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By Bhaskar Roy

The fact that a civilian government in Pakistan is completing a full five-year tenure is a hopeful sign. There is another fact, which is worrying. Army Chief Gen. Parvez Asfaq Kayani recently stated that the army will back peaceful elections and a civilian government.

Why is an assurance and support necessary to hold elections and civilian rule? Simply because real power still lies with the army. The army adopted a low profile after a couple of sensitive military installations were attacked by terrorists. The main blow was the discovery of Osama bin Laden in the garrison town of Abbottabad last year, when American seals took him out in a striking operation. It was clear to the world that Osama was under the protection of the Pakistani army. The west, however, did not press this point very much. They had other strategic interests with the Pak army.

Among the people, however, the army has lost its shining armour. The army and its intelligence service, the ISI, are active. They still decide on strategic issues and relations with neighbours like India, Afghanistan, the Taliban and other terrorist organizations created and nurtured by them.

Gen. Kayani is on record having said that the terrorist organizations are the army's assets. At a conference in Brussels in 2008, Gen. Kayani is reported to have said that Pakistan had nothing in common with India – culturally, historically, linguistically etc. This revealed the mind set of prosecuting a 100 years war with India.

Almost from its birth, Pakistani leaders tried to take the country out of South Asia and make it a part of the Gulf and Middle East. Although Pakistanis are not accepted as Arabs for obvious reasons, the Pakistanis did not give up. Obviously, this causes what one can call a

historical and social schizophrenia.

A report on a new Pakistani military doctrine said that the main threat to the country was internal, leading many Pakistanis and Indians to hail the Pak army's reasonable position. Soon afterwards the army clarified that India remained the main threat.

It is the "Military Inc", (title of Ayesha Siddiq'a's book) that rules the roost. The Pak army is privileged, and this position should remain. To do this, they need to create external threats. Incidentally, the largest chunk of the budget goes to the armed forces. This includes parts of foreign assistance for development.

In 1965, Pakistan's economy was better than India's. Today, it is behind most South Asian countries. The manner in which the country is going does not inspire any confidence for a quick recovery.

Former ace counter-terrorism expert of the US, Bruce Ridel, who is now with a Washington think tank, has a very pessimistic view of Pakistan. He has written, with internal government inputs that Pakistan will collapse in or by 2030. This writer feels that the collapse could come sooner, but hopes it will not happen.

At this point one must pause and think how poet and philosopher Saadat Hasan Manto visualized in 1954 Pakistan's future. Aakar Patel did an excellent translation of Manto's essay (published in "First Post", February 22, 2013).

To quote from it **"But ladies and gentlemen, praise is owed only to Allah, who made the world. And thanks to him now neither bulbul remains not flower. We killed off the flower and the bulbul disappeared of itself. And many other things besides we have been rid of in this land of Pak, the pure"**.

Manto's writing is fascinating. How could he foresee as early as 1954 that religious extremism will dominate Pakistan, with Mullahs leading the chorus? Was it the arrival of Ala Moududi with his extreme interpretation of Islam? Moududi came to West Pakistan from East Pakistan, and his philosophy gave birth to Jamaat-e-Islami (JEI) which is setting Bangladesh on fire today.

Qaid-e-Azam Mohamed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, was a liberal westernized Shia. A Bombayite or Mumbaite, he was in love with Bollywood! And a Bollywood actress as stories say.

Today, 30 million of Jinnah's Shia brethren are being persecuted by Sunni extremists. In the last two months, in two attacks by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) in Quetta, nearly two hundred Shias were killed, and many more injured. The community protested strongly. Two LEJ leaders have been arrested since.

The response of the government to protect Shias lacks conviction. On March 03, targetted bomb blasts killed around 48 Shias in Karachi.

Attacks on Shias and Ahmedias have been going on for a long time. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto passed a law in 1972 making Ahmedia's non-Muslims.

Although Shias have not yet been religiously ex-communicated, the pressure on them has risen to such a degree that Shias are being forced to name their children in Sunni style, to hide their identity. Both Shias and Ahamedias are now openly saying that there is no place for them in Pakistan.

Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have had their Sunni versus Shia fight in Pakistan. With changes in the Muslim world, the sectarian fight within Islam is assuming disquieting proportions.

Can this sectarian persecution in Pakistan get reflected elsewhere in the Islamic world? It is visible in Syria. Iran supports Bashar al Assad and his Alawites (a Shia denomination) in Syria, while the Sunnis there are being helped by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries. The Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) is a mainly Sunni body. Iraq has a Shia government, but Shias and Sunnis are on a daily rampage against each other. Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni clan but the majority of the people are Shias. The hard line Sunni Al Qaeda is increasingly getting involved in this sectarian struggle.

The sectarian fight in Pakistan is very likely to divide the Islamic World, and could lead to an unending war. Iran is currently weak due to sanctions on its nuclear programme. If Tehran can come to a compromise as the recent 5+1 (Perm.5 of UN and Germany) and Iran meeting in Almaty, suggests, things will change.

Pakistan, in that case, can face a major debacle. Iran has a border with Pakistan, which is an advantage over Saudi Arabia.

Internal problems in Pakistan like the Baluchistan nationalism issue and Sindh exploitation could see another partition of Pakistan. The Punjabi domination is very visible. It was one of the contributing factors for the creation of Bangladesh. Pakistan's internal threats like from Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is not to be taken lightly. Its hold over the border areas with Afghanistan, is another threat.

Although the Pak army supports the Taliban bid to take over Afghanistan, the relations between the two are far from warm. Yet both need each other. If the Taliban returns to power in Kabul and is recognized by the international community, they will certainly derecognize the Durand Line and demand territories accross the borders with Pakistan. Even when the Taliban governed Afghanistan between 1991-2001, they did not accept the Durand Line as the border.

Last, if not the least, is Pakistan's economy. It is sustained by international donations and IMF loans. The IMF is not going to be easy to deal

with any longer. Open trade with India could give Pakistan a substantial economic boost. But their visceral antipathy towards India is the problem. Pakistan's business community wants it. But the army and foreign office hardliners stall every move. They have blocked the South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) at every instance.

It is difficult to find a silver lining in Pakistan's future. If it really melts down it will be a threat to the world. Imagine 20 million Pakistanis trying to seek jobs in Europe! There will be an exodus to India as refugees. And many more unimaginable consequences. Finally, What about its huge nuclear arsenal? Who will control it or execute it?

The scenario is mind boggling, and eludes an answer at this moment.

(The author is an experienced analyst of South Asian region. He can be contacted at grouchohart@yahoo.com [1])

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