

# Who's really the top gun in Pak politics?

A tussle for control involving Gen Bajwa, Shahbaz Sharif, Imran Khan, the Supreme Court and the IMF is being played out



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Pakistanis, in general, are tired of the dominance of their army in the country's national life. There is a post that goes thus: "While every country has an army, in Pakistan, the army has a country". The dominant role of the Pakistan army in virtually every sphere of the country's national life grew following a series of military takeovers by Generals Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan, Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf.

Long periods of army rule led to its virtual takeover of many of the crucial functions of government. The notorious ISI plays a crucial role in almost every aspect of political life in Pakistan.

The ISI is always available for influencing and wielding power in virtually every important sphere of the country's national life. With the passage of time, the army has spread its wings to cover even the judiciary, which often avoids taking on the army.

## Faltering at crucial times

Given its all-embracing role in the country, the Pakistan army tends to falter when it is most needed, especially in situations when it triggered conflicts. This happened in the 1971 Bangladesh conflict and the 1999 Kargil conflict, initiated by General Pervez Musharraf, who ousted the elected Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif shortly after the conflict.

This phenomenon was also evident in recent years, when army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa,

who was known to be a suave and soft-spoken officer, has influenced virtually all important decisions in Pakistan's national life. Pakistan's army chiefs often derive their aura from the way they are treated by American dignitaries, who are all self-proclaimed champions of democracy.

The latest instance of such an occurrence was when General Bajwa personally called Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman, seeking early finalisation and disbursement of IMF assistance to Pakistan. The details of IMF assistance were duly published barely a fortnight later.

It is now acknowledged in Pakistan that General Bajwa was instrumental in creating the environment for the inevitable ouster of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

The "Bajwa Magic", however, does not always work. Pakistan's Supreme Court overturned Bajwa's efforts to reject recent electoral victories by Imran Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf in crucial by-elections in Pakistan.

As a result, Imran Khan now controls the Provincial Government in Punjab, which is the key to victory in any forthcoming national elections. It must, however, be acknowledged that Bajwa is not given to Islamist extremism and talks rationally about India.

Quite naturally, Bajwa cannot veer too far away from conventional thinking about India. The Pakistan army believes it has a divine right to rule the country. Who succeeds Bajwa is, therefore, important, especially on issues pertaining to relations with India.

General Bajwa's term of office ends on November 28. Imran Khan's favourite, as Pakistan's next Army Chief, is the present Corps Commander Peshawar, Lt. General Faiz Hameed, who had served him "loyally," as his ISI Chief when he



**No cosy relationship** General Bajwa was instrumental in creating the environment for the inevitable ouster of Imran Khan AP

was Prime Minister. Faiz Hameed is, however, only 10th in the order of seniority, amongst serving Lieutenant Generals, who would be eligible to become the army chief.

## Terrorist issue

Like Imran Khan, Faiz Hameed has a distinct affinity for radical Islamic groups in India and Afghanistan. Bajwa's successor will assume charge on November 28. His successor is not likely to be Lt. General Faiz Hameed, whose cosy relationship with Imran Khan is presently a liability for his promotion.

Moreover, a cash-strapped Pakistan has to be circumspect in aiding terrorist groups, as it is facing international surveillance on actions it takes against terrorists. While Pakistan has ostensibly taken action against sections of

the ageing leadership of the Lashkar-e-Taiba, the leadership of the Jaish-e-Mohammed, which was responsible for the hijacking of IC 814, remains untouched.

Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif has generally been restrained on issues pertaining to relations with India. His elder brother and family patriarch, Nawaz Sharif, still remains in exile in London because of pending charges against him. He fears a return to power by Imran Khan, who would naturally act strongly against him, especially if backed by a new army chief who does not continue General Bajwa's policies of seeking closer ties with the US and maintaining peace on its borders with India.

New Delhi has, however, to keep its policies of making it economically, politically, militarily and diplomatically costly for Pakistan if it

persists in supporting cross-border terrorism.

But Imran Khan is also in troubled waters as he has been found involved in money laundering during past elections by Pakistan's Election Commission. This will naturally have a bearing during national elections in October 2023.

Pakistan has long believed that it can balance its budget, by tying itself to major powers. It remained an "ally" of both China and the US for decades. China recently provided a loan of \$2.3 billion to Pakistan. It has committed itself to strongly back moves to end international sanctions on Pakistan imposed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

## IMF conditionalities

In the meantime, the IMF has set tough conditions to bailout cash-strapped Pakistan, yet again. These conditions will involve further tightening of already tight belts by the people of Pakistan, who are even now desperately trying to make both ends meet amidst spiralling inflation.

The extended IMF facility will involve a package of \$6 billion over 39 months from 2019. Pakistan will, meanwhile, receive \$1 billion shortly. New conditions have been imposed by the IMF, which include a phased rise in petroleum prices by ₹50 per litre. There will also be a phased increase electricity and gas charges, and a host of other taxes and economy measures.

These essential measures can only increase the political rhetoric of Imran Khan, even as he has been summoned by the Election Commission for illegally financing his last election campaign, with funds from abroad.

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