

## Hands that rock the cradle remain pervasive in Pak



Maj Gen (Dr) G.G. Dwivedi (Retd)

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Pakistan Senate Chairman Sadiq Sanjrani administers the oath of office to Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Shehbaz Sharif as the 23rd Prime Minister of Pakistan, in Islamabad on 12 April. ANI

***The most urgent challenge for the new PM is to secure a \$3 billion loan from IMF.***

The week of 3-9 April 2022 will go down in the annals of Pakistan history as an epochal one, when the nation stood at the crossroads. The heightened politico-legal drama between Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the combined opposition led by Shehbaz Sharif, culminated in a photo finish; with a "no confidence vote" going through minutes before the midnight deadline. With the opposition securing 174 votes in the 342-member Pakistan National Assembly, Imran Khan became the first PM to be voted out of power.

It was Imran's quest to hold on to the chair at all cost that led to a national crisis. Interestingly, the Three "A"s synonymous with the Islamic Republic of Pakistan figured prominently in the

imbroglio. The “Army”, though deemed to have taken a neutral stance, was actually instrumental in ending the impasse, with COAS General Bajwa literally forcing Imran Khan to seek a vote of confidence. “America” was at the heart of the “conspiracy theory” raked up by Imran Khan, to topple his government. The spectacle coincided with the beginning of the “holy month of Ramzan”, a period full of “Allah’s blessings”.

Shehbaz Sharif, the younger brother of former PM Nawaz Sharif and ex-Chief Minister of Punjab has taken over the nation’s reins amidst formidable challenges. Politically, the two main parties of the new ruling coalition; Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) headed by Shehbaz himself and Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) led by Bilawal Bhutto, besides eight smaller parties, have nothing in common, making the concoction extremely fragile. Alongside, Imran Khan is continuing with his mass rallies and road shows, protesting against his unconstitutional ouster. He has even raised concerns regarding the safety of the country’s nukes under the new regime; which was dismissed squarely by Major General Babar Iftikhar, DG Inter Service Public Relations (ISPR).

Pakistan’s current economic situation is a nightmare for the new dispensation. Imran Khan inherited a bad economy but left it even worse after his three and a half years’ truncated term. He had famously stated, “I didn’t join the politics to know the prices of tomatoes and potatoes”. Pakistan is amidst deep debt, coupled with double digit inflation and record unemployment. The GDP has shrunk to \$292 billion, foreign exchange reserves have dropped to \$11.3 billion as on 1 April (barely enough to meet two months’ imports), its currency has depreciated by 14.3% against the dollar and its public debt stands at 70.7% of the GDP. The chances of recovery in the near future are rather bleak, given Pakistan’s meagre rate of savings and long standing structural weakness. Even the Asian Development Bank has projected Pakistan’s GDP growth at barely 4% in the current year.

Immediately on taking over, Shehbaz Sharif has promised to tackle the economic crisis on a war footing. To salvage the grim situation, the most urgent challenge for the new PM is to secure \$3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) so as to avert an immediate financial crisis. In keeping with the past practice of the new PM’s maiden foreign visit, Sharif will soon be heading to Saudi Arabia, the traditional aid donor; followed by a “tribute paying ritual” to China, the all-weather friend to garner further loans for debt servicing.

The Army has played a pivotal role in shaping Pakistan’s destiny since its creation 75 years ago, with half the time the men in khaki ruling the nation directly; choosing to adopt the proxy route during the other half. Despite being in the back seat driving mode, the Army, referred to as the “Establishment” or “Deep State” has exercised effective control over the civilian government, often changing the regimes at will. Interestingly, no civilian government completed its five-year term. Even in Imran Khan’s case, the Army played a key role in orchestrating his exit; despite the fact it was through “Establishment” support that PTI came to power. Sharif will have to keep the Army on his right side, notwithstanding DG ISPR statement that Gen Bajwa will neither seek an extension nor accept such an offer.

As far as Delhi is concerned, not much is expected to change fundamentally as Islamabad’s security and foreign policies are primarily steered by the Rawalpindi GHQ. Although General Bajwa has sounded a favourable note for better relations with India but strategically, painting India as an existential threat to Pakistan is in the Army’s interest to retain its formidable position as the “saviour of the Islamic Republic”. Further, there is absolute convergence in China’s and Pakistan’s core national interests with regard to the Indian subcontinent. The Kashmir issue continues to be central to Pakistan’s polity. In his recent letter to PM Modi, Sharif has stated;

“Pakistan desires cooperative ties with India and Peaceful settlement of outstanding disputes including Jammu & Kashmir...” It is obvious that there is very limited scope for any strategic manoeuvring with regard to India-Pak ties. Nonetheless, the politico-diplomatic process may see symbolic traction, especially in the arena of trade as serves Pakistan’s cause.

Despite intense political slugfest, the saving grace was that change of guard in Pakistan ultimately did take place as per constitutional norms. The Supreme Court played a crucial role by upholding its credibility as an institution and by lending credence to Pakistan’s democratic credentials, with the Army choosing to adopt a wait and watch policy. After week-long hectic negotiations between the key stakeholders, the first lot of the 34-member cabinet along with three advisers has been sworn in. Although all the coalition partners have been given representation to keep the flock together, the dissenting voices are getting louder by the day. Even Bilawal Bhutto is yet to take a call to join the Cabinet as many wrinkles with regards to power sharing remain to be ironed out.

The priority for the new government is its own survival, in view of the serious internal factionalism, belying any notion of major transformational initiatives. Rather, hands that rock cradle of democracy in Pakistan—the Establishment—remains all pervasive, set to play a greater role in the coming times.

Writer is a war veteran, former Assistant Chief; currently professor, strategic and international relations.