Charlotte Kennedy: Pakistan's protests

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Islamabad’s tree-lined streets, usually clear, are now trash–strewn and cluttered with tents. Men and women camped opposite Parliament House are washing their clothes, rolling up their bed mats and quietly gossiping over deep–fried parathas and boiling cups of milky tea. Children play between the tents and barbed wire, while local police, weary in the summer heat and itchy in their polyester uniforms, rest on their rifles.

Many of these people have been sitting in the spot known as D–Chowk, a scrappy piece of land between the commercial centre and Pakistan’s national assembly, for 56 days. They are waiting for a revolution.

Demonstrators arrived behind two separate leaders on 14 August, Pakistan’s Independence Day. One group followed Imran Khan, the cricketer–turned–politician who was elected to the parliament last year; the other, a slightly comical Muhammad Tahir–ul–Qadri, a Pakistani–born Canadian cleric who delivers stern addresses inside his fitted–out, bullet–proof shipping container. (This has become such a common practice that Pakistanis have coined the term ‘container politicians’.)

The few hundred Pakistanis in the Qadri and Khan camps, who have held the fort over the last month, are primarily paid, young labourers who have been crammed into small minibuses and shuttled in from nearby villages. Many of these young men have been told by their politically connected employers to do this instead of turning up to work. By night, their obedience is rewarded. Curious families and young teenagers from nearby Rawalpindi and outlying villages join them in the city for the night’s entertainment. On most nights, Khan and Qadri address the masses on separate stages, urging people to rise up against the corruption of the state and demand the removal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Pakistani celebrities and singers appear on stage to the blasting tunes of DJ Butt, who was recently arrested by the Sharif government for inciting violence.

As the protests were taking place in Islamabad, over 1,000 kilometres away at the Karachi airport, irate passengers chased former interior minister Rehman Malik off a plane. YouTube clips captured the now–infamous episode during which the state–run airline delayed a commercial flight for over 90 minutes so that the former minister could catch it – a normal practice. As Malik casually sauntered down the air bridge, angry travellers blocked his way and chased him back into the terminal.

In the context of the street agitation, liberal commentators were quick to celebrate ‘the Malik episode’ as evidence that the normally docile masses were finally ready to challenge the patronage system and culture of VIP entitlement. The episode was hailed as Pakistan’s ‘Tunisia moment’ (a reference to the instant when a frustrated and disillusioned street vendor took a match to his gasoline–soaked clothes and set himself alight – sparking revolution across the Arab world).

Certainly, the defiance against Malik was an aberration in a normally submissive society. The level of frustration amongst Pakistanis at the political system is palpable. However, what we are witnessing on Islamabad’s streets is not a revolution. It is not even a precursor to a revolution. It is a familiar ritual in Pakistani politics.

Since Pakistan’s formation in 1947, ‘long marches’ and street protests have been a recurring theme in its political culture. They are guided by their own internal logic, having almost nothing to do with ‘people power’ and everything to do with the games of the political elite. According to Pakistani political scientist Dr Hasan Askari Rizvi, the civilian elite use street agitation to settle their political scores with one another. ‘Opposition parties often take to streets because neither the Parliament nor the ruling government care to develop negotiation skills for political conflict’, Rizvi explains in his recent editorial.

The late Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister assassinated in 2007, used such tactics to seek the removal of...
Nawaz Sharif when he was last in power. Her first attempt ended abruptly when she was placed under house arrest. But by the second time around, the mere threat of a long march was enough for her to elicit the army’s support, prompting Sharif to resign. Sharif also used this tactic against his political opponents – with varying degrees of success.

While the recipe for a successful street protest in Pakistan requires the ability to recruit and retain an impressive crowd, substantial financial backing and a political opponent with declining popularity, in reality the success or failure of elite-led street agitation comes down to one factor alone – the blessing or backing of the military.

In the lead-up to Pakistan’s May elections, Qadri staged a similar protest to the one occurring today. I was working as a political officer in the Australian Embassy at the time and had to endure the paralysis of the city that such a protest creates. After several days of occupying Islamabad and threatening to storm the parliament, Qadri managed to enter into negotiations with the former government and extracted its agreement to a number of minor electoral reforms. It was widely assumed that Qadri had the blessing, if not the financial backing of the Pakistan military as a means for the army to retain control during the caretaker period before elections.

Equally, Imran Khan has made dharnas (the act of exacting justice by sitting or fasting at the doorstep of an offender until death or until demands are met) part of his own personal brand of politics. In 2013, Khan famously declared he would stage a ‘long march’ to South Waziristan, Pakistan’s militant-controlled border region, and hold a sit-in against drone strikes. He made it as far as Tank, a small town that borders the self-governed tribal areas, before having to turn his convoy around due to Taliban threats, a lack of people-power and probably an absence of military approval. Headlines the next day read that Imran had ‘tanked it’.

For both Khan and Qadri, the 2014 protests have not gone as planned. Even at their largest, the numbers of supporters have been well short of the ‘million man’ march they had desired. By late August, monsoon rains had washed away much of the protesters’ determination, and Pakistanis bored with this familiar style of politics switched off the 24/7 live television broadcasts and resumed their normal lives.

Frustrated but unable to back down, Khan and Qadri are now seeking new momentum. Khan has taken his show, with its glittering celebrities, to Karachi and is scheduled to hold a protest in Sharif’s political heartland of Lahore on 28 September. Meanwhile, Qadri, steadfast in his commitment to occupy the small strip of land at D-Chowk, has reportedly told his paid supporters they are not allowed to go home.

Khan and Qadri may be able to revive their respective movements, but what is increasingly apparent is that neither group has the political muscle i.e., the army backing necessary to remove Sharif from power. Put simply, if the army was backing these protests and wanted to oust Sharif, one would expect that after 56 days of this enduring game, it would have done so by now.

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