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Reuter

A slow-burning revolution in Pakistan

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Rarely does the perennial struggle for power between civilian and military authority punch to the surface quite so openly in Pakistan, yet thanks to the increasing use of the internet, it is now being played out in public across websites, Twitter, blogs and online newspapers. It is a struggle that is every bit as important as those taking place in the Middle East, and like those of the Arab spring, one that has the potential to tip the country into even greater instability or steer it onto firmer ground.

The renewed and very public debate started with the May 2 raid by U.S. forces which found and killed Osama bin Laden in the garrison town of Abbottabad. That unleashed an unprecedented wave of criticism against the military — both for failing to find the al Qaeda leader, and for apparently failing to detect and react to a U.S. raid in the heart of the country. The anger rose after militants attacked a naval air base in Karachi, and swelled further when the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency was accused of beating to death Pakistani journalist Saleem Shahzad — an allegation it denied.

With one of its own silenced — [a man well-liked for his affability and courtesy](#) — the media raised its voice.

Columnist Ejaz Haider published [an open letter to ISI head Lieutenant-General Shuja Pasha](#) challenging the ISI to prove it was not involved with Shahzad's death and insisting it respect the supremacy of civilian authority. Institutions of state, he wrote, "are all accountable through two levels of agency. The first and primary level of agency is granted by the people through elections to their representatives; the second, a much more restrictive level of agency, is accorded by the peoples' representatives to bureaucratic institutions, including the military and its intelligence agencies. You, sir, are therefore a servant twice over, as are all your officers and other personnel. You are answerable to our representatives and those representatives are answerable to us."

Najam Sethi, a doyen of Pakistani journalism, [wrote that](#) "the indignant argument that any criticism of the military is 'unpatriotic' or serves the interests of the 'enemy' doesn't wash any more. Indeed, the term 'establishment', which was hitherto used in the media to refer obliquely to the military so as not to offend and incur its wrath, is rapidly going out of fashion, and the army and navy and air force are being referred to as army, navy and air force, which is, of course, exactly what they are and have always been."

"The Pakistan military should see the writing on the wall. It must hunker down and become subservient to civilian rule and persuasion," he said.

"What we saw and read in the media in May has never happened before," [wrote Cyril Almeida at Dawn newspaper](#). Using [archive material](#) on Dawn's reports on the Pakistan Army's defeat by India in the 1971 war, he compared the criticism levelled at the military now with the very muted coverage of its humiliating surrender in Dhaka on December 16, 1971.

"The furious words in the media last month were not unprecedented since 1971. They were unprecedented. Period," he wrote.

"The banner headline in this newspaper of record on Dec 17, 1971? 'War till victory'. And below it, a small two-column headline, 'Fighting ends in East Wing'. The accompanying story began: 'Latest reports indicate that following an arrangement between the local commanders of India and Pakistan in the Eastern theatre, fighting has ceased in East Pakistan and Indian troops have entered Dacca.'

The army has replied with some very public words of its own. [In an extraordinarily lengthy statement](#) issued after army chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani met his Corps Commanders, it appealed to the nation to rally behind it and unite to fight terrorism. Kayani almost never speaks in public — when his views are reported in such detail and at such length, it suggests that something important has already changed in Pakistan.

The statement condemned those it said were deliberately trying to malign the armed forces. "This is an effort to drive a wedge between the Army, different organs of the State and more seriously, the people of Pakistan whose support the Army has always considered vital for its operations against terrorists," it said.

"COAS (Chief of Army Staff General Kayani) noted that in order to confront the present challenges, it is critical to stand united as a nation. Any effort to create divisions between important institutions of the country is not in our national interest. The participants agreed that all of us should take cognizance of this unfortunate trend and put an end to it."

The appeal for unity is important. Without national unity, the army says it cannot rally the public support needed to fight Islamist militants, including in military campaigns against its own people in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan. It also becomes more vulnerable to disquiet within the ranks about Pakistan's military strategy and its much-disliked and fragile alliance with the United States.

And to the army's defenders, it is the only effective national institution, holding together the country while a weak civilian government struggles to master the basics of governance. According to this argument, a sapping of support for the army would also rob the country of its ultimate safety net, based on a long-held view that if the worst comes to the worst, the military can always step in to restore order.

Yet to the army's critics, it is the centralising and authoritarian tendencies of the military which have created many of Pakistan's problems in the first place. Leave aside [its past tendencies to use militant proxies](#) (that's a subject for a different post). Without the softening grey areas of democracy and decentralisation which create the space to mediate differences between the diverse ethnic groups in Pakistan, many have turned to violence — from Baluch separatists to Pashtun tribesman. Power has been centralised in Punjab, the traditional recruiting ground of the Pakistan Army and the country's biggest province. And in the absence of a political system which accommodates diversity, Pakistan has had to rely on Islam to hold the country together – a self-defeating exercise, argue some, given the diversity of faith in the country, both within different traditions of Islam and among its non-Muslims.

Before the bin Laden raid, some of that was starting to change, with efforts by the civilian government to devolve power to the provinces through [an 18th Amendment to the constitution passed by parliament in April](#). There was also talk of breaking up provinces into smaller units, including Punjab — a politically difficult move which might never see the light of day, but which nonetheless showed quite how far Pakistan had come in its thinking about how to transform the country from the centralised Punjab-dominated structure which characterised past military rule.

It was a slow-burning and – at the time - a rather quiet, revolution. In more stable times, it might have had a chance of working. It may yet work, barring any fresh crises in Pakistan triggered from without or within. Kayani has made clear that he has no interest in having Pakistan return to military rule, and the army statement reiterated its commitment to democracy. But such a transformation would take time and patience – perhaps more than the United States in particular is willing to give to Pakistan.

“There were times one hoped to initiate a civil-military dialogue with the intention of building bridges,” [Ayesha Siddiqa wrote in The Express Tribune](#). “What we need right now is greater sanity. But more than that we need the capacity to draw rules of engagement in which we can talk sensibly without people losing lives.”