

COVID-19 AND PAKISTAN: EMERGING POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISIS

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All across the globe nations hit by COVID-19 have been severally impacted economically, socially and in some cases politically. Pakistan faces grave challenges due to the existing economic stress with low growth rate, mounting debt burden, weak healthcare facilities, economic depression, lack of coordination between the federal and provincial governments and inadequate infrastructure. The ruling party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI), is undergoing major struggle due to intensified internal differences and decreasing popularity of the party within Pakistan. Imran Khan's government seems to have lost its credibility and there is an apparent mistrust in the government's ability to deal with the present health crisis.

Interestingly, Prime Minister Imran Khan perpetually tried to assure the nation (more than once!) that the COVID-19 problem is under control. The opposition parties—the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)—have been extremely dissatisfied with Imran Khan's decisions regarding the delay in announcing the national lockdown and then relaxing the lockdown early when the numbers of coronavirus cases are still rising.¹ Former Defence Minister, Khawaja Asif

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1. "Pakistan Opposition accuses Imran Khan government of mishandling coronavirus crisis as the cases rise to 31, 684", PTI, India TV, May 11, 2020, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/news/world/pakistan-opposition-accuses-imran-khan-mishandling-coronavirus-616346>. Accessed on May 11, 2020.

As the nation continues to deal with the pandemic some important developments have surfaced: increasing differences between the political parties, intensifying fissures within PTI, interesting developments in civil-military relations with the military gaining more control (directly), the military's assertion and unwillingness to compromise on defence spending.

(PML-N), led the criticism against the government during the National Assembly session held in May (2020) after a break of two months. He said, "The current situation that we are in is due to the approximately two months-long negligence showed by the government. When we had fewer deaths, the entire country was completely shut down. Now that we are seeing a dangerous spike in cases, they are easing lockdown restrictions."² On the other hand, Imran Khan in the initial phase of the crisis (on May 15), expressed

optimism stating that Pakistan is ready to deal with the crisis, "The numbers are expected to rise and we are prepared for that. The government is working towards enhancing its health facilities and increasing capacity."³

During the initial phase of COVID-19 the ruling party leaders said that the virus is a mere flu and there is no need to panic. Imran Khan himself made a statement that the coronavirus will not be able to survive the hot weather of Pakistan. As the situation worsened and the number of cases multiplied after the opening up of the lockdown, the leadership seems to be finding new targets to blame for the spread of the pandemic. Punjab Health Minister, Yasmeen Rashid, termed the people of Pakistan as illiterate (*jahil*) for not taking precautions. The minister said, "Lahoris [citizens of Lahore] are 'weird creatures' of [*sic.*] aren't even ready to listen what we have been saying regarding the virus and social distancing. I think no nation would

2. Ibid.

3. "Faring better than predicted Coronavirus figures: PM Imran Khan", *The Express Tribune*, May 15, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2222190/1/>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

have been more illiterate than us.”⁴

As the nation continues to deal with the pandemic some important developments have surfaced: increasing differences between the political parties, intensifying fissures within PTI, interesting developments in civil-military relations with the military gaining more control (directly), the military's assertion and unwillingness to compromise on defence spending, and very importantly, the power of the extremist clerics within Pakistan who refused to abide by the instructions of the civilian leadership regarding the lockdown and suspending large gatherings and prayer meetings. Even at the time when the nation is struggling with grave economic and political uncertainties, Pakistan has continued its relentless efforts to keep the *Kashmir* issue alive at the domestic and international front. Imran Khan and Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi have hardly spared a public forum in the last year where they have not raised the issue of Kashmir and reminded the Pakistanis of their right to fight for Kashmir.

Externally, Pakistan is receiving generous support from China, the US (which acknowledges Pakistan's role in its negotiations with the Afghan Taliban), and Turkey (Pakistan's friend, which has been assisting in the form of various medical supplies). International financial organisations have extended support to Pakistan in the form of debt relief, loan and aid. The support brings temporary relief, but larger financial challenges remain for Pakistan.

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THE CORONAVIRUS SPREAD

The first case of coronavirus was reported in Pakistan on February 26, 2020 in Karachi. Following this the pandemic spread in all the four provinces.

4. "Punjab Health Minister Terms Nation 'Illiterate' for Not Taking Coronavirus Seriously", *Naya Daur*, June 16, 2020, <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/06/punjab-health-minister-terms-nation-illiterate-for-not-taking-coronavirus-seriously/>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.

The numbers in Pakistan are supposedly under-reported and there is lack of transparency and trust.⁵ At the time of writing the article, the reports suggested that Pakistan's COVID-19 tally stood above 231,000. The number of deaths stood at 4,762. Looking into the provincial numbers, Sindh province reported 94,528 cases, Punjab 81,963, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa 28,116, Islamabad 13,494, Balochistan 10,814, Gilgit-Baltistan 1,561 and Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir 1,342.⁶ There has been a noticeable spread amongst the senior political leadership.

The reasons for spread of coronavirus in Pakistan have undoubtedly been the flights carrying Pakistani nationals from the severely affected countries like Spain, the United Kingdom, Italy, etc. Apart from this, the spread of coronavirus in Pakistan can be attributed to mainly three factors:

Pilgrims from Iran: The coronavirus started to show rapid signs of spread in Pakistan in early March when infected pilgrims and workers started pouring in from Qom, a religious city in Iran—one of the worst coronavirus affected countries. In fact, in March, Imran Khan's special assistant on public health, Dr. Zafar Mirza, blamed Iran mainly for the spread. He said, "Eighty percent of the COVID-19 confirmed patients in Pakistan originated from Iran, which lacked the capacity to deal with an international public-health emergency."⁷

In Iran the spread of coronavirus was fuelled by politics and religion and the pandemic did spread to many other nations, specifically the bordering nations. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) report, 46 percent of confirmed cases in Pakistan have travelled from Iran.⁸ The land

5. See Dr. Rana Jawad Asghar, "COVID-19 Pakistan's magic hat of numbers", *The Express Tribune*, July 4, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2253346/covid-19-pakistans-magic-hat-of-numbers>. Accessed on July 5, 2020.

6. Imtiaz Ahmad, "After Qureshi, now Pakistan's health minister Zafar Mirza contracts COVID-19", *Hindustan Times*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/after-qureshi-now-pakistan-s-health-minister-zafar-mirza-contracts-covid-19/story-nFCBIUYDnpL6OowJzo7SKI.html>. Accessed on July 6, 2020.

7. "Pakistan says Iran forced 5,000 of its nationals over border despite request to wait", *Arab News*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1673266/world>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

8. Owais Tohid, "Pakistani pilgrims caught in Iran's Coronavirus web", *Arab News*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1654296>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

route to Iran runs through Balochistan in Pakistan which is not equipped to handle the situation. The Baloch government spokesman, Liaquat Shiwani complained about the Iranian attitude, "We had requested Iran through the envoy in Pakistan to provide our pilgrims quarantine facilities and health certificates. ... But the Iranians were amid their own crisis and had their own cases to deal with. They started pushing the pilgrims across the border and stamping 'exit' on their passports so we had no choice. They are Pakistani citizens, we had to accept them with our limited facilities."⁹ There are reports of ample mismanagement in Pakistan's border town of Taftan from where Pakistan received more than 6,000 pilgrims.

Reluctance of the Clerics and Religious Extremism: The second important factor responsible for the spread of the virus has been the reluctance of the clerics and religious preachers to close the mosques for Friday prayers. The government's biggest challenge has been countering the resistance from the clerics and Imams who remained reluctant to accept the lockdown and suspend gatherings for Friday prayers and prayers during Ramadan. The extremist clerics have refused to help and their logic has been that "To avoid mosques on Fridays would only invite God's wrath at a time when people need his mercy."¹⁰

Several Shia groups conveyed strongly that they will go ahead with the procession to commemorate the martyrdom of Hazrat Ali and that the government cannot restrict them.¹¹ The Sunni Muslim missionary group, Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) Pakistan, hosted the event in Raiwind, Lahore in mid-March. According to the reports 2,258 attendees were tested positive (by the third week of April).¹² The five-day annual gathering was attended by around 70,000 people (including

9. Ibid.

10. Zia-ur-Rehman, Maria Abi-Habib and Ihsanullah Tipu Mehsud, "'God will Protect Us': Coronavirus Spreads through an Already Struggling Pakistan", *The New York Times*, March 26, 2020.

11. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary, "Pakistan bracing for 40,000-50,000 death toll due to Covid: Top doctors", *The Economic Times*, May 11, 2020.

12. Faseeh Mangi, "Now, Pakistan races to trace Lahore Tablighi event attendees to contain Covid-19", *The Print*, April 21, 2020, <https://theprint.in/world/now-pakistan-races-to-trace-lahore-tablighi-event-attendees-to-contain-covid-19/405675/>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

more than 3,000 foreign participants).¹³ Although the event was cut short to two days, but by then the transmission of coronavirus had hit large numbers. After the announcement of the lockdown by Imran Khan in the third week of March, the ulema and other religious groups defied government instructions and went ahead with the gatherings in mosques. It is interesting to know that at the request of Pakistan President, Arif Alvi, the Grand Imam Sheikh of Egypt, Ahmed Mohamed Ahmed al-Tayeb, the former President of Al-Azhar University, issued a Fatwa suspending the Friday prayers.¹⁴

Despite the Fatwa, there was extreme resistance to following the lockdown and suspending the prayers and the clerics continued offering collective prayers. Mufti Taqi Usmani, one of the most respected clerics, said that, "It is not possible to get rid of the Corona without asking God for forgiveness."¹⁵

The second phase of resistance came from the clerics as Ramadan drew closer. Dozens of well-known and influential clerics signed a letter demanding that the government exempt mosques from the lockdown during the month of Ramadan. The letter demanded that the prayers were essential for Muslims and should be allowed as long as safety measures were observed.¹⁶ The ban on congregational gatherings did provoke a severe backlash in Pakistan and the police personnel were attacked. The leadership did try to assert its point on shutdown and restricting the gatherings to a limited number of five, but the request/orders did not go well with the clerics who hold significant clout in the country.

Delay in Lockdown: The third critical factor has been Imran Khan's hesitation in announcing the nation-wide lockdown after cases were being

13. Ibid.

14. Hamza Azhar Salam and Mutaza Ali Shah, "Pakistani clerics quarrel as Egypt's Al-Azhar university announces major fatwa", GEO News, March 26, 2020, <https://www.geo.tv/latest/279347-pakistani-clerics-quarrel-as-egypts-al-azhar-university-announces-major-fatwa>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

15. Ibid.

16. See Syed Raza Hassan, "Pakistan clerics call for lifting of congregational prayer limits", Reuters, April 14, 2020, <https://in.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-pakistan-mosques/pakistan-clerics-call-for-lifting-of-congregational-prayer-limits-idINKCN21X0B7>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

reported in February-end and March beginning. The Prime Minister faced immense criticism from the opposition parties and also the Pakistani population (that section of society which was aware of the severity of the pandemic). Imran Khan's logic has been that given the state of the economy, lockdown will cause immense damage financially:

Twenty-five percent of Pakistanis are below the poverty line... today if I impose a complete lockdown then... my country's rickshaw drivers, pushcart vendors, taxi drivers, small shopkeepers, daily wage earners, all of them will be shut in their homes. If Pakistan had the resources that Italy has, that France has, that the US has, that England has, I would fully lock down all of Pakistan today.¹⁷

The Prime Minister has been deeply concerned about the economic situation but the fact remains that the spread of the virus caused due to the delay in lockdown did aggravate the situation in Pakistan.

INITIATIVES BY THE GOVERNMENT TO DEAL WITH CORONAVIRUS

Major COVID-19 relief operations/initiatives in Pakistan are based on charity in the country which many citizens feel is the best way to combat the crisis. Pakistan government announced *Ehsaas Programme* to families affected by coronavirus. Under the programme 12 million families are covered and have received (are receiving) Rs. 12,000. The daily wage earners who are the worst affected by the pandemic are the priority under this initiative.¹⁸

Prime Minister's Relief Fund was up on April 1 and donations have been requested to help those "who have been made destitute by the lockdown."¹⁹

The Corona Relief Tiger Force (CRTF), a voluntary force, has been one of the leading initiatives by the Imran Khan government. By the end of March

17. "Naya Pakistan Waffles on Covid lockdown—Updated", *New Pakistan*, March 27, 2020, <http://new-pakistan.com/2020/03/27/naya-pakistan-waffles-on-covid-lockdown/>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.

18. "Coronavirus: Govt to distribute funds under the Ehsaas Programme from today", *The Nation*, April 9, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/09-Apr-2020/coronavirus-govt-to-distribute-funds-under-ehsaas-programme-from-today>. Accessed on May 11, 2020.

19. Prime Minister Imran Khan on Twitter, April 1, 2020.

The CRTF consists of around one million volunteers including students, teachers, engineers, medical workers and social workers. The main responsibilities of the CRTF include ration distribution, implementation of the 20-point guidelines introduced by government during Ramzan, and spreading awareness regarding the pandemic.

Imran Khan announced the formation of “Corona Relief Tiger Force” to fight the crisis. Tiger Force is an effort by the government to get the young population of the nation to unite and work towards the efforts dealing with COVID-19. Interestingly, Imran Khan urged the youth to join the Tiger Force and referred to it as *jihad* against the pandemic:

I want youth to play their role in helping our fight against the COVID-19 by joining our Corona Tiger Force, which will be organised to do Jihad against the suffering caused by this pandemic...²⁰

The registration for Tiger Force opened on March 31 and within ten days, more than 10,000 volunteers had registered, which is indeed commendable.²¹ The CRTF consists of around one million volunteers including students, teachers, engineers, medical workers and social workers. The main responsibilities of the CRTF include ration distribution, implementation of the 20-point guidelines introduced by government during Ramzan, and spreading awareness regarding the pandemic.²²

Parallel to these initiatives, the Non-Governmental Organisations and personal initiatives aimed at collecting donations and providing essentials

20. Aishwaria Sonavane, “Pak PM Imran Khan declares ‘Jihad’ against Covid; Asks Youth to join ‘Corona Tiger Force’”, Republicworld.com, April 2, 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/pakistan-news/pak-pm-imran-khan-declares-jihad-against-covid-asks-youth-to-join.html>. Accessed on May 1, 2020.

21. Aysha Imtiaz, “Pakistan’s ‘Tiger Force’ to combat coronavirus economic woes”, Al Jazeera, May 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/pakistan-tiger-force-combat-coronavirus-economic-woes-200506075821109.html>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

22. “Corona Relief Tiger Force”, *The Nation*, May 7, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/03-May-2020/corona-relief-tiger-force>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

to the masses have been actively working in different areas.

The National Core Committee (NCC) has been set up for coordination between the national and provincial governments. The NCC is the government's lead agency in the COVID-19 fight and is chaired by the Prime Minister and has representation from all the provinces, Gilgit Baltistan and the Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. The National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) has been tasked to acquire medical supplies and coordinate with the provincial governments for distribution.²³ The National Command and Operations Centre (NCOC) has been set up to closely examine the evolving situation and status of the virus spread and also devising strategy to counter the spread.²⁴

The ruling party won the 2018 elections and came to power promising *Naya Pakistan*, which would ensure jobs, basic essentials and housing for people. But so far nothing has been executed by the PTI government in actions, resulting in anger and frustration among the people.

COVID-19 IN PAKISTAN: IMPLICATIONS

Political Crisis

Imran Khan's government is facing multiple challenges and there seems to be a severe political crisis in Pakistan. Imran Khan is being blamed for not handling the health crisis appropriately. Pakistan is anyway struggling with the economic challenges which the PTI government has been unable to handle. The ruling party won the 2018 elections and came to power promising *Naya Pakistan*, which would ensure jobs, basic essentials and housing for people. But so far nothing has been executed by the PTI government in actions, resulting in anger and frustration among the people. While the

23. "Govt's timely steps to contain corona surge: Shibli", *The News*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/657712-govt-s-timely-steps-to-contain-corona-surge-shibli>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

24. Ibid.

Imran Khan government was struggling to cope with the financial issues, the coronavirus crisis hit the country, multiplying the problems. Imran Khan initially talked about the virus quite casually before realising the gravity of the problem. The government also did not abide by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) guidelines regarding the lockdown and there were reports about the lockdown being eased out to a great extent on account of Eid.

The government is being blamed for mishandling the health crisis and being indecisive. Even though it is not COVID-19 which can be held responsible for the ongoing political crisis in Pakistan, certainly the epidemic has managed to highlight the incompetence of Imran Khan's government. There are reports of rifts within the government which have allowed the domestic and international media talking about the downfall of the government. PTI suffered a major setback when the Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M) announced its decision to quit the ruling coalition led by Imran Khan. The decision of BNP-M certainly adds to the vulnerability of the current regime which has a fragile majority in the National Assembly.²⁵ The BNP-M has accused the PTI of not keeping to its promises and not paying adequate attention to the Baloch sufferings. The two parties reportedly signed a six-point memorandum of understanding in August 2018 for an alliance at the centre. The MoU included: "recovery of missing persons, implementation of the National Action Plan (NAP), observance of six per cent quota for Balochistan in federal government departments, immediate repatriation of Afghan refugees and construction of dams in the province to resolve the acute water crisis."²⁶

The PTI government has been seemingly too absorbed with the Kashmir issue and has not paid attention to Balochistan which has infuriated the Baloch. The BNP chief, Mr. Megal's anger and frustration are reflected in his statement, "You [the government] are constituting committees on Kashmir

25. Amir Wasim, "Setback for PTI as BNP-M quits ruling alliance", *Dawn*, June 18, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1564271>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.

26. Ibid.

which is not with us, but you are not worried about losing what you already have,... This house can discuss issues of wheat, sugar and tomatoes, but not the blood of the Baloch people.”²⁷

In a significant development the federal Minister for Science and Technology, Fawad Chaudhary, gave an interview to Voice of America (VOA), which brought out the faultlines in the ruling party and the grievances of the party members.²⁸ He highlighted in his interview the rifts among the senior party leaders which have allowed non-elected members to join the cabinet. He said that the non-elected members have replaced the elected representatives in the close circle of Imran Khan. There is immense frustration within the government as the special assistants and advisors to the PM occupy the key ministerial positions and the elected members are being sidelined.²⁹ There have been various reports of in-house fighting and blame game and this intra-party bickering has impacted PTI’s public image.

Army’s Nation

The COVID-19 crisis has once again demonstrated that the military calls the shots and dominates critical decision-making in Pakistan. On March 22, Imran Khan, in his address, expressed his unwillingness and lack of conviction regarding the national lockdown. However, in less than twenty-four hours, Pakistan Army spokesperson, Major General Iftikhar, announced the lockdown contradicting Imran Khan’s stance. After the announcement of the lockdown the army has been deployed all over the country to oversee the COVID-19 response efforts through the National Core Committee.³⁰ Interestingly, Commander of the Air Defence Command, Lt Gen Hamood

27. Ibid.

28. Fawad Chaudhry’s interview with Voice of America (VOA), June 22, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=70X39lQ_k88. Accessed on July 8, 2020.

29. Fahd Husain, “RED ZONE FILES: PTI’s festering fault lines”, *Dawn*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1565070/red-zone-files-ptis-festering-fault-lines>. Accessed on July 1, 2020.

30. “Imran Khan’s government authorizes army to take over in case of lockdown violations”, *WION*, April 26, 2020, <https://www.wionews.com/pakistan/imran-khans-government-authorises-army-to-take-over-in-case-of-lockdown-violations-294830>. Accessed on May 12, 2020.

Uz Zaman Khan, has been appointed as the convener of the NCOC. The NCOC is acting as an implantation arm of the NCC.³¹ The Imran Khan government has authorised the Pakistan army to oversee adherence to the lockdown.

Once again it was established that in Pakistan 'crisis' cannot be managed without the military stepping in. One of the retired Generals made an important statement which explains the situation aptly. He said, "The government left a big gap in its handling of the Coronavirus. The army has tried to fill that gap, there was no choice."³²

In another significant move, former Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) chief, Lt Gen Asim Saleem Bajwa (Retd), has been appointed as the new Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on information and broadcasting. Bajwa is also leading the China-Pakistan Corridor Authority. He replaced Firdous Ashiq Awam, with whom Imran and the army were unhappy over corruption allegations.

PTI's inability to handle the domestic situation has allowed the military to take control of multiple key positions. Another significant example of military taking over the important and lucrative positions is the appointment of the Air Marshal (Retd) Arshad Malik as the head of the state-owned Pakistan International Airlines (PIA). The PIA has come under major scrutiny after self-destructive revelations by Aviation Minister, Ghulam Sarwar Khan. The minister said in the national assembly that almost 40 percent of Pakistani pilots have fake licences. This has had major repercussions for the PIA and many countries have decided to suspend PIA operations to their countries. This issue is serious for Pakistan and could have a long-term severe impact on the Pakistan aviation sector and Pakistani aviation professionals around the world.

31. "Pakistan Army to oversee coordination between federal, provincial govts, cases cross 2,200", *The Economic Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-army-to-oversee-coordination-between-federal-provincial-govts-cases-cross-2200/articleshow/74948030.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on May 10, 2020.

32. "As Coronavirus crisis ravages Pakistan, military trumps Imran Khan", *The Times of India*, April 26, 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/as-coronavirus-crisis-ravages-pakistan-military-trumps-imran-khan/articleshow/75385589.cms>. Accessed on May 13, 2020.

Economic Stress

The Pakistan economy has been under major stress for the last few years and Prime Minister Imran Khan, despite his 2018 election promise of '*Naya Pakistan*', has not been able to deliver results on stabilising the financial front. Debt burden is rising, inflation is high and unemployment is adding massive frustration amongst the masses. Pakistan's GDP growth rate stood at 3.3 percent in 2019. After multiple rounds of negotiations Pakistan did manage to get an approval of US\$ 6 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with tough conditionalities in 2019. Pakistan has also been under severe pressure from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to contain and act against terror financing. The country has been on the FATF grey list and getting repeated warnings to act in order to avoid the FATF black list. Pakistan now has a breather and the FATF meeting, originally scheduled in June to assess Pakistan's case, has been postponed due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Pakistan's near-term macroeconomic outlook has severely deteriorated following the COVID-19 outbreak and the *International Monetary Fund World Economic Outlook* has projected the GDP growth rate at -1.5 percent in 2020.³³

The adverse impact of COVID -19 has been highlighted in Pakistan's federal budget 2020-2021:

- "The Industry and the retail businesses all over Pakistan have been badly affected
- Economic growth has been reduced by Rs. 3 trillion which brought down GDP growth projection from 3.3% to -0.4%
- Projection of overall budget deficit has been revised upward from 7.1% to 9.1% of GDP
- FBR revenue loss has been projected at Rs. 900 billion
- Non-tax revenue of the federal government has been reduced by Rs. 102 billion
- Exports and remittances have been badly affected

33. International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook, April 2020: The Great Lockdown*, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/04/14/weo-april-2020>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

Beijing has actively supported Pakistan and has supplied masks, testing kits, ventilators and protective clothes, and most importantly, medical staff to assist Pakistan's inadequate healthcare infrastructure. Turkey has been supporting Pakistan and sending assistance in the form of medical equipment.

- Unemployment and poverty have increased
- Large-scale manufacturing and FDI have declined
- Domestic tourism in Pakistan has stalled.”³⁴

Pakistan did request the IMF for a low-cost, fast disbursing loan under the fund's Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI) in order to deal with the coronavirus crisis.³⁵ The IMF has approved US\$ 1.4 billion of rapid financing for Pakistan to facilitate Pakistan's urgent balance of payment requirements and assist it in dealing with the socio-economic impact of the crisis.³⁶

The government has been working aggressively towards raising finances and appealing for debt relief. Imran Khan has appealed for a 'Global Initiative for Debt Relief'. According to the Prime Minister, the initiative on Debt Relief intends to “bring together stakeholders on a platform to promote coordinated health and economic response.”³⁷ Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, sought China's support at the G-20 forum for the initiative. Pakistan's efforts in this direction have yielded results and Pakistan will reportedly sign a US\$ 2 billion debt relief agreement with G-20 before December 31, 2020.³⁸ In addition to the IMF loan Pakistan has received US\$ 200 million from the World

34. Federal Budget 2020-2021, Budget in Brief, Government of Pakistan, Finance Division Islamabad, June 12, 2020. http://www.finance.gov.pk/budget/Budget_in_Brief_2020_21_English.pdf. Accessed on July 14, 2020.

35. “IMF to consider \$1.4 bn loan to Pakistan to help tackle economic impact of Covid-19”, *The Print*, April 13, 2020, the.print.in. Accessed on May 13, 2020.

36. “IMF to tide Pakistan over COVID-19 shocks”, *The News*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/658736-imf-to-tide-pakistan-over-covid-19-shocks>. Accessed on May 16, 2020.

37. “Imran Khan urges world community to grant debt relief as Pakistan's coronavirus cases reach 5,230”, *The Hindu*, April 13, 2020.

38. “Pakistan to avail Rs. 335 billion debt relief from G-20 to mitigate negative effects of Pandemic”, *The Economic Times*, July 6, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/pakistan-to-avail-rs-335-billion-debt-relief-from-g20-to-mitigate-negative-effects-of-pandemic/articleshow/76810482.cms>. Accessed on July 7, 2020.

Bank and US\$ 305 million emergency COVID-19 loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

Islamabad has been receiving lavish assistance from its all-weather friend, China. Beijing has actively supported Pakistan and has supplied masks, testing kits, ventilators and protective clothes, and most importantly, medical staff to assist Pakistan's inadequate healthcare infrastructure. Turkey has been supporting Pakistan and sending assistance in the form of medical equipment.

Pakistan did manage to amend its relations with the United States (to some extent) by acting as an active facilitator in the US-Taliban agreement signed in February 2020, facilitating the exit of the foreign forces from Afghanistan. The Pakistani leadership has been cherishing the change in the US position towards Pakistan. Washington has recently announced a welcome relief package for Pakistan. According to US chargé d'affaires Paul W. Jones, "This is the latest chapter in a long, vibrant US-Pakistan health partnership," in regard to the emergency coronavirus assistance. Talking about the US commitment towards Pakistan he said, "Since designating Pakistan a priority country for coronavirus assistance, the United States has committed nearly US\$ 15 million in new coronavirus response funding to our joint efforts. All of these contributions were identified as top priority needs by Pakistani authorities and are fully paid by the American people."³⁹

Even though Pakistan has been running from pillar to post for financial relief and assistance, the interesting part is that the country's commitment for defence spending has not changed. Military expenditure remains a leading priority for the Pakistan leadership. Pakistan is compelled to allocate 41 percent of national expenditure to debt servicing and the tax revenue has projected a downfall owing to the ongoing economic challenges and

Pakistan allocated Rs. 1.29 trillion for defence in the budget for the fiscal year 2020-2021. This represents an increase of close to 12 percent as compared to last year.

39. "US helps Pakistan in its COVID-19 battle", *The Express Tribune*, May 15, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2221936/1-us-helps-pakistan-covid-19-battle/>. Accessed on May 15, 2020.

COVID-19. Despite these stresses, Pakistan allocated Rs. 1.29 trillion for defence in the budget for the fiscal year 2020-2021. This represents an increase of close to 12 percent as compared to last year.

CONCLUSIONS

Various reports from health experts suggest that the pandemic COVID-19 is here to stay (for a few more months or potentially for another year!) and the world will have to learn to *live with it and deal with it*. The outbreak of COVID-19 has certainly intensified Pakistan's economic woes. Imran Khan is facing challenges from four fronts—a looming political crisis with clear rifts appearing within the government; COVID-19 crisis which is not going away anytime soon; multiplying economic challenges; and declining popularity and fan following of Imran, who in 2018, was seen as a leader genuinely committed to upliftment and well-being of Pakistan. In the last six months there have been significant developments and some critical deductions can be made:

- Pakistan military retains the power strings, and although there have been some signs of stiffness in the civil-military relations, Imran Khan and the military are very much in sync with each other. Imran Khan is likely to stay in power for some time as the military does not seem to have a suitable alternative. The civil-military relations remain cautiously comfortable. The existing perception that Pakistan's civilian leadership is incapable of managing a crisis without military support has been strengthened.
- The military does not intend to take any cuts in the defence budget owing to COVID-19. The military has sought additional outlay of Rs. 63.69 billion to cover a 20 percent increase in the salaries of the armed forces personnel.⁴⁰ The defence budget has been increased by 12 percent and the *actual defence spending* is likely to be maintained at a high level.

40. Imtiaz Ahmed, "Pakistan military seeks nearly Rs. 64 bn for salary hike of personnel", *Hindustan Times*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/pakistan-military-seeks-nearly-rs-64-bn-for-salary-hike-of-personnel/story-2RZnWZukhkvWPQs7ifhBXX.html>. Accessed on May 14, 2020.

- The COVID-19 crisis demonstrated the strength of the extremist religious preachers. The lockdown orders by the government were clearly defied by the mosques, and a large number of cases can be attributed to this factor.
- Pakistan's economy will take a serious blow due to COVID-19 and the IMF projections indicate a negative growth rate for 2020. Pakistan has been diplomatically very active in raising funds and debt relief. These initiatives are likely to provide short-term relief to Pakistan's economy.
- Sino-Pakistan alliance will continue to grow and Beijing will provide extended support to Pakistan at bilateral level and multilateral forums. Some projects of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) will see delays but this is unlikely to hamper the momentum of the alliance.
- Support from the US is significant for Pakistan not only in terms of quantum of aid, equipment, etc., but also the diplomatic support at the international forums.
- India-Pakistan tensions continue to grow and New Delhi's decision to reduce the strength of the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi by nearly 50 percent is a strong message to Pakistan that its continued acts of terror and disgraceful comments leave little scope for diplomatic relations.

The critical question is, will the COVID-19 crisis affect Pakistan's actions and objectives against India? The answer is clearly 'No'. Terror attacks in Jammu and Kashmir have clearly indicated that Pakistan intends to continue and accelerate the sub-conventional war under a different brand—*The Resistance Front (RTF)*—in Kashmir. Pakistan has also continued to raise the Kashmir issue at various international forums. New Delhi is unlikely to see a change in Pakistan's strategy which primarily relies on covert war and projection of a low nuclear threshold.