



ISI: The War Within

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During the last week of July, the civilian government in Pakistan issued a notification transferring the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate from the Prime Minister's Office to the Interior Ministry. Within hours, however, the order was withdrawn. Why did the civilian government attempt to bring the ISI under the Interior Ministry and why did it back off? Is there support for this move inside Pakistan? Who supports the civilian control of the ISI and who opposes it? What are the implications of the government reversing its order?

A Brief History

The history of the ISI in Pakistan can be traced in five phases: from its creation in 1948 to 1958; in the Ayub-Yahya era; during the *jihad* against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan; in the 1990s; and, in the aftermath of 9/11. The ISI was created with the primary objective to collect external and related domestic intelligence for Pakistan, besides coordinating with the other three Services. The Intelligence Bureau (IB) was to take care of domestic intelligence.

The personnel of the ISI are primarily drawn from all the three Services and even the paramilitary forces; civilian personnel provide secretarial assistance. The military component of the ISI is not permanent, though it is also not entirely rotational either. Some officials stay for a longer duration to

provide continuity, while others, including the director general, serve for a specific tenure.

Two factors have contributed to making the ISI more answerable to the military rather than the civilian leadership of the country. Since the late 1950s, the functions of the ISI blurred. Security of Ayub Khan and his regime became priorities, resulting in the ISI's attention being diverted from its primary objective of collecting external intelligence. The political upheaval in East Pakistan during the late 1960s, along with the policies and strategies adopted by Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan, made the ISI the most powerful intelligence agency within Pakistan. The IB was relegated to the background.

The second coup in Pakistan by Zia in the 1970s, followed by the entry of Soviet troops into Afghanistan, made the ISI a powerful force in the region. After the coup, Zia extensively used the ISI inside Pakistan. The American endeavours to force the Russians back from Afghanistan led to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) using the ISI extensively in the 1980s. American funding and supply of arms to the Afghan Mujahideen were made through the ISI. The CIA not only closed its eyes to pilferage, but also allowed the ISI to use drug money and *jihad* as instruments of war against the Soviet troops. Thus, the ISI gained a measure of financial independence with its clandestine drug and arms resources. It was during this period that a section within the ISI started culti-

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vating individuals and groups, ranging from militants to war and drug lords, for their clandestine activities.

More importantly, the above economic, political and international support nudged the ISI to turn its attention towards India in the 1980s. The existing political deterioration in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) in the mid and late 1980s provided it the necessary ingredients in terms of rationale and manpower.

Unfortunately, after the Soviet withdrawal, the US also withdrew from the region. Therefore, the ISI gained a free hand in the early 1990s, more by default than by design, to manipulate events and the course of history in Afghanistan and J&K. The trend continued in the mid-1990s when the ISI propped up the Taliban in Afghanistan and expanded its clandestine activities towards the whole of India. Unfortunately, democratically elected political establishments in Pakistan in the 1990s were weak and instable. Worse, the ISI was extensively used by the military to manipulate political events – assembling coalitions and parties, and splitting them when necessary.

9/11 and the “War on Terrorism” in Afghanistan brought the Americans and the international community back to working with the ISI. The war in Afghanistan and the ongoing militancy in the Federally Administered Tribal Agencies (FATA) in Pakistan made the international community question the continuing links between the ISI and the Islamic militants and its role in aiding the Al Qaeda and Taliban. While India has been complaining of this for the last two decades, the US in the last few years has taken these links seriously and has been pressurising the Pakistani government to rein in the ISI. Ever

since Gilani became prime minister, pressure has mounted on him to check ISI activities. It is no coincidence that the notification was issued just before Gilani undertook his first ever visit to Washington as the prime minister of Pakistan.

The July 2008 Notification

On 26 July 2008, the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) led government surprised everyone by bringing the ISI under civilian control, through a memorandum. The memorandum placed the administrative, operational and financial control of both the ISI and the IB under the Interior Ministry. The stated objective of this change was to improve coordination among various intelligence organisations and the need to work with the civilian authorities; to avoid the army acquiring a bad name (by associating with the ISI). However, in reality, the notification was born out of fear, pressure and an anxiety to control the ISI.

The PPP has always been uncomfortable with the ISI. Its role in assembling an anti-PPP coalition – the Islamic Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI) – in the 1980s to prevent Benazir from assuming power after the death of Zia is well known. Ever since, the ISI has worked against the interests of the PPP. It played an important role in her removal from the post of prime minister – both in 1990 and in 1996. In turn, the PPP also attempted to curb the role and influence of the ISI. During her first tenure as prime minister, Benazir Bhutto attempted to bring the ISI under control.

From Benazir’s forced exile to Zardari’s arrest and the attempts to split the party, the PPP considers the ISI as the main force behind all anti-PPP activities. Immediately after the failure of the first attempted assassination on her in October 2007, Benazir Bhutto hinted at the role of the ISI or sections within it. The PPP’s fear of the ISI is shared by most of the moderate secular political parties at the national and regional levels. In fact, most of the political parties, from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) to the Awami National Party (ANP) welcomed the notification.

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Secondly, there has been enormous pressure from the US to rein in the ISI and end the ISI-Taliban nexus that is responsible for the spurt in militancy in southern Afghanistan in the recent years. Though the CIA concedes that the ISI has helped in targeting and arresting a few Al Qaeda leaders hiding in Pakistan, it also believes that there is a section of the ISI that provides safe havens to, and even shares vital intelligence information with, the Taliban-Al Qaeda elements. Stephen Kappes, deputy director of the CIA, made a secret visit in July to confront the Pakistani leadership with the evidence of ISI-Taliban linkages, especially with that of Jalaluddin Haqqani. Reports in the American media have also quoted intelligence agencies possessing evidence that the ISI-Haqqani nexus was responsible for carrying out the suicide attack on the Indian embassy in Kabul in July 2008. India and Afghanistan too have accused the ISI-Taliban nexus, but it was the American pressure that acted as a catalyst to curb pro-Taliban ISI activities. The prime minister was well aware that he had to do something on this issue before he landed in Washington DC. Since the PPP and the other moderate secular political parties share a genuine fear of the ISI, it is possible that Gilani and Zardari used the American pressure to justify their actions in bringing the ISI under civilian control.

The Reversal

Why then was the announcement withdrawn in less than 24 hours? The government issued a new notification holding in abeyance the previous one. It also stated that the previous one had been misunderstood and that it only demanded better coordination between the Interior Ministry and the intelligence agencies. Why this volte-face?

Though the prime minister had a meeting with Gen Kayani, the Chief of Army Staff, only a day before his decision to bring the ISI under civilian control, it is unlikely that the civilian leadership had an understanding with the military leadership. Maj Gen Athar Abbas, director general of the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR), stated that though there was a debate on coordination between all intelligence agencies, bringing the ISI under the control of Interior Ministry was not discussed.

Obviously, the military and the ISI were not

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happy with the decision, asking the PM to reverse it. The military will have serious issues regarding any control on the ISI by the civilian government and its implications on the power relations among the troika. Even if the security forces agree to civilian control over the intelligence forces, they will certainly not agree to it at this juncture.

Conclusion

What are the conclusions one could draw from the failed attempt to bring the ISI under civilian control?

Firstly, the real question should not be whether the ISI is under the Prime Minister's Secretariat or under the Interior Division. Rather, the question should be what ought to be its objectives and functions? Should it, like other intelligence agencies like the CIA and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), focus exclusively on external intelligence gathering? The strategic elite in Pakistan, including the military and the political establishments, as also the strategic community, should reach an understanding on the objectives of the ISI. Unfortunately, the July 2008 attempt to redefine the functions of the ISI did not arise from such an understanding.

Secondly, the military establishment has always viewed any such attempts by the civilian leadership with suspicion and contempt. Attempts by both Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto to put the ISI under civilian control never went down well within the military establishment. A consensual approach, therefore, is essential.

Thirdly, there have been articles and reports underlining the professionalism of the present Chief of Army Staff based on his decision to keep the military away from political developments during and after the elections. Will he also bring professionalism inside the ISI? No one would understand the objectives, func-

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tions and operations of the ISI better than Gen Kayani himself. He has served as the deputy military secretary to Benazir Bhutto, when she became the prime minister for the first time and was a witness to her attempt to bring the ISI under the civilian control. He was the Director General of Military Operations (DGMO) during 2001-03 and participated in the 2001-02 military stand-off between India and Pakistan. He was appointed director general of the ISI in October 2004, a position that he held till 2007, when the “War on Terrorism,” violence in FATA and the AQ Khan controversy were at their peak. Given the immediate reaction to the 28 July notification, one could only conclude that the military leadership prefers the status quo on ISI functioning.

Fourthly, the political establishment is not yet ready to redefine the functions and operations of the ISI. The fact that the prime minister could not even make his announcement hold for a day on this issue reveals who holds real power in civil-military-intelligence relations. Despite popular expectation and pressure from the US, India and Afghanistan on ISI activities, the political establishment in Pakistan is not in a position to assert itself vis-à-vis the military and intelligence forces.

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Whatever be the reasons, the timing of the prime minister’s move to control the ISI was bad. The notification should certainly not have been issued just before the PM’s trip to the US. This only served to strengthen the position of the hawks that the government was becoming a puppet in American hands. It should not also have preceded the major decision of the PML-N and PPP to impeach President Musharraf. But, if the timing of the announcement was bad, its withdrawal within a day was even worse. None of this bodes well for the internal power dynamics within Pakistan and its impact on the region and beyond.



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Views expressed in this issue brief are those of the author and do not represent the views of the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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