

Pakistan: Endless turmoil

by GWYNNE DYER

Last year US President Joe Biden called Pakistan 'one of the most dangerous countries in the world,' presumably because of its potentially lethal cocktail of nuclear weapons and unstable politics. But somehow it staggers on endlessly, never resolving its permanent political crisis but never quite exploding either.

For the past five years the crisis has revolved around Imran Khan, a former cricket star and socialite playboy 'at least 17 ex-girlfriends and five known or alleged children' who relaunched himself 25 years ago as a populist Islamic politician. He became prime minister with army backing in 2018 and was removed (again with army support) in 2022.

He is currently besieged by police and paramilitary forces in his house in Lahore but is protected by a cordon of his own supporters. 'The government is petrified of elections,' he said. 'They're scared that we're going to win. Therefore, they're trying everything to get me out of the way, including assassination.'

There was an attempt on Khan's life last year. The gunman only managed to shoot him in the leg, but he has every reason to fear being murdered: two Pakistani prime ministers have been shot to death, and one was hanged by the army after a military coup. Yet his own rhetoric constantly invokes violence.

Just before he lost a military-backed non-confidence vote in parliament a year ago, he told his opponents: 'I wish to warn you: If I am ousted from the government, I will be more dangerous for you.' He has kept his word, and he is mobilising his supporters with constant claims that the military have sold out to anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan forces.

He insists that he was 'ousted because of a conspiracy to install America's puppets,' and says that the government that replaced his, led by Shehbaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (N), was 'an attempt to impose the Indian-Israeli-American agenda on Pakistan and enslave Pakistan.'

What that alleged joint agenda might be is hard to imagine, since the disastrous end of the US occupation of Afghanistan has demoted Pakistan to the bottom of the list of US priorities and Israel is busy elsewhere. However, the accusation resonates in Pakistan's domestic politics, and the army is angry at being painted as a traitor to the country and to Islam.

It is not yet clear whether this will end with yet another military take-over in Pakistan. (It would be the fourth since independence in 1947.) That would be no great tragedy in itself: the country has spent half its history under military rule, and it was no more and no less dysfunctional in those periods than it has been the rest of the time.

However, the soldiers might find that foreign support for their rule is less available than it used to be. In particular a financial bail-out of the sort that was common in the past, and is urgently needed again, may not be forthcoming this time, because the old formula that Russia backs India and the US backs Pakistan no longer applies.

The Indians happily buy Russian oil and gas at a 40% discount, and New Delhi hedges its bets by staying neutral on the war in Ukraine. However, India now hobnobs with Australia, Japan and the United States in the 'Quad', a proto-military alliance aimed at containing Chinese power. In this new strategic context, who rules Pakistan is virtually irrelevant.

Absent any US pressure to bail Pakistan out, the International Monetary Fund is only interested in whether its loans will be repaid. From that perspective the current coalition, a military regime or a restored Imran Khan government are all equally unreliable borrowers, so the loan doesn't come through and Pakistan sinks deeper into poverty, debt and despair.

Of the three parts into which the Britain's former Indian empire was eventually divided, Pakistan is now indisputably the poorest.

Gross Domestic Product per capita is only \$1,500 in Pakistan, compared to \$2,250 for India and almost \$2,500 for Bangladesh. The gap will grow even wider, because Pakistan's population is growing twice as fast as the other two.

To some extent Pakistan's poor performance is due to its perpetual arms race with far bigger India because of the territorial dispute over Kashmir, but it cannot be denied that a large part of the fault lies with the country's corrupt and chaotic politics.

Two extremely wealthy political dynasties, the Bhuttos and the Sharifs, have dominated civilian governments for decades. Imran Khan is an interloper, but about as helpful in terms of reforming Pakistan's politics as Donald Trump has been to America's. And the army is always the tail that wags the dog.

But none of it matters much any more, except to the long-suffering Pakistanis themselves.

To shorten to 700 words, omit paragraphs 9 and 10. (?However...irrelevant?)

Gwynne Dyer's new book is 'The Shortest History of War'.