

The Army Steps In

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Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and army chief General Raheel Sharif, Islamabad, Pakistan, August 14, 2015
The suicide bomber who killed seventy-two people on Easter Sunday in a park in Lahore, Pakistan has drawn condemnation from around the world. Among the killed were twenty-nine children, and another 370 people were wounded, many of them members of the country's Christian minority. Far less noted, however, has been the attack's equally devastating effect on relations between Pakistan's army and civilian government, which threatens to bring further instability to the country's Punjab heartland.

At the heart of the crisis are two men, General Raheel Sharif, commander in chief of the Pakistan army, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, head of the civilian government. For the past eighteen months, the two Sharifs (no relation) have maintained a tenuous political compact: the army—in some consultation with the prime minister—had overall control of Pakistan's foreign and nuclear policy, as well as its counterterrorism strategy in Karachi, in the south, and along the border with Afghanistan, in the north. In turn, the civilian government could run the economy, and, most significantly, keep control of the prime minister's home province of Punjab—the most populous region of the country, which includes the city of Lahore. Counterterrorism actions in Punjab were entrusted to the Punjab police rather than the army. This compact ended hours after the bomb blast on the night of March 27. Almost immediately, the army declared it had taken control of security in the province, dealing a perhaps fatal blow to the already dwindling political prestige of Prime Minister Sharif. The army told the [media to emphasize](#) that the orders for the Punjab operation were given directly by General Sharif and not the prime minister.

In fact, the army has no political, constitutional, or legal cover for going into Punjab. That would require the government to invite the army in. But over the past few days, as hundreds of arrests have taken place in Punjab, General Sharif and Nawaz Sharif have not met or apparently conferred with one another, adding to the uncertainty. Ashen-faced government ministers, brought on TV after the bombings, and even the prime minister himself, in his own speech, did not mention that the army had begun an operation in Punjab. For a country at war with extremists it was clear that there was no coordination or even a common strategy.

The result is an acute collapse of relations between the prime minister and the army chief, a dramatic breakdown of what Pakistanis call civil-military relations. In the past, such situations have led to the military imposing martial law on four occasions since 1958. How the current crisis plays out will be critical to the future of counterterrorism policy—and democracy itself—in south and central Asia.

Until this week's bombing, Prime Minister Sharif had successfully rebuffed attempts by General Sharif to take over security in Punjab, including a direct request to do so in May 2015. But now, the stakes for Punjab have become much higher—for both Sharifs. The army has moved decisively over the past eighteen months to crush the Pakistani Taliban and the multiple Taliban factions that operated in Karachi, in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and in the tribal belt adjacent to Afghanistan. Yet it is Punjab, where there are an estimated sixty Islamic extremist groups and over 20,000 madrassas or religious schools—some of which produce militants and spew extremist ideologies—that has become the central hub of terrorism in Pakistan.

Since the 1980s, many of Pakistan's extremist groups have been sponsored and trained by the army's intelligence services to fight for control of Indian Kashmir or, on occasion, to attack other Indian targets. Such support from the military has now mostly ended. But the real test of General Sharif's determination to root out terrorism from Pakistan has always been in Punjab. Is the army now willing to turn on its former extremist allies and crush them, in what is now a very complex situation?

Several of the most deadly groups in Punjab are now trying to overthrow the state, among them Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, the group behind the Lahore park bombing. Jamaat-ul-Ahrar is openly sectarian and has targeted the army and Christians in particular. But Punjab also hosts dozens of anti-India extremist groups that have been supported by the army in the past. These include the well-trained and heavily-armed Lashkar-e-Tayabba (LT), which was responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks and which is listed by the UN and the US as a terrorist group.

Since the September 11 attacks fifteen years ago, LT has been helped by state institutions and the army to evolve into an Islamic charity, although it has been able to sustain its militant wing, even since it carried out the Mumbai attacks. While the army has stopped LT and other groups from launching attacks into India, many LT fighters are now openly fighting in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban or helping extremist groups from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan regain footholds in their homelands.

In light of this activity, the army knows it cannot bring peace to the country or secure its borders and control the cold peace with India until it ends Punjab-based terrorism. It has also come under enormous international pressure for allowing such militancy to flourish; many are especially concerned about the security of Pakistan's growing nuclear weapons program.

Now that the army has unilaterally taken control of security in Punjab, the crucial question is whether it will be selective in the terrorist groups it decides to go after, or whether it will observe a genuine "no favorites" policy, as General Sharif has long promised. Adding to the challenge, the army itself recruits much of its half-million-strong manpower from Punjab. The generals are getting wary that if Islamic extremists continue to fester in Punjab, their soldiers will also get infected with the bug.

For Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Punjab is equally critical. Since the 1980s, when Sharif and his brother Shahbaz were first hoisted into power by a military regime, and later, when Nawaz Sharif won three general elections, the Sharif brothers have had a political lock on Punjab, where there is also widespread political corruption; Shahbaz Sharif is now the chief minister of the province.

But since becoming prime minister for the third time, Nawaz Sharif has frittered away his opportunities. He has proved to be a hopelessly incompetent leader, neither strong enough to initiate badly needed reforms nor sophisticated enough to deal with the country's well-oiled military machine. Much of day-to-day governance is run by his close family rather than by the cabinet, parliament, or other institutions. He has been soft on extremist groups—some of which have close

ties to his party, the Pakistan Muslim League—apparently to persuade them not to attack in Punjab. That policy has clearly now failed. Meanwhile the country's other three provinces, which are controlled by opposition parties, are losing patience with the government's overwhelming attention to Punjab.

In recent days, tensions between the army and the government have escalated on other fronts, including Pakistan's recent diplomacy with Iran. Amid the Lahore bombing crisis, the army disclosed that it had caught an Indian spy working to destabilize the province of Balochistan. The spy, Kulbhoshan Yadav, was said to be a retired Indian naval officer, and had lived many years in Iran from where he travelled to Pakistan.

The timing could not have been worse. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani had just been on his first state visit to Pakistan and Nawaz Sharif was negotiating for Iranian oil, gas, and electricity contracts. Asserting his prerogative over foreign policy, General Sharif said that in his meetings with the Iranians he had criticized them for allegedly hosting Indian spies. Meanwhile he announced the capture of the spy. The Iranians left angry (though Rouhani denied the discussions), while the Pakistani prime minister was again shown to be largely powerless.

There is enormous uncertainty as to how this will end. "The Lahore park bombing ought to have been a moment of clarity," the leading Pakistani daily *Dawn* wrote, in an editorial on March 30. "Yet, in the very moment that the country needed its leaders to demonstrate resolve and unity, an utterly befuddling signal has been sent. Instead of jointly trying to address the challenge... the army and political leaderships appear to have withdrawn into their respective camps." Maybe this time around the army will be satisfied with all the powers it has already accrued and will not feel the need for a full-scale military coup. This could mean that the army will do a short, swift crackdown and then withdraw its forces from the province. Whatever happens, the country's political leadership has been hobbled and the future of democracy in one of south Asia's most populous states is in serious doubt.

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