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The forthcoming Pakistani elections to the National Assembly on May 11,2013, should be of close interest to India. Will the elections pave the way for another five years of civilian rule uninterrupted by Army intervention or will there be new instability prompting the Army to intervene? It is too early to answer this question, but certain issues need to be underlined.

2.Despite the usual ups and downs in Indo-Pakistan relations which come in the way of normalisation of bilateral ties, one has to acknowledge that the five years of rule by the coalition headed by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) saw a new mindset in Islamabad marked by a loosening of the historic obsession with the Kashmir issue. It is no longer Kashmir or nothing. The PPP-led Government showed a willingness to give a try to past suggestions from India and others, including the US and China, not to oppose progress in other issues such as bilateral trade by continuing to make the bilateral relations a hostage to the Kashmir issue.

3. While the Pakistan Army under Gen.Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, the Chief of the Army Staff, continued to regard India as the main threat to Pakistan and did not relent in its attempts to undermine any Indian role in Afghanistan, it did not come in the way of the attempts of the civilian Government to improve bilateral relations in other fields.

4. Indian attempts to encourage the signs of a new mindset in the Pakistani leadership were thwarted by the 26/11 terrorist strikes in Mumbai by the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) and the lack of sincerity and seriousness in the Pakistani leadership in acting against Hafiz Mohd Sayeed, the Amir of the LET, and other Pakistan-based masterminds of the 26/11 strikes in Mumbai. The recent violation of the Line of Control (LOC) in Jammu and Kashmir by the Pakistan Army and its brutal beheading of an Indian soldier added to suspicions that the Pakistani military leadership continued to give primacy to its traditional policy of keeping India bleeding in J&K.

5. Despite these negative factors, two seemingly positive factors need to be noted. The first is the absence of any major act of terrorism by ISI-sponsored jihadi organisations in Indian territory outside J&K after 26/11. The second is the similar absence of ISI-sponsored attacks on Indian targets in Afghanistan.

6. One would have thought that the ISI-sponsored organisations, particularly the LET, would have exploited the unhappiness among sections of the Muslim community over the execution of Afzal Guru, one of the perpetrators of the attack on the Indian Parliament in December, 2001, to revive mass fatality terrorist attacks in the Indian territory outside J&K. This has not happened. There is so far no credible evidence of any Pakistani hand in the recent terrorist incident in Hyderabad.

7. One has to be alert to the possibility of a reprisal attack by the LET and the Karachi-based Dawood Ibrahim group to avenge the recent confirmation by the Supreme Court of the sentences passed against the perpetrators of the March 1993 serial blasts in Mumbai, which marked the beginning of the ISI attempts to spread jihadi attacks to Indian territory outside J&K. There would be need for special security caution in Mumbai and Gujarat. There could be attempts by jihadi elements – indigenous or LET-orchestrated--- to discredit Narendra Modi as he emerges as the possible next Prime Minister by disturbing internal security in Gujarat.

8. While the strength and capability of the LET and other ISI-sponsored jihadi organisations for carrying out acts of mass fatality terrorism in hinterland India continue to improve, their lying low since 26/11 is an indicator of the Pakistan Army's keenness not to be seen by the international community as coming in the way of the civilian leadership's attempt to avoid new frictions in the relations with India.

9. The poll campaign in Pakistan is yet to pick up steam, but one could see that while the fundamentalist and jihadi organisations continue to be venomous in their attitude to India and in their determination to make India bleed whenever and wherever they can, the political mainstream is slowly coming round to the view that perennial hostility to India may prove counter-productive.

10. As one waits for a clearer indicator of the likely outcome of the polls, one has to be worried over the possibility of rogue elephant terrorist organisations such as the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Sunni extremist Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LEJ) causing major disruptions in the elections, particularly in the Pashtoon areas and in Karachi. If they can disrupt the elections in Karachi and aggravate the instability there, the political consequences could be unpredictable.

11. Keeping aside the security scenario, one notices from the reports coming out of Pakistan that there is so much disenchantment with the five-year rule of the PPP-led coalition that the chances of the Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League (PML) coming to power have improved despite some support for Imran Khan in Punjab and the Khyber-Pakhtoonkwa (KP) province.

12. In Pakistan, the mainstream media is generally better disposed towards Nawaz Sharif than to Asif Ali Zardari. Despite their optimistic projections of the chances of Nawaz, one should not rule out a repeat of the 2008 elections--- with the PPP doing well in Sindh Rural and the Seraiki areas of Southern Punjab, its ally Awami National Party (ANP) doing well in KP and the Pashtoon pockets of Karachi, the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) of Altaf Hussain retaining its traditional Karachi strongholds and Nawz's PML doing well in Central Punjab despite the challenge from Imran Khan. If Imran Khan does well it will be more at the expense of the PML and the ANP than of the PPP.

13. Whether 2008 is repeated or whether a new combination of political forces emerges on top, it will be in India's interest to welcome the continuance of civilian rule and remain engaged with the new civilian leadership in an attempt to give a benign direction to Indo-Pakistan relations.

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