

Political situation (Pakistan): Khan Against the Generals

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For much of the past week [15-22 May], former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan's house in Lahore has been surrounded by armed police, and the Rangers - a repressive force straddling the police and Army but under civilian control - have been on standby. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has ruled that Khan should not be arrested, but he doubts he will stay out of jail for long. The entire leadership of his party, the PTI, is currently behind bars.

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This marks a dramatic escalation of the political war between the PTI and the Army, along with its favoured politicians and the government it manoeuvred into place after [removing Khan from office](#) last April. The new administration is essentially a coalition of Pakistan's dynastic parties led by Bhutto-Zardari and the Sharif family. Since it was installed, Khan has repeatedly accused the US of orchestrating the congressional coup against him - motivated by his refusal to support their interventions in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Large numbers of anti-American protesters have taken to the streets, demanding his reinstatement.

Usually, Pakistani leaders can only be forcibly removed from office once they have lost some degree of popular support. If they haven't, the choices are limited: exile abroad or judicial murder. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was executed after a 4-3 vote in the Supreme Court; Nawaz Sharif was whisked off to exile in Saudi Arabia; Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in mysterious circumstances at the start of an election campaign. But Khan? Every opinion poll shows him sweeping the country at the next general election. On 8 May, a nervous Army leadership - by no means unified - and a Sharif government fearing a political wipeout, took the decision to arrest Khan by sending in a team of Rangers while he was in the High Court dealing with an old corruption case. He was immediately dragged off to a squalid prison.

Before long, the Chief Justice ordered his release and reprimanded those who ordered the raid. But what happened on 9 May was dramatic. PTI supporters in their thousands launched frontal assault on the Army, invading cantonments in Lahore and Rawalpindi and destroying a model plane in Mianwali. The residence of the Lahore Corp Commander was firebombed. According to police, the leader of the attack was 34-year-old Khadija Shah: one of the most fashionable clothes designers in Lahore (daughter of a former Finance Minister, and granddaughter of Asif Nawaz, a former Army Chief of Staff) who has become something of an icon for the masses of women participating in the recent demonstrations.

In Mardan, an old town in Pakhtunkhwa province, there was another event that stunned the nation. At a huge public meeting demanding the immediate release of the PTI leader, a mullah took to the platform and described Khan as a 'paighamber' – or 'prophet'. This was blasphemy of the highest order. Every Believer, regardless of sect, accepts the Prophet Muhammed as the final Messenger of God. Was the poor mullah overcome by emotion, or was it a deliberate provocation? We shall never know. The microphone was switched off; the anguished crowd began to chant 'death, death, death'. The others on the platform seized the mullah and he was hacked to death. Problem solved?

Khan's criticism of the Army and its constant interference in Pakistani politics (of which he himself took advantage not so long ago) has sparked a serious crisis. Those in uniform have been humiliated. The last taboo has been broken. Even in previously ultra-loyal areas like Panjab province, activists have been marching on the barracks. The Army has responded with mass arrests and announced that political prisoners will be tried in military courts. This draconian move is backed by much of the government, which – stupid and short-sighted as ever – has tried to expel PTI parliamentarians, a decision revoked by the Supreme Court. Sentences for dissenters are likely to be stiff: possibly a few hangings of those without elite connections in the hope of deterring future offenders.

Whatever anyone might think of him, Khan is the first political leader in the country who has publicly denounced the Army and insulted its Generals, going so far as to name the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) officer who allegedly organised the effort to [assassinate him](#). How will the military respond to this unprecedented challenge? General Zia offered Bhutto exile, which he contemptuously refused, before Supreme Court judges ordered his hanging. Khan, too, may be offered exile or a military trial. The temptation to accept the former will be strong (his two sons already live in London with their mother), but a lot will depend on the advice of his current wife, Bushra Bibi, who masquerades as a spiritual leader of sufi persuasion, but is as proficient as any other politician at taking 'gifts' from billionaires. The most notorious of these is like a character from a Mohsin Hamid novel: Riaz Malik, a self-made man who has bribed every major politician and General in the land. This is hardly a secret, and Khan's own dealings with him are the subject of a High Court trial, currently suspended. This involves the Qadir Trust, of which Imran and Bushra are the key trustees, and which, it is alleged, was set up with Malik's laundered money: millions of pounds were uncovered by Britain's National Crime Agency and returned to Pakistan. It was, some say, handed back to Malik, who provided a much larger sum, much of it earmarked for a 'spiritual' Sufi university in London and Allah alone knows what else. Did the entire PTI cabinet sign off on this project without being allowed to open 'the sealed envelope' containing the details? I honestly don't know. (How long do we have to wait for a Netflix series?)

The function of a military court, meanwhile, would be to bar Khan from politics forever. The judges would probably refrain from executing him; not for moral reasons, but because it would risk unleashing a civil war of sorts. Khan remains popular among a layer of officers, junior and senior, which combined with his mass support means his opponents must tread carefully. At this stage, the military leadership cannot restore order by falling back on traditional sacralisations of the Army. Its legitimacy crisis runs too deep.

Throughout this century, and half of the previous one, political life in Pakistan has displayed all the characteristics of a permanently diseased organism. Commercial capitalism, foreign aid handouts, state-backed industrial monopolies, illegal import-export deals and money-laundering schemes: together, they have created a continuous crisis. Predators fight for the spoils of power and refuse to accept bureaucratic impositions such as paying tax. Every mainstream politician works hard to cultivate the art of clientelism, gathering around them a following of loyal dependents. The latter can make various offerings to those lower down the ladder, often by skimming public funds off elephantine military budgets. Percentage commissions remain hugely popular within the ruling elite.

Old-style corruption still rules the roost, but the emergence of the internet has made life a lot easier by eliminating paper transactions and allowing the rich to conceal their hidden spoils. Not that too much is hidden these days. People can see what's going on, and have lost hope in politicians and their cronies. Khan is the exception for three reasons. He is no longer the incumbent; he is enough of a foreign policy maverick to deny the US the total subordination it demands; and he has capitalized on the country's dire economic conditions. Pakistan is now hopelessly dependent on the IMF, experiencing non-stop inflation, and suffering from a corrupted and useless education system that weaponizes religion to prevent children from learning anything useful (the polar opposite of medieval Islam, which produced countless scholars, astronomers, mathematicians and scientists).

The PTI was complicit in all these failures, but it has the advantage of no longer being in office. At present, two of its factions are preparing for Khan's departure from frontline politics. One is led by Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who has served in virtually every government over the last few decades and would be the safest bet for the Army; the other by Jehangir Tareen, who was once a marginally more radical figure and retains a strong middle-class power base. Whether the PTI can exist without Khan remains an open question. The Army hopes that things will revert to business-as-usual once they've dealt with him, and the governing parties will no doubt open their doors to defectors. It must be stressed that none of Pakistan's political outfits, let alone its military, aims for even a modest change in social relations. They're not in the business of creating a new society. When people take to the streets to demand one, their only response is repression.

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P.S.

• New Left Review, Sidecar, 22 May 2023:
<https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/khan-against-the-generals>