



Why did Imran Khan Lose the Unwritten No-Confidence Motion of the Military?



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The no-confidence motion was tabled against Pakistan's Prime Minister, Imran Khan, on March 28th by the opposition legislatures in the National Assembly. The countdown for exit seems to have begun for the cricketer turned politician, who had no experience of governance before taking the PM's seat. He failed the expectations of the masses, couldn't keep up with his election promises of Naya Pakistan and, very importantly, lost the confidence and support of the military establishment that facilitated his victory in the 2018 elections, which were also termed as Selection 2018 in Pakistan.

On March 27th, Imran Khan and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) held a massive rally to display the mass appeal and popularity of the Prime Minister. The rally was a power show by PM Khan, which was expected to exert pressure on the judiciary and military establishment and also build the momentum of his support in the coming week. Imran Khan termed the rally the "biggest ever jalsa in Pakistan" and showered praises and compliments on himself and his party in his marathon speech which lasted for more than an hour. During his speech, he tried hard to present his Progress Report and convey the assurance that "None of the govt in Pakistan's history has delivered as much as my [PTI] govt has delivered in these 3.5 years". Ironically, the speech targeted the opposition leaders and, at the same time, blamed foreign hands for persuading and using the opposition against him and creating instability in the country. He said, "Attempts are being made through foreign money to change the government of Pakistan. Our people are being used. Mostly inadvertently, but some people are using money against us." While it is outlandish on his part to convey to the masses that the entire political opposition of Pakistan, the military establishment, and his party members are so naïve and vulnerable to foreign influences and monetary incentives, it is not surprising that Khan once again has tried to shift the blame of his incompetence and poor governance to the foreign forces. In the last 3.5 years, there have been a series of incidents, including the attacks on the Chinese workers engaged in the China-

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Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects in Pakistan and peaceful resentment by the popular Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) demanding basic civil rights of the Pashtuns, where Imran Khan and his loyalists have invariably blamed a foreign hand.

Not only the PTI's allies but also important members of the PTI have been frustrated and disappointed with Imran Khan and have turned against him, making his chances of survival extremely bleak. The Prime Minister has been relentlessly trying all possible constitutional and legal tactics to threaten his party members from going against him on a no-confidence motion.

Even though the no-confidence motion was placed on March 8th, Khan lost power when he lost the unwritten no-confidence motion by the military establishment. His simmering stresses with the military started to become more prominent in the last few months which facilitated the opposition to gain momentum and finally bring Imran to the crossroads. It would be interesting to analyse what went wrong with Imran Khan and how the civil-military dynamics turned against him. While there are several factors, some developments are critical to understanding the current situation in Pakistan.

In 2018, Imran Khan's PTI was supported by the military as he was probably the best option for the military after a bad political inning (yet again) with Nawaz Sharif. During the 2018 election campaign, even two months before the polls, the statistics favoured Sharif's PML (N) till the military showered its blessings on Imran Khan. PTI promised development and Khan was projected as a clean, selfless leader solely driven by the welfare of the state, which Pakistan's dwindling economy and declining human development index desperately needed. For three years, a projection of comfortable civil-military relations was maintained until Khan's inability to deliver and frequent controversial statements in international forums started to impact the military's image and position.

The economy went from bad to worse, inflation stood at an all-time high, and Pakistan couldn't convince the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to move it out of the 'grey list'. Perpetual struggles for external financial funding were adversely impacting Pakistan's bilateral relations with its conventional Muslim brother nations, and the strict conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) indispensable loan added significantly to the woes of the masses.

For decades, Pakistan's foreign policy has been defined by how it manages its relationship with the United States. The relationship has gone through its phases of highs and lows, but it hit its lowest during Imran Khan's tenure. He couldn't resist being openly critical of the US, holding his compulsive victimhood card without realizing that the military was keen to revive its ties with the US given its military relationship and also, Pakistan's high dependence on the international financial institutions.

Pakistan's relationship with New Delhi has seen the worst phase in the last three years. While the ceasefire agreement was announced in February 2021 along the LoC, the bilateral relationship remained extremely stressful. Imran Khan has probably been the most toxic Pakistani Prime Minister with his uncompromising targeting of the Indian leadership, accusing it of being run on Nazi ideology in every possible forum.

Imran Khan's closeness with the former Director-General of the ISI, Lt Gen Faiz Hameed, and whispers about him being appointed as the next army chief were surely not comforting for the military's senior leadership. The military's decision to replace Faiz Hameed with Lt Gen Nadeem Ahmed Anjum received a nod from Khan after a rather unprecedented delay.

Imran Khan's unpopularity had started to reflect in Punjab, Pakistan's most important province, where the Chief Minister, Sardar Usman Buzdar, (who resigned on March 28th) was accused of corruption charges and incompetence. While Imran's popularity started to decline in Punjab, the PML (N) used the opportunity to revive itself in the province, which represents more than 50 percent of the National Assembly seats (general). A series of developments, proving Imran's inability to stabilise the nation on multiple fronts, led to the military's loss of complete confidence, which also didn't want to associate with Imran anymore. At present, the military stands as 'neutral', which at this stage simply implies that they are not supporting Imran Khan. All indications are that Imran Khan has no cards left, even though he has been claiming that he holds a trump card. We need to wait and watch as the next few days unfold. Pakistan's complicated dynamics have surprised us many times in the past. It remains to be seen if we see the expected fate of Imran Khan based on known facts or he magically survives the no-confidence motion.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

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