



## SEEKING CHANGE IN PAKISTAN : WELCOME MR QADRI

Dr Shalini Chawla

Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi

Pakistan will finally get rid of its rather embarrassing past record of democratically elected government not being able to complete its full term uninterrupted. This year, the Zardari government will complete its full tenure of five years, setting up the stage for the next elections, due in May 2013. President Zardari, took power in 2008 after amnesty for hundreds of corruption cases permitted Benazir and him to return from their long exile, back to Islamabad. Since then, Zardari government has shared the "usual" turbulent relationship with the military, and strong probability of the military coup was avoided atleast once in the last five years. Irrespective of the fact that Zardari and his Prime Ministers - Gilani and Raja Pervez Ashraf have remained irritant to the men in Khaki, the coalition regime has managed to complete five years, which is a break-through in the history of Pakistan, which has always been condemned for frequent military takeovers.

In December 2012, Mohammad-Tahir-ul-Qadri, a sufi cleric who returned from Canada after seven years, received wide media coverage and popular support for his 'democratic revolution'. He demanded immediate dissolution of the Zardari government and formulation of a caretaker government in order to annihilate corruption and incompetent officials responsible for retarded economic growth, energy shortages, raging Taliban insurgency and rapid escalation in crimes within Pakistan.

Qadri is a Pakistani Sufi Scholar and has been a popular preacher and speaker on moderate version of Sufi Islam. In 1981 he formed the Minhaj-ul-Quran, a hanafi Sufi Qadriya Islamic founstation, inspired by the Saint Tahir Allauddin. He was also former professor of international

constitutional law at the University of Punjab. In 1989 he formed a political party - Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT). He functioned as a Member of National Assembly under General Musharrf in 2002. He resigned from the National Assembly and subsequently moved to Canada citing threats to his life after his meeting with the controversial Danish cartoonist. The West took notice of Qadri in 2010 when he issued a 600 page *Fatwa on Terrorism* denouncing all forms of terrorism as *UnIslamic*. He asserted that there is no place for terrorism in Islam.

Qadri returned to Pakistan with an objective of launching a democratic revolution through electoral reforms and announced his million-men march from Lahore to Islambad. The protest received noticeable public support and on January 14<sup>th</sup> the rally did enter Islamabad bringing the city to a standstill. Qadri's supporters in the rally belonged to primaily middle and lower class and came from various parts of the country, including Lahore, Peshawar, FATA, Karachi, Hyderabad, Gujranwala, Mianwali, Dera Gazi Khan and Multan.

People in Pakistan are certainly miserable and their patience seems to be running out: "There is a jungle law in Pakistan. That is why we want to remove these incompetent people and replace them with capable talented and patriotic people who will work for the betterment of the nation."

– Said Sajida Sagheer, a college student from Lahore.<sup>1</sup>

"When atrocities become unbearable, allah wakes up sleeping people like us, by saying 'Look, today these people are in this place, tomorrow something could happen and you will be standing in this place.'" Shahnaz Ali, a housewife from Islamabad.<sup>2</sup>" We will support Tahirul Qadri. We will support him

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as much as we can. And even if we die doing that, we will have no regrets.”<sup>3</sup>

It was not difficult for Qadri to mobilize the masses against the cause of corruption and inefficiency of the governing authorities and demand rectifications, which could potentially lead to change. Qadri demanded that the caretaker

government should come into being in place of the current government and carry out elections reform in order to have a free and fair elections. Very importantly, he demanded that the composition of the caretaker government needs to be decided in consultation and inputs from the military and judiciary. Not only the army could play a role in formulation of the caretaker government and but also manage the upcoming elections in May. Qadri’s drive initially did receive support from a political party Mutahida Qaumi Movement (MQM), which later decided to withdraw itself from the protest.

Qadri’s talking about military’s role in the formulation of the caretaker government obviously raised numerous apprehensions and many suspect the entire ‘Qadri episode’ as a military sponsored act. The army and ISI are well known for their interventions in the elections in the past. Also, Qadri’s association with Musharraf, way back in 2000s is well known. Both Qadri and the military have denied these allegations and Qadri claimed to be working on behalf of his patriotism, in order to bring a positive change and better governance in Pakistan.

Qadri’s campaign did receive immense public support and media coverage which actually waggled the political mainstream. He did manage to mobilise thousands by his campaign and many in India and Pakistan drew similarities to Anna Hazare’s campaign in India.

Qadri was seen as a military man and Pakistani media and many others have questioned his sources for funding lavish media campaigns and fleet of buses to transport supporters from all across Pakistan. Qadri claims the funds are derived from the donations from the Pakistani citizens settled within Pakistan and abroad, who do support his fight against the corrupt regime. Tens of thousands of people came to join Qadri’s march and scuffles did occur

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between police and protesters. The police reportedly did fire tear gas shells at the crowd and in return the protesters reacted by throwing stones on the police. But overall the protest was relatively peaceful.

Qadri’s in his first address to thousands of people in Islamabad outside the parliament on the 15<sup>th</sup> January said:

“We are here in front of the parliament house just to save our country from collapse and from complete ruin.....We need substantial changes and reforms in our democratic political electoral system. We want to put democracy in its spirit in place”.<sup>4</sup>

Massive protests ended in Pakistan after four days giving some relief to the Pakistani leadership. On January 17<sup>th</sup>, after hours of discussion between Qadri and delegation of Cabinet Ministers and government members, an agreement was negotiated bringing the protest to an end. According to the terms of the agreement, the government will dissolve parliament ahead of a scheduled date of 16<sup>th</sup> March in order to facilitate the due elections in May to be conducted within 90 days. Qadri’s demand that army should be consulted in the formulation of the interim government was not accepted. The government agreed that all the parties would have a say in the formation of the interim government which will precede the elections.<sup>5</sup>

The agreement however provided that Mr Qadri’s Awami Tehreek Party would have limited say in the choice of the caretaker government. Also, the law Minister would consult Qadri for composition of the election commission which would oversee the electoral process.<sup>6</sup>

**Can this protest bring change in Pakistan ?**

Qadri’s protest did come under widespread criticism and there have been different interpretations of the whole event. Critics accuse him of being an army’s man as he was Musharraf’s loyalist and demanded army’s intervention in the formulation of the caretaker government.

Raza Rumi, director of the Jinnah Institute, an Islamabad-based think tank said :

“ There is a lot of discontent in the country, so Qadri sort of exploited that sentiment with this march.....But the problem is that his demands are

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those which have always been articulated by the military in the past. So basically, this is why there has been so much speculation in the media and elsewhere that Mr Qadri might be acting on behalf of the military or might be wittingly or unwittingly contributing to their agenda.”<sup>7</sup>

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Qadri has denied these allegations and claims to work towards bringing in the democratic revolution in Pakistan supporting a fair electoral process. Looking into Qadri's record, his association with the military in the past, and his sudden return to Pakistan after spending seven years in Canada and availing Canadian citizenship, these doubts are not baseless and might not be totally incorrect.

The agreement Qadri managed to negotiate was viewed as a face saver and experts see this as a way of allowing Mr Qadri a peaceful exit from Islamabad. According to Salman Akram, a leading constitutional lawyer:

“It is a capitulation in a sense that it is an unconstitutional document....But in practice, it will have no effect. It is just a face saver that allows Tahir-ul-Qadri to leave Islamabad”.<sup>8</sup>

The critical question here is not whether he is a military man or how much actually he managed to gain from his protest, but how does one view this whole process. This can be seen as a welcome beginning in Pakistan, which, after a long pause has provided expression to the masses. His rally faced clashes with the security forces and the protesters continued their support despite cold and heavy rains. Although, Qadri did not succeed in his headline aims like immediate dissolution of Zardari government, the whole process can be seen as a fair beginning in the middle of looming political, economic and security uncertainties

within Pakistan. This could lead to a potential chain reaction of educated elites commanding public support, taking bold initiatives for bringing change in Pakistan.

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government was immensely worried about Taliban optimizing the opportunity to conduct another terrorist attack. The mass mobilisation does project Pakistan's strength (which could be utilised) where political leadership was compelled to sit on the negotiating table and agree to certain demands. After all people's calling led to change of regime in Cairo and that's the strength of democracy. The key challenge for Pakistanis would be to continue these initiatives which could potentially lead to positive change.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Pakistan: Thousands protest along sufi cleric Qadri in long march, demand change”, *CNN-IBN*, January 15, 2013. <http://content.ibnlive.in.com/article/15-Jan-2013pakistan/pakistan-thousands-protest-along-sufi-cleric-qadri-315793-56.html>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “‘Revolution’ urged at Pakistan protest”, *ALJAZEERA*, January 15, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2013/01/201311543617347112.html>

<sup>5</sup> Pakistan deal reached to end cleric Qadri's protest”, January 17, 2013, BBC NEWS ASIA.

<sup>6</sup>Declan Walsh and Salman Masood, “Pakistani Preacher Ends Protest in Government Deal”, *The New York Times*, January, 17, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/18/world/asia/>

<sup>7</sup>“Who stands to Benefit from Qadri's March?” Charles Recknagel and Daud Khattak, *RadioFree Europe RadioLiberty*, January 15, 2013, <http://www.rfel.org/articleprintview/24824795.html>

<sup>8</sup> Declan Walsh, n 6.



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Centre for Air Power Studies

P-284, Arjan Path, Subroto Park, New Delhi 110010

Tel: +91 11 25699130/32, Fax: +91 11 25682533

Editor: Dr Shalini Chawla e-mail: shaluchawla@yahoo.com

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