

# Tahirul Qadri's rise and its potential impact on Pakistan's stability

By Huma Yusuf

## ■ Executive summary

At a time when Pakistan's civilian government, army and judiciary are still negotiating the parameters of their influence in the current dispensation, a protest march and sit-in led by cleric Tahirul Qadri in Islamabad in January 2013 was rightly perceived as an indicator of political turmoil. The march was widely believed to be an attempt by the military or judiciary, or both, to delay elections and subvert Pakistan's democratic transition. The protest also had implications for Pakistan's internal security owing to its sectarian dimensions: Qadri hails from the moderate Barelvi subsect and Pakistan's security establishment might be promoting him to counter the violent extremist ideologies of Deobandi militant groups. But in terms of medium-term political stability in Pakistan, the most dangerous trend highlighted by Qadri's protest is the growing disconnect between Pakistan's civilian and military political elite and the public, which includes an increasingly politicised middle class that is demanding improved governance and service delivery.

On January 14th 2013 between 25,000 and 50,000 people led by Tahirul Qadri – a cleric calling for electoral reform who founded Minhajul Quran International (MQI), an international educational charity – began a four-day protest and sit-in in front of the Pakistani parliament in Islamabad. Coming months ahead of general elections, which will mark the first time in Pakistani history that a popularly elected civilian government has completed its term, Qadri's call for the Pakistan army and judiciary to select the caretaker government to oversee the elections and the reconstitution of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) caused widespread alarm. Many believed the demands veiled an attempt by the military to install a puppet government and subvert Pakistan's democratic transition.

The sit-in ended after negotiations between Qadri and the government, which agreed to dissolve national and provincial assemblies by March 16th; seek broad-based consensus, including Qadri's input, on an interim executive set-up; and reconstitute the ECP. The government was compelled to give Qadri a role in the political process to end the protest that had paralysed the capital for days. At the time, activists across the political spectrum celebrated the efficacy of peaceful protest in Pakistan's democratic set-up. But subsequent events suggest that the government's accession was half-hearted at best: in the last week of January a government committee announced that the

constitution did not allow the government to dissolve the ECP, forcing Qadri to emphasise his secondary call for the dismissal of provincial chief election commissioners, whom he claims are political appointees.

The outcome of Qadri's "long march" has been hailed as proof of the resilience of Pakistan's civilian political system, with political parties demonstrating maturity in uniting against Qadri's calls for the early ousting of the sitting coalition government. But while political parties' efforts to ensure timely elections are encouraging, many aspects of Qadri's political intervention point to continued political instability in Pakistan.

## Institutional tussles?

The scale of Qadri's protest – and the advertising campaign that preceded it – raised many questions about the cleric's source of funding. Journalists, political analysts and government officials at the time pointed fingers at the Pakistani "establishment", a euphemism for the country's army and intelligence agencies. Pakistan has a long history of military intervention in civilian politics: last year the Supreme Court decided a long-running case against the army, finding that the intelligence agencies had bankrolled various political parties ahead of the general elections in 1990 to prevent then-prime minister Benazir Bhutto from returning to power. In this context, Qadri's "long march"

was publicly perceived as an attempt at a “soft coup” by the military.

Analysts reasoned that the army was seeking to delay or suspend elections because the current army chief, General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, is scheduled to step down in November 2013. Rather than permit a popularly elected civilian government to choose his successor, the army would prefer the compliance of a puppet caretaker government.

The Supreme Court’s decision to order the arrest of Prime Minister Raja Pervez Ashraf on long-standing corruption charges on January 15th, the second day of the sit-in, also fueled conspiracy theories regarding the judiciary’s involvement in a scheme to undermine civilian politics. Since 2009 the judiciary under Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry has clashed with the Pakistan People’s Party-led coalition government because President Asif Ali Zardari opposed the chief justice’s reinstatement, fearing the judge would revisit corruption charges against him. Living up to these expectations, in 2010 Justice Chaudhry voided an amnesty scheme under which Zardari had contested elections. This led to proxy battles in the courts, which culminated in the June 2012 dismissal of former prime minister Yousaf Raza Gilani for refusing to heed court orders to pursue corruption inquiries against the president.

Whether or not Qadri’s protest was a manifestation of this institutional tussle remains unclear. On February 13th the Supreme Court rejected Qadri’s petition seeking the reconstitution of the ECP, arguing that the current composition of the commission did not violate Qadri’s fundamental rights, as he had claimed. This ruling dispelled suspicions of the judiciary’s backing for Qadri’s “long march”.

But there can be no doubt that the civilian government, army and judiciary are still negotiating the parameters of their influence in the current political system. Along with General Kayani, Chief Justice Chaudhry is scheduled to step down in December 2013, when he reaches the mandatory retirement age. This means the newly elected civilian government will have a rare opportunity to consolidate civilian rule through its influence over the selection of a new army chief and Supreme Court chief justice. Qadri’s protest seemed to be the first attempt to avert this scenario by installing a puppet caretaker government that would delay elections until the army and judiciary were under new leadership. While Qadri’s specific demands seem unlikely to be met, the clash of Pakistan’s institutions will certainly continue, undermining the credibility and efficacy of the government, army and judiciary.

## Sectarianism and politics

Theories about army backing for Qadri’s march were not limited to issues of civilian control: they also had a sectarian dimension. The cleric hails from the Bareilvi subsect of Sunni Islam, which is tolerant and moderate, especially in comparison to the Deobandi subsect from which members of most extremist militant groups, including the Pakistani

Taliban and anti-Shia sectarian groups, hail. Prior to the January protest, Qadri was best known in Pakistan for a 600-page religious edict denouncing terrorism and suicide bombing. His sudden entry into Pakistan’s political sphere – coinciding with a new military doctrine that identifies “homegrown militancy” as the “biggest threat” to national security – has thus been perceived as a way to counter the growing influence of violent Deobandi ideologies.

But highlighting sectarian differences in the political realm is a dangerous proposition in light of rising numbers of incidents of sectarian violence. At present constituencies are not defined along sectarian lines, although sectarianism does affect politics. Many politicians, including former prime minister Gilani, are *sajjada nashins* (shrine caretakers) who use their ties to Sufi shrines to woo constituencies. In central and southern Punjab major political parties rely on the backing of the outlawed, yet influential anti-Shia extremist group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) to win parliamentary seats. But as political and security analyst Dr Ayesha Siddiq (2013) has pointed out, subsects are not unified constituencies – the Bareilvis do not follow “closed group” dynamics and are unlikely to vote for Qadri’s preferred candidates. As such, an expanded role for sectarian identity in the political realm will only further polarise Pakistani society, fueling intolerance and instability.

This is a trend that Pakistan can ill afford at a time when sectarian strife is plaguing many parts of the country. Qadri’s march left Lahore for Islamabad days after a double suicide bomb attack at a snooker hall in Quetta killed 92 people, mostly Hazaras – an ethnic group whose members are predominantly Shia. This attack, the worst single attack against the Shia Muslim minority, which comprises 20% of Pakistan’s population, came after the deadliest year on record for the country’s Shia: more than 400 members of the community were murdered in 2012, almost double the number killed in 2011 (Waraich, 2013). Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, the militant offshoot of SSP, has claimed responsibility for most of the attacks, which were concentrated in Karachi, Quetta, the northern Gilgit-Baltistan district and the Kurram tribal agency. Although nationwide protests against the killing of Shia followed the Quetta attack, the risk of sectarianism fueling further violence is high: according to a recent Pew poll, only 50% of Pakistani Sunnis accept Shia as Muslim (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012).

## Political disconnect

In terms of political stability in Pakistan, the most dangerous trend highlighted by Qadri’s protest is the growing disconnect between Pakistan’s political elite, whether civilian or military, and the public. While elite considerations focused on institutional power plays and sectarian counterbalances, Qadri’s supporters endured freezing temperatures and rain to demand improved governance.

The majority of protesters hailed from Pakistan’s expanding middle class, which amounts to 70 million people, or 40% of the population, if the undocumented economy is

also included in the estimate (Sherani, 2012). In a country urbanising at the fastest rate in South Asia – 50% of the population will live in cities by 2025, up from one-third at present – this demographic is key to Pakistan’s political future.

According to news reports, Qadri’s supporters included teachers, civil servants and small-business owners from second-tier cities such as Multan, Sheikhpura and Bahawalpur or semi-urban towns with basic health-care and education facilities. Many supporters were mobilised through Qadri’s MQI charity. MQI has attracted a middle-class support base by offering affordable secular education and health care: in addition to 572 schools and 42 colleges, MQI runs cultural centres, 3,000 libraries, and more than 100 free health clinics and blood banks, while the Minhaj University in Lahore offers courses in business administration, mathematics, information technology and Islamic studies (Mustafa, 2013).

These supporters were attracted by Qadri’s call for the pre-election screening of all candidates to prevent law breakers and tax evaders from running for office. In interviews with the media during the protest Qadri’s supporters repeatedly demanded employment opportunities, fewer power outages, consistent gas supply, inflation control and decreased corruption – in other words, better governance and service delivery. This is the same constituency that made cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan a serious political contender on the basis of his campaign promise to eradicate government corruption within 90 days.

## Conclusion

Qadri’s January protest thus demonstrated how Pakistan’s leadership is becoming increasingly disconnected from public sentiment at a time when a progressively politicised, urban middle class is seeking democratic rule, good governance and effective service delivery. Institutional power plays are undermining the consolidation of a durable civilian government, which is necessary to address issues of service delivery, law and order, and social cohesion. As Pakistan’s population is increasingly polarised along sectarian, ethnic and linguistic lines, the failure to redress genuine grievances about governance is likely to fuel divisiveness and violence, and points to continued political instability in Pakistan’s medium-term future.

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