he was investing in the army chief authority the chief could not even exercise. In fact, in fighting his political battle, Imran was willing to accept an unconstitutional role expansion for the army chief.

Imran’s rhetoric flowed from a degree of apprehension given his own experience with the senior-most general in the list of potentials, who was removed from the post of ISI chief when reportedly he showed the then prime minister – Imran Khan –evidence of corruption by some individuals in the PM’s close circle. Apparently – according to PTI circles – there were some policy differences that cropped up after a foreign tour that also created problems leading to the general’s removal. Like the PML-N which was apprehensive of one former ISI chief, the PTI was reportedly apprehensive of the other.

It soon became clear that the government was determined to exercise its authority to appoint the new chief, despite the pressure from Imran Khan which interestingly included the culmination of the PTI’s long march in Rawalpindi on November 26.

Many interesting moves followed. The general’s retirement date was November 27, two days before the outgoing chief’s retirement, yet the government had the authority under Rule 16A of the Pakistan Army Act 1952 to still ensure his eligibility as a candidate for the chief’s position. But for that the seniority list had to arrive in the defence ministry and a summary sent to the PM days before November 27. The government’s key men pulled out the PAA 1952 and rules of business to assert its own authority. Nawaz Sharif took the decision to appoint the new chief after detailed consultation with many within and outside of the PML-N. He had all the PDM allies on board. Once he made the decision, he closed all discussions and took off for Europe.

So, the government’s clear messaging, sobriety – and above all adherence to law, tradition, precedence and the constitution – enabled the long-winded turbulent process to conclude successfully four days before Gen Bajwa’s retirement. The incoming COAS, Gen Asim Munir, former head of Pakistan’s military intelligence, quartermaster general and corps commander Gujranwala, ought to be a loyalist to only the constitution of Pakistan and therefore refrain from political play. The onus of ensuring that the general plays his constitutional role ably is also on the country’s chief executive.

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