

AN UNEQUAL STRUGGLE

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CROSSED SWORDS — Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within: Shuja Nawaz; Oxford University Press, I Floor, YMCA Library Building, 1, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi-110001. Rs. 695.

Pakistan's history can be said to be that of its army, since it has ruled the country for 38 of its 60-year existence. It has been described by a former Army Chief as an institution that has been and remains the centre of gravity of Pakistan. Explanations for this were framed in terms of the feudal elites from which the army drew its leaders. Others attribute this to Pakistan serving the purposes of the U.S.- led alliances as a front-line state against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, by which the military gained and retained its dominant status.

Shuja Nawaz's book provides new insights into the ideological and cultural drivers of this unique army. The advantage of being closely linked with the military and political leadership has given him extraordinary access both to archival and anecdotal history. He provides insights both into the belief system and the internal rivalries, which affect this army's role as the main determinant of Pakistan's polity and policies.

Continuing strategy

What comes through is the reality of a militarist hierarchy which has disdain for its political leadership, and a belief in itself as the best instrument of governance. The outcome of the unequal struggle between an organised, well-trained military institution and a weak squabbling political establishment was never in doubt. The clear vision of General Ayub Khan and his successors, in seizing and exercising the levers of power at every level is vividly brought out, as are the consequences of that continuing strategy.

The decision-making processes which went into the start and continuation of the conflict in Jammu & Kashmir, of wars with India, and of seeking the U.S. as the guarantor of military's legitimacy make for a fascinating account. What the author does not mention but still comes through is the skilful exploitation of the 'Indian bogey'. The sustained portrayal of an Indian threat to dismember Pakistan, and undo the Partition was effectively used to legitimise the extraordinary size, role and expenditure on the military. In the process, Pakistan's army embraced a militarist ideology which placed its interests above that of the state. It led in turn to the army arrogating to itself extraordinary privileges and benefits, making it an independent economic and business player in the state.

Militarist thinking

General Musharraf's speech on assuming powers after dismissing the Nawaz Sharif Government provides the window to the militarist thinking. The Prime Minister who had been elected by a near two-third majority was deposed. In the General's words, the P.M.'s decisions had affected the integrity of the military. In other words, the military's cohesion was placed at a higher value than that of the state.

The limited and motivated briefs given to the Prime Ministers by the Army Chiefs are a revelation. The belief that the military knows what is best for the country comes through repeatedly in the insider accounts of the politician-military interaction. The possibility of gaining political immortality by taking Kashmir was suggested in a GHQ briefing to Benazir Bhutto. General Musharraf's offer to Benazir to plant the Pakistani flag in Srinagar by the Kargil operations is an extraordinary recounting. These further confirm the militarist beliefs which make the army disregard international and domestic implications of its actions.

Army management

The sub-title of "wars within" the Pakistan Army refers to the systemic flaws in the political management of the army. The army hierarchy maintains a firm professional grip on the internal cohesion and efficiency of the force. However, above the ranks of Major Generals there is a Byzantine manoeuvring for bigger prizes. This occurs because the Chiefs have been rarely chosen on the principle of seniority. Other things being equal amongst the top half a dozen Generals, seniority should be the established norm. When that is jettisoned, as has often happened in Pakistan, other considerations come to the fore. Clan against clan, Punjabi against Pathan, Multani against Muhajir, even marriage and blood relations become determining factors.

The decision processes that go into making national policies concerning major events in Pakistan's history are a strong part of the book. Emergence of Bangladesh, the Afghanistan-Taliban-ISI play, and the current struggle to restore democracy provide a hitherto unavailable insight through interviews and close observation.

The Kargil conflict is shown through comments and perspectives of multiple individuals. There are as many interpretations of the event as there are individuals amounting to what the author terms the Roshomon effect, after the famous Japanese filmmaker's technique.

New phenomenon

The Pakistan Army is faced with the phenomenon of fighting a new war on its own territory. Its operational doctrines are based on maximum force, with

the use of artillery, helicopter gun ships and even tanks against opposition. It is not used to taking casualties or conducting operations without recourse to overkill. Its actions against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban are viewed in parts of the army and amongst the populace as fighting someone else's war on Pakistani soil. The legitimacy and relevance of the army to a Pakistani cause has come into doubt. It is no surprise that the army has done its deals of live and let live in the tribal areas.

The conclusion from this remarkable book is of the indispensability of the army to any political arrangement in Pakistan. It is not yet possible in Pakistan to secure and exercise political power without the support of the army. Benazir Bhutto and Zardari came to terms with this reality and were co-opted by the military, while Sharif is yet to do so. A united political front against the military's role is not in sight. The security situation also makes the army a prime player in the country. The military's belief in its capacity to direct political outcomes will thus be strengthened. It will retain sole control over its nuclear assets. Its economic clout will remain undiminished. Its militarist belief system will be further reinforced, and policy-makers everywhere would do well to take note of it.