
ISI in Pakistan's Domestic Politics: An Assessment

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Abstract

The article showcases a larger-than-life image of Pakistan's Intelligence agencies highlighting their role in the domestic politics of Pakistan, by understanding the Inter-Service Agencies (ISI), objectives and machinations as well as their domestic political role play. This is primarily carried out by subverting the political system through various means, with the larger aim of ensuring an unchallenged Army rule. In the present times, meddling, muddling and messing in, the domestic affairs of the Pakistani Government falls in their charter of duties, under the rubric of maintenance of national security. Its extra constitutional and extraordinary powers have undoubtedly made it the potent symbol of the 'Deep State'.

Introduction

The incessant role of the Pakistan's intelligence agencies, especially the Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI), in domestic politics is a well-known fact and it continues to increase day by day with regime after regime. An in-depth understanding of the subject entails studying the objectives and machinations, and their role play in the domestic politics.

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ISI is the main branch of the Intelligence agencies, charged with coordinating intelligence among the three military services. Headquartered in Khayaban-e-Suhrawardy Street in Islamabad, the entrance according to the journalist, Declan Walsh, “is suitably discreet: no sign, just plainclothes officer packing a pistol who direct visitors through a chicane of barriers, soldiers and sniffer dogs,” with a sliding giant electric gate, revealing a sleek grey building, with one difference that nothing is signposted.¹

Powerful and notorious in equal measure is this premier spy agency, which for decades has operated behind a dense veil of secrecy, impervious to allegations of election rigging, terrorist training, abductions and assassinations, which many Pakistanis themselves call—“State within a State.”² Over the years many analysts have dubbed the ISI as the “invisible government”—the potent symbol of the Deep State.

Objectives and Machinations of the ISI

The main objectives and responsibilities include coordinating with the intelligence networks of the Army, Navy and Air-force; a collection of foreign and domestic intelligence; conducting covert offensive operations like in Kashmir and the Afghan conflict, surveillance of foreigners, domestic media—both print and online, foreign diplomats and also Pakistani diplomats serving outside the country. All these fall under the charter of duties of the ISI.

Though ISI was created in 1948 primarily to oversee exogenous/external activities in the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and the Northern areas, but the endogenous/domestic role was not clearly laid out. The fact of the matter is that it has been playing a central role in the internal political activities for a long time. Genesis of its political role were a direct result of the coup led by General Ayub Khan in 1958. In the present times, meddling and muddling in the domestic affairs of the government fall very much in their charter of duties, under the rubric of maintenance of national security.

According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Report 2009, intelligence agencies in Pakistan are still trying to maintain their objectives regarding social control; protect the regime against all sources of disturbance, and promoting acceptance of regime policies by the population.³ Iftikhar Malik, writing about the working of the intelligence agencies states that, “operations against dissenting politicians, objective intellectuals and other activists were carried out through systematic harassment, disinformation campaigns, fictitious trials, kidnappings, torture, and assassination.”⁴ In the words of Mazhar Ali Khan, the late Editor of the Pakistani newspaper *Dawn*:

“The ISI is seen by many people to be an unwanted legacy of the military rule. While Under martial law regimes, the agency’s expanding constitutional role was at least understandable, because with the constitution suspended, the will of the military dictators took precedence over every rule, law and tradition, but after the end of military rule and restoration of the Constitution, for ISI’s functioning to go beyond its parameters was violative of the Constitution. It also defied the regulations that govern the network of agencies and the institutions that serve the armed forces”.⁵

ISI has acquired a larger-than-life image among all the institutions in Pakistan, with over 25,000 permanent employees and reportedly 30,000 on its rolls as informants and other related roles; the ISI is a well-organized and well-oiled outfit.⁶ According to Frederic Grare Pakistan’s intelligence agencies’ political role is a combination of militarisation, political surveillance, and state terror, though the intensity and relative importance of each component varies over time and according to a specific situation, all three are always present at all times.⁷ It has subverted the political system to its advantage, by making the civilian governments victim of their manipulations, by using various means like: funding the

political parties; providing support to the religious parties; setting up alliances or breaking alliances of the political parties to suit its interests; influencing the social media; manipulating political violence and even democratic control through constitutional and legal changes.⁸

The reason why intelligence agencies have been called upon to be directly involved in political matters is with an assumed logic. The logic is to play divide and rule, Rizvi notes that “their interests in these matters stem from the assumption that a polity in turmoil cannot sustain a professional military,”⁹ and also that a weak and divided polity can be instrumental in preserving the position of the Military; hence, the necessity of involvement of ISI. This logic enables the military to manipulate politics and indirectly rule the country and also ensures that the civilian intelligence agencies remain marginalised, as these might perhaps one day become powerful with the patronage from an elected government.

ISI's Role in Pakistan's Domestic Politics

Pakistan's history is replete with the ISI involvement in domestic politics. As mentioned earlier, General Ayub Khan led coup 'd'état in 1958 was the beginning of a direct political interference by the ISI. This led to the monitoring of the politicians, overseeing the media or surveillance on the civil society/social organisations, trade organisations, student groups, etc. ISI was called upon to deliver warnings and threats if such organisations were getting too much in the way of the military and ordered the establishment of a covert action division in the structure.¹⁰ All the three intelligence agencies were placed under his direct control, and together they became the stronghold for consolidating his regime. Any threat to his rule was crushed on the pretext of endangering national security. In the 1964 presidential elections, the agencies were used again to ensure that the winning candidate remained General Ayub Khan.

The next ruler, General Yahya Khan, further enlarged the power of the Intelligence agencies to include, overseeing the activities of the

ethnic minorities and the separatists. This was primarily done to check the political activities of the leading nationalist Party, the Awami League of East Pakistan. ISI was instrumental in waging the genocide in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, A nationalist security council was specifically created to infiltrate the Awami League circles and to control the 1971 elections to ensure that no political party won. Hence, the policies and strategies adopted by Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan made ISI the most powerful intelligence agency within Pakistan,¹¹ with its primary and specific functions becoming more and more blurred as well as enlarged.

Even the civilian leaders did not hesitate in using intelligence agencies for their personal political motives. Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, further expanded the ISI's political role by creating an internal security wing/political cell primarily for monitoring his political opponents. One official of that time confirmed this saying, "[...] even his ministers' phones and offices were bugged and their personal lives monitored since Bhutto trusted no one and relished replaying tapes in front of those who had fallen from grace."¹² Another incident during his regime was recalled by Late B. Raman, a senior RAW Officer of India stated, "ISI's Internal Political Division had Shah Nawaz Bhutto, one of the two brothers of Benazir Bhutto, assassinated through poisoning in the French Riviera in the middle of 1985, in an attempt to intimidate her not returning to Pakistan for directing the movement against General Zia-ul- Haq."¹³ The political cell was used for rigging the 1977 election as well as against the Balochi Nationalists. According to author Zahid Hussain, Bhutto also used the ISI to keep surveillance not only on his opponents but also on his party men and cabinet ministers.¹⁴

In General Zia-ul-Haq regime, ISI spread its tentacles to include information on political and religious organisations that opposed Zia's regime. For instance, collecting intelligence about Sindhi nationalists' activities and monitoring of the activities and leadership of Pakistan's People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto who had launched the Movement

for Restoration of Democracy in the early 1980s.¹⁵ Besides, the activities of Pakistan's Shi'i organisations were being controlled and monitored as well as the dissident political leaders were also constantly harassed. In this process, the Military Intelligence too became involved and its role became evident in the dismissal of two Bhutto-led Governments in August 1990 and November 1996 respectively.¹⁶

In May 2006 in London, former Prime Ministers of Pakistan, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif signed the "Charter of Democracy."¹⁷ According to Article 32 of the Charter: "The ISI, MI, and other security agencies shall be accountable to the elected government through the Prime Minister Secretariat, Ministry of Defence and cabinet division respectively".¹⁸ Also to note, even the 2008 election manifesto of Pakistan People's Party mentioned that "all security agencies, including ISI and MI, will be answerable to the elected Prime Minister".¹⁹ Benazir Bhutto took the courageous step of reforming the intelligence agencies; wherein, she formed a committee under Air Chief Marshal Zulfikar Ali Khan to review the role of all intelligence agencies in a democratic system of governance. But, this was of no consequence as the influence and spread of ISI was starkly evident during the visit of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to Pakistan in December 1988, when both the leaders were told to be careful in their conversations as the ISI had "bugged" her office and residence.

Under General Pervez Musharraf, the ISI was given full freedom to finance and weaken the major parties to ensure the complete loyalty of the ruling coalition. Bribes and blackmail were used extensively. Even a tactical support to a group of dissidents was given who, after the 1999 military coup, had broken away from former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, to create the Pakistan Muslim League Q (PML-Q).²⁰ It also helped in convincing Muttahid Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) leaders to accept General Musharraf as the President in Uniform.²¹

ISI's Subversion of Pakistan's Political System

Apart from the military dictators/rulers under whose leadership ISI manipulated domestic politics, ISI on its own too has been utilising various means to subvert the political system to its advantage primarily to ensure an unchallenged Army's rule. This became even more evident after the Soviets left Afghanistan. A manifold increase in their political activities was seen, be it the funding of the political parties or dismissal of civilian governments. Such political interferences became a regular feature, and the narrative started building up both in the print and social media that the intelligence agencies are above law and accountable to neither the executive nor the judiciary.

These agencies have been at the forefront of many a strategic depth misadventure, while, on the home front they have been used to subvert the political process, manipulate elections and silence those who disagree with state policy.²² The Supreme Court Chief Justice, Sajjad Ali Shah, revealed during the hearing on the ISI's role in domestic politics in the year 1997, General (retd) Mirza Aslam Beg admitted to the practice of ISI supporting candidates and using secret service accounts for the disposal of money during the election season he said that Lieutenant General Assad Durrani had received Rs 60 million for funding certain candidates.

Setting up *alliances* and *factions* within political parties is another way of manipulating the domestic politics in its favour. In 1988, the ISI set up *Islami-Jamhori Ittehad* (IJI), an alliance that united right-wing politicians (like Nawaz Sharif) with religious leaders. It was also funded by the ISI to counter Benazir Bhutto's PPP from sweeping the polls (this is now a matter of court record, thanks to the Asghar Khan case and according to former ISI director General Hamid Gul's admission). In General Beg's words, "the decision to hold onto or relinquish power rests squarely with the Army," even creating rifts within political parties if a particular party becomes too powerful or non-compliant.²³

The funding of political parties is another way to consolidate its hold on the party activities. For instance, it was found that ISI had distributed over Rs 140 million among favourite politicians during the 1990 elections.²⁴ While the Mehran Bank Scandal too had ISI involvement during the 1990s politics. The intelligence agencies prevailed upon politicians from different parties to trade their loyalties for a price. The objective was to destabilise a hostile government and then put in place a friendly regime. The scandal comprises the entire gamut of financial crimes, like fake loans, kickbacks, illegal transactions, and bribes, and involved several high profile names of politicians and a serving Army chief.²⁵ On June 28, 1997, Pakistani newspaper *Nation* commenting on the ISI involvement in the Mehran Bank Scandal stated:

“The case has refocused public attention on what is widely perceived to be a government within a government—the intelligence agencies and their virtually autonomous role in the political affairs of the country. The baneful influence of the intelligence agencies has spread its malign shadow over the political destiny of the country.”²⁶

Another significant aspect is the support of ISI to the religious parties, which appears to be the norm. Military rulers like Zia-ul-Haq gave full backing of the State to Islamisation. Zia co-opted the religious parties, notably the JI, undertook a process of Islamisation that included the introduction of new Islamic laws, setting up a federal Sharia court, making Islamic education compulsory in schools, and promoting religious schools or madrassas. He took steps to Islamise the army by including Islamic teachings into the military's training.²⁷ For instance, support to religious parties like the *Islami Jamhoori Ittehad (IJI)*, manipulation of elections, and help in the creation of party like *Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM)* in 1984 created a rift within MQM to split the party into three dissident factions, MQM—Afaq Ahmad, Aamir Khan, and Badar Iqbal.

While ISI's support to the armed religious parties is also a well-known fact. As noted, between 1982 and 1990, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), working with the ISI and Saudi Arabia's intelligence service, funded the training, arrival, and arming of some 35,000 Islamic militants from 43 Muslim countries in Pakistani madrassas—sowing “the seeds of al-Qaeda and turn Pakistan into the world center of jihadism for the next two decades.”²⁸ Such linkages and close connections with the Islamic fundamentalist groups, like the *Harkat-ul-Ansar*, *Lashkar-e-Toiba* continues till date fostering on anti-India stand. Prime Minister Imran Khan himself admitted that the Pakistani Army and the ISI trained *al-Qaida* and other terrorists groups to fight in the Afghanistan war.²⁹

Creating rifts within parties if they are becoming too powerful and non-complaint is another way of subverting the political system. ISI was no stranger during the constitution of the PML-Q and it openly twisted politician's arms to join the newly formed “King's party.”³⁰ This was done to change its support base from the PPP to the opposition. Discredit certainly goes to the Intelligence agencies for having instigated political violence, be it with jihadi or sectarian groups or the MQM, the agencies have created a series of Frankenstein whose powers they have had to limit at times by pitting them against each other without trying to eliminate them, but simply making sure that they would remain compliant enough for whatever task they were assigned in the process, the ISI has created a culture of violence that is likely to be a lasting legacy for the country.³¹

Under the democratic means of the constitution, statutory laws, and remedies, certain Articles like Article 4, Article 8, and Article 90 have been provided for to check the extra-constitutional and extraordinary powers of these intelligence agencies, but it is of no use.³² These are supposed to work within the general gambit of the federal governments' executive powers, contained in Article 90 of the constitution. But this remains a

mere hogwash. On the contrary, the military rulers have brought in laws to suit their own rule and tighten the rein on those political parties which don't suit their interests.

During General Ayub Khan's rule, Article 173 of the 1962 constitution prohibited any person from contesting elections as a member of a political party unless permitted by an act of the central legislature. The Political Parties Act, passed in July 1962, allowed only limited political activity. Successive dictators perpetuated these and other tough measures against political parties, introducing various laws and regulations to restrict or ban those political parties and political activities that threatened their rule.

After Pakistan's second coup led by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1977, a large portion of the constitution was placed in abeyance, including fundamental rights and Article 17 on the freedom of association. Zia also promulgated the Martial Law Order (MLO) in June 1978, setting up disqualification tribunals to inquire into charges of misconduct against those who had contested the 1977 elections. All forms of political activity were effectively controlled and dissent was dealt with through harsh punishment under laws specially devised for this purpose. Musharraf and the military maintained power for almost nine years, utilising the same tactics of suppressing democratic forces and rigging national and local elections. He consolidated his power in December 2003 primarily through the passage of the seventeenth amendment to the constitution, which transferred several powers from the prime minister to the president, including the authority to dismiss the prime minister and the national assembly.³³

Civilian leaders, like Benazir Bhutto tried to reorganise and reform the intelligence agencies by issuing a notification on transferring the ISI directorate from the prime minister's office to the interior ministry, but so much was the power of the Intelligence agencies that within hours, the order was withdrawn. On 26 July 2008, the PPP-led government surprised everyone by bringing the ISI under civilian control, through a

memorandum. The memorandum placed administrative, financial, and perennial control of both the ISI and the IB under interior ministry with the hidden aim borne out of fear, pressure, and anxiety to control the ISI. The PPP considers ISI as the main force behind all anti-PPP activities. In October 2007, she also hinted at their role in assassinating her. But it is a well-known fact that the political establishment in Pakistan is not in a position to assert itself vis-à-vis the military and intelligence forces.³⁴ Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif too realised that the ISI was a useful tool for governing and used it to investigate the financial dealings abroad of various politicians and bureaucrats, including Benazir Bhutto. He wanted to start a new Federal Investigative Agency (FIA), precisely for this purpose; but it did not fructify. This proves that the role of the intelligence agencies in domestic politics has increased stupendously over the years, so much so that at times it seems that they are the real power wielders. Furthermore, the present selected Prime Minister is only playing up to the tunes of what can be called an “Uniform-ed Democracy.”³⁵

Therefore, ISI has acquired a role that is far beyond its original charter of providing external and military-related intelligence. Its extra-constitutional powers and extraordinary powers enable it to control Pakistan’s domestic politics; hence, truly symbolising ISI, as the “Deep State.”

Notes

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32. Article 4 states that enjoying the protection of the law is the inalienable right of every citizen of Pakistan. Article 8 states that laws inconsistent with, or in derogation of fundamental rights, are null and void, no law that benefits intelligence work can infringe on the constitutional rights of the citizens. Article 8 states that laws inconsistent with, or in derogation of fundamental rights, are null and void, no law that benefits intelligence work can infringe on the constitutional rights of the citizens.
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