

The Pakistan Army's Political Gamble

The Daily Beast - 10/15/2009

By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistanis have been besieged with nine separate Taliban-led suicide attacks over the last 10 days aimed at the security forces—including a devastating and embarrassing siege inside the army's general headquarters in Rawalpindi that claimed 22 lives. In that climate, you'd think the generals might have other things on their minds than making statements that threatened the elected government and Pakistan's precarious relationship with the U.S. and other aid-giving countries.

But the army's chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, chose this point in time to challenge his government and the Obama administration—just as a crucial aid bill that has taken more than a year to pass on Capitol Hill was finally ready for President Obama's signature.

The military launched a massive public-relations exercise, briefing key TV talk-show hosts and journalists who were urged to whip up public opinion against the U.S. aid bill.

For a moment, it seemed that despite promises that the army would no longer intervene in politics, Pakistan's long-running military-civilian tensions about the army's intentions gripped the country.

The U.S. bill will provide Pakistan's civilian and development sector with \$1.5 billion a year for the next five years, while the military would have a separate aid bill worth over \$1 billion a year. It would be the first time in the history of the relationship between the U.S. and Pakistan that Washington would be giving so much money to a civilian government for development purposes. In the past, America has lavished money on military regimes, but barely helped civilian ones.

The bill stipulates that Pakistan must remain a democracy with civilian control over the army and the defense budget, while obligating the government to continue its fight against terrorism. However, these conditions were wrapped in a clause giving the U.S. president waiver rights to continue aid, even if such conditions were not met.

U.S. officials insisted the bill had no conditions, but rather only accountability and oversight demands so that the money reaches the people and is not wasted. The legislation had been through multiple drafts and had been watered down considerably after negotiations with the Pakistan government, foreign ministry, and army, which had objected to language used in earlier drafts—especially about Pakistan's nuclear program.

With the government bankrupt and surviving on life support only because of a massive \$11.3 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund, the passage of the U.S. bill is critical to convince European and Arab donors to give more aid to Pakistan.

Pakistan is battling the Taliban in the midst of a huge economic downturn, massive unemployment, and an acute energy shortage; there is no electricity in major cities for up to 10 hours a day.

For nearly a year, 20 countries and international agencies known collectively as the so-called Friends of Pakistan have been promising to give over \$5 billion in aid. But nothing has come of the pledges, because they were waiting for the Americans to go first.

U.S. officials told me that Rep. Howard Berman (D-CA), the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has personally briefed General Kayani, while Sen. John Kerry (D-MA), chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, visited Pakistan several times to meet with the generals in the past two years.

American legislators were furious with the army's statement. Berman told The Washington Post that although "billions have gone down a rat hole in the past" in Pakistan, he did not want to "micromanage" the country's use of the new money. State Department officials said they were trying to restrain angry legislators from saying anything more.

General Kayani, while on a visit to Kabul on September 29, conveyed to General Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, that he found the bill insulting and demeaning to the army. A week later, when McChrystal was in Islamabad, Kayani repeated his objections, according to U.S. officials.

On October 7, Kayani summoned the army's most powerful assembly—a meeting of the nine Corps Commanders—who then issued a statement saying the bill impacted on Pakistan's national security.

In the meantime, the military launched a massive public-relations exercise, briefing key TV talk-show hosts and journalists who were urged to whip up public opinion against the bill. Kayani also secretly met with the main opposition politician, Shabaz Sharif, the chief minister of Punjab Province.

Caught completely by surprise, President Asif Ali Zardari and the Pakistan Peoples Party government faced a sudden onslaught of accusations in parliament and the media that they were traitors who had sold out to the U.S.

The PPP became the sole defenders of the bill and are convinced that the army's move was part of a long-term plan to unseat Zardari as president and bring in someone more compliant.

Zardari, the widower of slain political icon Benazir Bhutto, has long taken a diametrically opposite view to the army on foreign policy. He would like peace with India, closer ties to the U.S., and an end to the Afghan Taliban's safe havens in Pakistan. But the army, which runs foreign policy, has more hard-line views.

Zardari has not helped build his case with the public because his government is considered weak, incompetent, and corrupt. Moreover, it has handed over command and control of the war against the Pakistani Taliban to the army. In the recent military offensive to clear Taliban out of the Swat Valley, it was the army, not the civilian government, that led the relief effort for 2 million displaced people.

Now, with the army promising to launch another offensive against Pakistani Taliban leaders holed up in South Waziristan, close to the border with Afghanistan, the Obama administration cannot afford to annoy the military. On October 14, Kerry and Berman released an "explanatory" statement saying that the U.S. had no desire to impinge on Pakistan's sovereignty.

For the moment, things have calmed down, and Kerry is due to visit Islamabad next week. But the problems between the army and the civilian government will not go away. And the possibility of return to military rule in Pakistan has only added to the complicated scenarios under review in the White House as Obama decides on his new Af-Pak strategy.

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