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Politics in Pakistan: Army in the middle

A messy stand-off between the government, protesters and the army suggests that controlling Pakistan is harder than ever

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SEIZING control of the state-controlled broadcaster used to be the prelude to military dictatorship in coup-prone Pakistan. The headquarters of the Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) in the heart of Islamabad was one of the first buildings to be taken over by soldiers in 1999 when General Pervez Musharraf ousted Nawaz Sharif, the country's then-prime minister who was re-elected in a landslide victory last year. The sight of troops piling back into that same office block on September 1st (see picture) aroused feelings of déjà vu. This time the soldiers entered PTV only to remove protesters who had forced the channel off air. Even so, those who

hoped Mr Sharif's return to power would spell an end to military meddling have reason to be worried. The generals are again circling ominously around him.

The demonstrators at PTV were largely made up of supporters of Tahir ul Qadri, a Muslim cleric with a large religious support base, and of Imran Khan, a famous cricket-player-turned politician. Mr Khan and Mr Qadri have been holding supposedly separate demonstrations in the heart of the capital since mid-August in an attempt to force out the government. Mr Khan has demanded the sacking of Mr Sharif, and a rerun of last year's election. He claims he was robbed of victory, although no independent election observers seem to agree with him.

The two men's combined crowds have been modest by Pakistani standards. Numbers have peaked at around 50,000 on carnival-like nights of music and speeches, but fell far below that during a recent rise in tension. The aim of the assault on PTV appeared to be to stir up confrontation in the hope that this would tempt the army to step in and remove Mr Sharif. Mr Khan, with his fondness for cricketing references, had promised his supporters that a "third umpire" will come and send Mr Sharif back to the pavilion. Banners lauding the army surround Mr Qadri's encampment. While thugs have struck police officers with bamboo staffs, soldiers have been treated respectfully.

On August 28th the army did come out to umpire: Mr Khan and Mr Qadri were invited to a midnight discussion with the army chief, Raheel Sharif, who offered to act as a mediator between them and the government. (He had also been holding talks with Mr Sharif, who is not a relative.) On August 30th Mr Khan and Mr Qadri told followers to storm the prime minister's official residence, prompting violent clashes with police. The following day the army told the government not to use force against the protesters. When military personnel asked them to stop smashing cameras and leave the PTV building, the 200 stick-wielding rioters swiftly complied.

The generals certainly have motives to weaken or even destroy Mr Sharif, who has a big parliamentary majority. The prime minister has made no secret of his desire to impose civilian control over the army. He also wants to transform hostile relations with India, a policy the army opposes. Furthermore, a government source says that the generals are angry because Mr Sharif reneged on what they allege was a secret deal to let Mr Musharraf slip abroad to avoid being found guilty of treason in an ongoing trial. Lastly, the government has been at odds with the army over Geo, a television station. In April the army demanded that Geo be closed down after it accused the chief of its intelligence wing of ordering the assassination of one of the station's journalists. Geo later apologised to the army for its reporting. Now come reports from some of the prime minister's aides that the army has already made a grab for the portfolios of foreign and defence policy, and that Mr Sharif has ceded some authority in these areas.

That is an infringement of the prime minister's power. But it is not exactly a coup. The protesters' efforts to draw the army further in have not worked; Mr Khan has been stung by allegations he has been dancing to the army's tune and appears to have given up his street-fighting approach. And the signs are that even the generals appear to recognise that a military takeover would be bad for the army itself. The last time around, under Mr Musharraf, it was not up to the task. That is why, since Mr Musharraf's ousting in 2008, the army has been trying to avoid taking overt control of politics. It worries that American financial assistance would be

jeopardised by a coup. It has little interest in prolonging the turmoil on the streets of Islamabad at a time when it is engaged in a long-delayed assault on the Pakistani Taliban in the tribal areas of North Waziristan.

The army also happens to support a few of Mr Sharif's policies, including his efforts to wean the country off expensive energy imports. The generals back his efforts to boost economic growth, not just to pay the nation's civilian bills but also its huge military ones.

It is uncertain how much of a role, if any, the army played in fomenting the recent protests. Kamran Bokhari of Stratfor, an American security-analysis company, says Pakistan has a vast number of retired generals, who claim to speak for "the army" but who are in fact far removed from the real power around General Sharif and corps commanders. "There is no one script," says Mr Bokhari.

There are still politicians who want a greater army role in politics, but those who oppose interference have grown in strength in recent years. At a special joint session of parliament on September 2nd many spoke out in defence of democracy and against the unruly demonstrators outside the building. Pro-democracy voices also include some of the private news channels that have proliferated since 2002.

The army is still by far the strongest institution that Pakistan has. But political power has become much more diffuse than it was on that night 15 years ago when the army needed only to seize control of one television station to take command of the entire country.