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The Protests, the Military, and What Comes Next

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Pakistan has once again plunged itself into domestic chaos. Since early this summer, two popular personalities -- Imran Khan, the former cricketer and Lothario turned conservative politician, and Tahir ul-Qadri, a Canadian-Pakistani activist Sufi cleric -- have whipped their bases into a frenzy. Their followers, armed with clubs and other weapons, have occupied a section of the capital and seized government buildings. Khan and Qadri claim that the movements are peaceful sit-ins; they are anything but. And they are after nothing less than the resignation of the prime minister, Nawaz Sharif.

These events no doubt dismay analysts who happily proclaimed the return of democracy in Pakistan and the death knell of military interference when, in May 2013 Sharif's party secured a surprising majority of seats in the parliament in the general elections and peacefully took office. Pakistan, it seemed, was on the path to normalcy. So what went wrong? As usual, the answer has something to do with the military.

## CIVILIANS IN COMMAND?

Since 2008, when the last military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, left office, the army has understood that an outright coup would be neither feasible nor beneficial. For one thing, Pakistanis are still broadly opposed to military rule. For another, the army has its hands full managing a stable of Islamist militants, some of whom are its loyal proxies and some of whom have turned their guns and suicide bombs against their erstwhile patrons.

However, the army has not taken recent developments lightly. First, Pakistanis were starting to develop a taste for democratic transfers of power. Although the general election that brought Sharif to office was not pristine [2], it was the first time that a democratically elected administration had completed its term (although not without considerable turbulence) and handed power over to another democratically elected administration. Throughout the 1990s, the military had always cut elected officials' tenures short. Analysts were hopeful that, as democracy became more routine, the military would have an increasingly difficult time proroguing the government and staging outright

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