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Change Of Guard In Pakistan: Change Of Policy As Well? – OpEd

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General Raheel Sharif, the present Pakistan Army Chief is likely to retire on 29th November this year. By all accounts, General Sharif does not seem to be seeking an extension of his term. The sitting incumbent usually has a say in the extension of tenure, which cannot be refused by the political dispensation owing the stranglehold of the military over all affairs in the country. Given that, it appears pretty surprising that the present Chief does not want one. What then does that reveal about the state of affairs in Pakistan?

General Sharif became Chief with the tacit backing of former Chief and President of Pakistan, General Musharraf. Pervez Musharraf continues to maintain his command over the way the Pakistan Army, and therefore the civilian government functions. Ostensibly, there are a number

of cases being contested in courts against Musharraf but these should be taken with a handful of salt considering the record of justice disbursement in an almost 'banana republic'. Further, what is happening behind the screens will never be available for public consumption, and it may well be wheels within wheels in the warped politics of Pakistan that are propelling these eyewashes. In either case, it remains irrefutable that Musharraf continues to be an active and assertive voice in their domestic politics and foreign policy.

Foreign policy in Pakistan has two important tenets namely its relations with the United States (for what it can extract) and its historical conflict with India (which remains its bete-noire). Both these play an important role in what decisions are taken in its domestic sphere. In the present instance, with the confusion prevalent following Trump's victory in the US Presidential elections, it may not be entirely clear to policy makers in Pakistan what to expect in the months to come. However, with Trump announcing General Flynn as the National Security Advisor in the transition team, it is evident that he intends to follow his rhetoric about Muslims (during campaigning) even after he takes oath. That may well be a cause of worry to the Pakistani establishment, both military and civilian, as they may not be able to continue sucking the American funds that they have been so used to in the past. It may also be wise to portray normalcy to the world, with the semblance of civilian control over the military establishment. To that end, a smooth transition of the Chief of Army will serve their interests in this projection to the US government.

It may also be possible that Sharif enters politics as a former Chief of Army, rather than usurp power that most of his illustrious (?) predecessors have done. By and large, he has enjoyed a fairly popular status in the country by selective action against radical Islamic groups, providing a fair degree of publically visible action against brutality and bloodshed on the streets, and yet has maintained the hidden agenda of the 'Deep State'. He enjoys similar popularity in the armed forces as well. To that extent he seems to be more politically astute than most former Chiefs (and some ex- dictators). If he succeeds in entering politics on this plank, he would have successfully accomplished both a smooth transition in public view, as well as retain his grip on the military-civil complex in Pakistan. It would appear perfectly normal to the outside observer that a former soldier has now decided to enter politics (as is the case in Trump's team also), without too much of focus on behind-the-scenes machinations. In addition he would have the continued backing of Musharraf, keep exploiting his background as Army Chief, even utilize his brother's martyrdom to his advantage. In his last months, he has even successfully nullified India's much touted 'surgical strikes'; much of the world believes there's more to the story than what the Indian government released to the world.

Therefore, this change in guard would translate in to little difference in the way things are dealt with, in Pakistan, in its civilian government, and definitely in its military establishment. In fact, the new Chief would be a handpicked General, obviously allegiant to the old guard, yet pitch for the 'rule of law' in international perspective. For those battling Pakistan's 'Export of Terror' machinery, it should be business as usual.

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