

Memogate Reveals Pakistan's Hand

Written by Mickey Kupecz

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MICKEY KUPECZ, NOV 30 2011

In a recent lecture at the National Defense University, Lt. Gen. (Ret.) David Barno related a telling anecdote from a conversation with Owais Ahmed Ghani, governor of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province. Ghani raised his hand, and explained that while the two men were looking at the same hand, one was looking at the palm and the other the back. Similarly, the U.S. and Pakistan view their relationship from different perspectives.

The unfortunate resignation of Hussain Haqqani, Pakistani Ambassador to the United States, on Nov. 22 illustrates this point. A former professor at Boston University, Haqqani was instrumental in managing a relationship that has become increasingly tenuous. He was also a prominent proponent for civilian governance in a country that has often lacked it, going as far as to publish a highly critical account of the military establishment, "Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military."

The military's distrust of Haqqani eventually became his undoing. His resignation was prompted by what came to be known as the "memogate" scandal. Allegedly, Haqqani sought to broker a deal back in May between the U.S. and Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari to prevent a military coup. Feeling politically weakened in the wake of the Osama bin Laden raid, Zardari supposedly sought to pass a memo through Haqqani to Admiral Mike Mullen, at the time the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In the memo, Zardari sought protection from the army in return for increased counterterrorism cooperation.

The story erupted on Oct. 10, when Mansoor Ijaz, a Pakistani-American businessman, wrote in the Financial Times that he had secretly passed a memo from an unnamed diplomat, presumably Haqqani, to Mullen. While the full consequences of memogate are yet to be seen, the scandal does reveal a serious disconnect between Washington and one of its major allies in the struggle against terrorism.

On the one hand, memogate instantly consumed public attention in Pakistan after Ijaz made his claims public in early October. In a country with a notorious appetite for scandal and conspiracy, Ijaz's claims boiled into a huge controversy in Islamabad. Further fueling the fire was the accuser himself. Ijaz has a biography that is checkered by political controversy and sensationalistic claims. CNN national security analyst Peter Bergen recently detailed the dubious nature of Ijaz's past assertions, calling into question the veracity of the memo scandal. Among other allegations, he has been accused of attempting to sell votes in the U.S. Congress to the Pakistani government. He also ignited a firestorm by claiming that he could have delivered Osama bin Laden through the Sudanese government were it not for rebuffs by the Clinton administration. Other reports cite his family ties to Pakistani intelligence.

Clearly not one to shy away from controversy, Ijaz released a statement defending his claims, bewilderingly concluding his self-defense with a quote from a fictional investment tycoon. He stated, "As a 27-year veteran of Wall Street, I can do no better than to quote the big-screen character of Gordon Gekko. He said, 'If you stop telling lies about me, I might just stop telling the truth about you.'" Writing style aside, Ijaz certainly does not appear to be someone a respected ambassador would trust with delivering a highly sensitive message.

On the other hand, American media attention developed much more slowly as memogate went largely unnoticed for nearly a month. With the exception of Foreign Policy's *The Cable* blog, the incident went unmentioned until Haqqani

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was suddenly recalled back to Islamabad on Nov. 17. Instead, he spent late October and early November deflecting accusations about Pakistan's duplicity, an activity that had become something of a daily routine for the Ambassador.

Immediately following the announcement that Haqqani had been recalled to Pakistan, the American press still remained more interested in Pakistan's hesitance to fight terrorists than the implications of memogate. The Christian Science Monitor hosted a breakfast with Ambassador Haqqani on Nov. 16, the day after the news of his recall broke. Following the event, CSM ran a piece titled "Why Pakistan can't clear its terrorist safe havens? Envoy explains." The disconnect in media coverage speaks volumes about which side of the hand each country views as important.

Meanwhile in Pakistan, memogate was first and foremost the latest chapter in the ongoing struggle between civilians and the military for control of the country. Given the attention paid to the scandal, designating a replacement to Haqqani was seen as a test of strength between the government and the army. On Nov. 23, Sherry Rehman was tapped for the position. Her selection came as a surprise to many. While she is a career member of the ruling PPP, Rehman has had several run-ins with the party. Most notably, she resigned her post as Minister for Information in 2009 over a disagreement with President Zardari regarding the government's closure of TV stations broadcasting coverage of the campaign to restore the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

Rehman's principled resignation is indicative of her strong liberal credentials. A former confidant of Benazir Bhutto, she is perhaps best known for supporting amendments to Pakistan's draconian Blasphemy Law. Salman Taseer, the former governor of Punjab Province, was assassinated for taking a similar stance. Rehman also founded the Jinnah Institute, a think tank focusing on human rights, media freedoms, religious tolerance, and women's issues. In 2009, the International Republican Institute awarded her the title of "democracy's hero."

While Rehman's appointment looks to be a victory for democracy, South Asia specialist Dr. Christine Fair of Georgetown University is more skeptical. When asked about the appointment, Fair responded that while Rehman may have sound credentials, she was appointed with the consent of the Army General Headquarters. The evidence seems to support this view. A recent report titled "Pakistan, the United States and the End Game in Afghanistan: Perceptions of Pakistan's Foreign Policy Elite" was recently released by the U.S. Institute of Peace in conjunction with Rehman's Jinnah Institute. The report's main findings echo the Pakistani security establishment's emphasis on stability and limited Indian involvement in Afghanistan, making her a tolerable consensus candidate in the eyes of the army.

Beyond the civil-military issue, even Pakistanis are not in agreement over what memogate reveals about the palm of their own hand. This is largely reflective of the historical ineptitude of civilian governance in Pakistan. Retired Pakistani Ambassador Touqir Hussain remarked that the controversy has been seized opportunistically. "If they are anti-Zardari but still for democracy they are highlighting not the civil-military dimension of the issue but the treachery of the government to barter away the sovereignty of the country to a foreign power," he explained. "And of course politicians are approaching it in the manner it advances their scramble for power." (conversation with author)

Indeed, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, a leader in the newly formed Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party and formerly the foreign minister under the PPP, praised Haqqani's resignation as being in the best interests of the country. He also used the opportunity to note, "It's about time to get rid of this ineligible and failed government." It is telling that such bickering continues in times of such crisis. For many Pakistanis, this petty politicking makes the generals appear the lesser of two evils.

Memogate and its aftermath provide revealing insights into U.S.-Pakistan relations as well as the state of domestic affairs in Pakistan. American policymakers and pundits have become so vehement about Pakistan's failure to cooperate on counterterrorism that other, more pressing problems in the country have often been overlooked. On the civil-military issue, memogate could have turned out far worse. While the military may have had veto power over the new ambassador's appointment, Rehman is unlikely to be a reed in the wind, bending easily to the military. Regardless, the episode shows that Pakistan's politics appears to be as dysfunctional as ever.

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