

A tale of two stories

By Cyril Almeida
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Military men have been up to some very bad things, we've learned this week. But the very different reactions to two seemingly unrelated stories in the media tell us at least one thing: things aren't going to get better any time soon.

First, over to Jeremy Scahill, writing in *The Nation*, US: 'At a covert forward operating base run by the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in the Pakistani port city of Karachi, members of an elite division of Blackwater are at the centre of a secret programme in which they plan targeted assassinations of suspected Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives, 'snatch and grabs' of high-value targets and other sensitive action inside and outside Pakistan.'

Before you reach for your pitchfork to skewer evil Americans up to no good inside Pakistan without our leadership's knowledge — military or civilian — consider what else Scahill has reported: 'He [a former senior Blackwater executive] said that Blackwater is also working for the Pakistani government on a subcontract with an Islamabad-based security firm that puts US Blackwater operatives on the ground with Pakistani forces in counter-terrorism operations, including house raids and border interdictions, in the North West Frontier Province and elsewhere in Pakistan.'

'Government' can be misleading since it implies the civilian side of the state, but the story makes it clear elsewhere who inside Pakistan is really working with Blackwater: 'According to the executive, Blackwater works on a subcontract for Kestral Logistics, a powerful Pakistani firm, which specialises in military logistical support, private security and intelligence consulting. It is staffed with former high-ranking Pakistani army and government officials.'

The reaction to these revelations should be severe; we don't need America's version of non-state actors, mercenaries, really, running around our country, whatever their purpose or utility. The fact that the Pakistan Army — that so-called bastion of professionalism and custodian of our national security — has acquiesced in or enabled the activities of these non-state actors as opposed to elected representatives — the so-called 'bloody civilians', aka politicians — doesn't make it any better or well-thought-out an idea.

But here's the problem: the selective outrage of the media and the public enables military men to remain immune from accountability.

On Tuesday, a front-page headline in Dawn proclaimed: 'Intelligence agencies looking into oil, gas deals'. The accompanying article goes on to report: 'According to sources, a team of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and Military Intelligence (MI) has collected record of the proposed transactions and interviewed the managing director of the Pakistan State Oil (PSO) and some senior officials of the petroleum ministry.'

Who authorised agencies run by the military to investigate commercial affairs? To whom is the ISI/MI team going to present its findings? To what purpose will the findings be applied? None of these questions have appeared to worry many here.

Fixated as the media and the public are on the corruption allegations that are churning the political waters at the moment, it seems to matter little who is probing corruption and why — just as long as someone is, there's hope that the 'dirty' politicians can be drained from the swamp. It's a simple, visceral reaction in a messy place where there are few good options: corruption, bad; those fighting corruption, good.

But bad as corruption may be, the revelation of the ISI/MI probe is, or ought to be, equally, if not more, unsettling. It is yet another piece of evidence that the transition to democracy, already shaky because of the political sins of the politicians, is headed in the wrong direction, and that the military is perhaps quietly working to nudge it in that wrong direction.

A bold pronouncement? Consider this. It is an open secret by now that President Zardari and the army high command have rocky relations. Neither really likes the other and some of that dislike is personal and some policy-driven. But the publicly known disagreements so far have been about policy issues: who controls the ISI, what is our declared nuclear posture, what conditions attached to US aid are acceptable.

Inserting the ISI and MI into the civilian domain to probe corruption, however, is not about policy, it is about politics. Only the incorrigibly naïve would believe that the intelligence team was sent over to fight corruption in the system.

But the point here is larger than the fate of Zardari or the government. The point is this: a law unto itself, the army's actions remain frighteningly immune from accountability — and

the lack of public and media opposition to its 'good' but possibly illegal actions (such as sending its intelligence operatives to investigate a very narrow, specific case of alleged corruption that could affect the presidential camp) means that there is absolutely no chance that the army's bad and possibly illegal actions can ever be stopped.

In real terms, there is virtually nothing that can be done to stop Blackwater and its ilk from operating here. Secret military operations are the blackest of black holes, and if the media and the public kick up a fuss over Blackwater, the army will quietly switch to some other opaque tactic. And if that is subsequently exposed, too, the army will switch to a third.

Meaningful civilian oversight of the army is obviously a distant goal, but it will remain a chimera — an impossible idea — if the public and the media and the politicians never push back against the army on the smallest of issues.

That's exactly what the corruption probe by the ISI/MI team should be: a relatively small matter on which there should be no ambiguity in denouncing it and demanding it be shut down at once.

There is, of course, no straight line between the army's corruption probe and its murky arrangements with Blackwater. But the two stories fit into a bigger picture of the army setting and playing by its own rules. And unless the army gets its knuckles rapped for minor misdemeanours, why should it ever worry about being held accountable for its major sins?

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