

Pakistan's Slow-Motion Coup

*Islamabad's generals are out to destroy Pakistani democracy.
Obama should try to stop them.*



BY C. CHRISTINE FAIR | JANUARY 5, 2012

Pakistan's civilian government, led by the Pakistan People's Party, has long been an irritant to the country's generals. President Asif Ali Zardari runs a corrupt and inept administration and has been far too willing to cozy up to Washington. Husain Haqqani, until November 2011, was Pakistan's controversial envoy to the United States. He has been a thorn in the side of General Headquarters since publishing his book [Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military](#) in 2005 while at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



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However, the Pakistani Army swallowed its contempt for the government and such representatives as Haqqani because the generals had very little choice in the matter -- at least, that is, until now.

One reason is that, after nearly a decade of living under Gen. Pervez Musharraf, Pakistanis are wary of military rule. The Army, too, has suffered a series of beatings to its reputation after nearly a decade of unpopular military cooperation with the United States and even more unpopular operations on Pakistan's soil. The Army knows that another military government would be a tough sell.

Another reason is that, while the Army made much of the sanguinary [NATO strike that killed 24 soldiers](#) in November, both it and the ISI -- Pakistan's most notorious intelligence agency -- are still smoldering over the humiliating facts that [Osama Bin Laden](#) enjoyed sanctuary in a cantonment town a short distance from the premier Pakistan Military Academy and that the United States could conduct a unilateral raid to kill and extract him before the Army even had a clue. Thus, the Army has been forced to work behind the scenes and through other institutions, such as the [judiciary](#), to keep this government on his heels.

Third, no matter how detestable Zardari, Inc. may be to the men in khaki, they have had no real alternative until now. The primary rival to Zardari and his PPP is former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his political fiefdom, the Pakistan Muslim League. The Army is scarcely more able to stomach a Sharif return to power after he sacked one Army chief (Gen. Jehangir Karamat) and tried to sack another (Musharraf). Karamat, a true democrat, retired without resistance; however, when Sharif tried to oust Musharraf, [the Army rolled in and toppled his government](#).

But the Army's luck is changing along with that of Imran Khan, whose political fortunes have shifted in recent months. For years, the lothario cricket star turned politician could barely win his own seat. However, with what Pakistanis suspect is support from the military and ISI, Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party has successfully wooed numerous turncoat politicians and their swollen vote banks. Khan has asked politicians who are now joining PTI to vacate their current elected seats in the parliament both as a means of ensuring that they do not reverse course but also as a ploy to bring about [fresh elections](#) earlier than 2013, when general polls are to be held. So far, PTI does not have the numbers needed to bring down the government, but politics in Pakistan is about coalitions and vote banks. This is a long shot, but not impossible with ever [more self-interested politicians from other parties flocking his way](#).

Khan holds views that align well with those of the Army. He has roused the sentiments of Pakistan's masses by calling for a restructuring -- if not outright cessation -- of military cooperation with Washington. He supports the Afghan Taliban, believes that Pakistan's armed forces should not be operating against Pakistani militants, and espouses a strong -- if absurdly pandering and unrealistic -- position on corruption. His views on sharia and blasphemy are chameleon-like. He is anything to anyone.

Not only does the Army have a palatable [political alternative to either the PPP or PML-N](#) -- it now has a mechanism to bring about the downfall of this government: Pakistan's interventionist Supreme Court. The current chief justice, [Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry](#), has long loathed Zardari because the latter opposed his reinstatement following his dismissal by then President Musharraf. The Supreme Court also rubbished a constitutional amendment -- [the "National Reconciliation Ordinance"](#) (NRO) -- that dropped various criminal charges against Zardari and his wife, Benazir Bhutto, along with other PPP members.

This legislation, which was brokered along with Musharraf and the U.S. government, paved the way for Bhutto's return in the fall of 2007. Washington understood the NRO to be the only way to salvage Musharraf's battered legitimacy by allowing him to remain as president while also paving the way for Bhutto to become prime minister following elections scheduled for late 2007. Her assassination changed everyone's fortunes.

In 2009, the Supreme Court ruled that the NRO was unconstitutional, with obvious implications for the various PPP officials who benefited from it, including Zardari. The Supreme Court has demanded to know why the government has failed to implement its 2009 vacation of the NRO by reinstating all criminal cases. The Supreme Court has also informed Zardari that he does not enjoy automatic immunity from prosecution for his alleged crimes.

The Army also now has a newer hook to hang proceedings against this government: the ["Memogate"](#) scandal. In the aftermath of the bin Laden raid, a mysterious [memo was delivered to Adm. Mike Mullen, then chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff](#). The memo asked for U.S. assistance to stave off a coup and in return offered to reverse Pakistan's decades-long policy of jihad under an expanding nuclear umbrella. Mullen [admits](#) he received the document, but quickly concluded that it was not credible. The memo riles Pakistan's military and intelligence officials because it sought to put them in their proper

place: under civilian control. This was the last straw for Pakistan's security complex, which for years has objected to this government's efforts to enlist U.S. assistance in curbing its power and influence.

At the vortex of Memogate is Haqqani, now back in Pakistan and subject to a travel ban, and Mansoor Ijaz, a wealthy Pakistani-American. For outside observers, the proceedings are bizarre. On Nov. 23, former [Prime Minister Sharif filed a petition](#) to the Supreme Court demanding a probe into the scandal under Article 184(3) of Pakistan's Constitution. With no charges filed and without any reference from a lower court, Pakistan's highest court of appeal has [ordered](#) a judicial commission to determine the authenticity and providence of the memo within four weeks. (This is possible because this provision of Pakistan's Constitution permits the court to directly hear a matter that is of public importance relating to the enforcement of fundamental rights.)

Whether or not Haqqani drafted or dictated the memo in question is difficult to discern, as there is no direct evidence linking him to it other than Ijaz's assertions and a series of cryptic [BlackBerry messages](#). Ijaz claims Haqqani dictated the memo to him over the phone, and thus far Ijaz has not claimed to have recordings of those conversations. Few analysts are foolhardy enough to vigorously defend either man, as both have long-established records of duplicity and double-dealing.

The stakes are high for Haqqani. [He believes that his life is in danger](#) because he has been widely depicted in Pakistan's jingoistic press as having sold out Pakistan's sovereignty to the Americans. That he has been an extremely effective ambassador and ably buffeted Pakistan from various U.S. fits of outrage is immaterial: Haqqani has been presumed to be guilty, has not been afforded the opportunity to present his version of events to counter those of Ijaz, has been denied freedom of movement without any charges being filed against him, and lives as a virtual prisoner within the prime minister's house.

Leaving aside the particular fate of Haqqani, it's important to understand this bizarre fiasco as a new sort of coup. In the old days, Pakistani generals sent tanks to oust a government. Now they plant stories in the press and manipulate the legal system.

First, if, for the sake of argument, one assumes that Haqqani is the author of the memo and indeed requested U.S. assistance in maintaining and expanding civilian control over the government and national security policy, the request is hardly treasonous. After all, the political disposition articulated in the memo is exactly what is called for in Pakistan's Constitution -- civilian control of the military.

Second, Haqqani is hardly the first to request U.S. involvement in Pakistan's national security affairs. In 1950, Pakistan's first premier, Liaqat Ali Khan, [told](#) an American journalist that should the United States "guarantee our territorial integrity, I will not keep any Army at all." Instead, Khan's visit ushered in the deep military cooperation with Pakistan that has enabled the Army to strongly root itself as the dominant institution in the country. But no one even intimated that such statements were treasonous.

Third, if Ijaz is to be believed, we must also consider his claim that Pakistan's spy chief, Lt. Gen. Ahmad Shuja Pasha, traveled to the Gulf to secure permission to sack Zardari. Surely, if these claims have any credence, such action is clearly an extraconstitutional step to undermine the government, if not high treason under [Article 6 of Pakistan's battered 1973 Constitution](#).

Watchers of Pakistan's sordid history of military intrusion into civilian affairs understand the rich irony of this current saga. Not one of the generals who have overthrown varied governments has ever been charged with treason. Not one of the varied Supreme Court justices who violated their oaths to protect the Constitution by providing judicial sanction to Pakistan's varied military coups has ever been punished.

So let's call the devil by his name: Memogate should be understood as a sophisticated attempt by the Army and intelligence agency to use the court to bring down this government, not just a titillating imbroglio involving Husain Haqqani.

But is there anything Washington can do about it? While the current Pakistani government is certainly abysmal, what's also true is that the only way Pakistani democracy can solidify is through consecutive constitutional changes of power through elections. If the United States and its partners genuinely support Pakistan's fragile democracy as the only means to achieve a more stable Pakistan in the long run, then they should act now to preempt the coup that, ironically, the suspect memo was supposedly written to prevent in the first place.

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