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# IMRAN KHAN'S FAILURE, THE NARRATIVES AND CONTINUING POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN PAKISTAN

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Pakistan's political instability, undermining of the state institutions and sudden (and welcome) rise of the cricketer-turned-politician, Imran Khan, in the 2018 general elections, and subsequently, his dramatic exit from the office of the Prime Minister reaffirms the dominance of the all-powerful Pakistan military and inherent weaknesses of the democratic institutions. Pakistan's military has repeatedly claimed that it is politically neutral and welcomes democracy in Pakistan, but irrespective of repeated statements regarding its neutrality, it is well acknowledged that the *men in khaki* continue to dominate the power dynamics and dictate strategic decision-making.

Historical evidence suggests a classic cycle of events in Pakistan's democratic landscape. A promising and confident civilian leadership comes into power with the full-fledged support of the military, but typically the civil-military romance seems to have a short-term expiry date and the civilian leadership struggles to complete its full tenure.

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In case the military has a choice of appointing another political face, the ruling party takes a blow and political leaders land behind bars on charges of corruption and money laundering. Imran Khan's tenure was not very different and he enjoyed the position comfortably until he crossed the unwritten red lines overestimating his political capability and popularity, and asserting his independence in decision making in the areas which remain sacrosanct to the military.

### **THE SAGA OF THE NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION**

From the time Imran Khan came into power, the opposition has been trying to gather momentum for his exit. One of the mistakes that Khan and his party made was completely refusing to have any working relationship with the opposition parties. Throughout his tenure, he continued to intensify the narrative of the corruption record of the opposition leaders. This, in a way, deterred a conducive environment for the functioning of the government. His narrative of himself as a clean, corruption-free leader did not enable him to fulfil his election promises. The opposition's aggressive drive to throw out Khan led to the unification of the opposition forces, which is rather unique in Pakistan. Although the no-confidence motion was tabled on March 8, the build-up for the motion started in November 2021. The PTI was confident it would sail through the opposition heat. The no-confidence motion was finally tabled against Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan on March 28, 2021 by the opposition legislatures in the National Assembly. On March 31, the Pakistan National Assembly session for the no-confidence was adjourned till April 3. And on April 3, Pakistan's President Arif Alvi dissolved the National Assembly on the advice of the Prime Minister, who had lost the support of his major allies. The Deputy Speaker, Qasim Khan Suri, who was in the chair termed the no-confidence motion against Imran Khan as "unconstitutional" and scrapped it in an attempt to save Imran Khan from the humiliation of a highly probable political defeat. On April 7, the Supreme Court restored the National Assembly, declaring the decision of dissolution of the Assembly against the Constitution. The Assembly session was called on April 8 and on April 9-10, 2022, after a major political drama with Imran Khan playing all possible churlish tactics to delay/avoid the

voting, the Opposition voted in favour of the motion, leading to Imran Khan's exit. For the first time in Pakistan, the Prime Minister was democratically removed through a vote of no confidence. Shehbaz Sharif, the leader of the second-largest political party, PML (N), has been sworn in as the Prime Minister. Another interesting development has been the election of Hamza Shehbaz as the chief minister of Punjab.

What went wrong for Imran Khan? He had no experience of governance before taking the PM's seat, failed the expectations of the masses, couldn't keep up with his election promises of *Naya Pakistan* and, most importantly, lost the confidence and support of the military establishment which had facilitated his victory in the 2018 elections, which were also termed as *Selection 2018* in Pakistan.

Imran Khan and his party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) held a massive rally on March 27 to display the mass appeal and popularity of the Prime Minister. The rally was a power show by Imran which was expected to exert pressure on the judiciary and military establishment, and build the momentum of his support before the voting on the no-confidence motion. 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 conveyed the assurance that "none of the governments in Pakistan's history has delivered as much as my [PTI] government has delivered in these 3.5 years."<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> 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,

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1. PTI Historic Jalsa: PM Imran Khan Complete Speech | March 27, 2022, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QryHhqbKtR8>. Accessed on March 29, 2022.

2. Ibid.

it is not surprising that Khan once again tried to shift the blame of his incompetence and poor governance to the “foreign forces”. During the 3.5 years of the PTI’s tenure, there have been a series of incidents, including the attacks on the Chinese workers engaged in the China-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 PTI were frustrated and disappointed with Imran Khan and turned against him, making his chances of survival extremely bleak. The Prime Minister relentlessly tried possible constitutional and legal tactics to threaten and dissuade his party members from going against him on a no-confidence motion. The momentum against Imran Khan was strong and none of his efforts seems to have worked in his favour.

#### **WHY IMRAN LOST THE CONFIDENCE OF THE MILITARY?**

Even though the no-confidence motion was initially placed on March 8, 2021, Imran 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 towards the end of 2021 which facilitated the anti-Imran opposition movement 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.

In 2018, Imran Khan’s PTI was supported by the military as he was probably the best option for the military after yet another bad political innings 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 Imran 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 needed badly. For three years, a projection of comfortable civil-military relations was maintained until Imran’s inability to deliver and frequent controversial statements on 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. Pakistan went on a begging spree in the last three years, seeking financial assistance from all possible channels: its all-weather ally China, conventional Muslim brother nations and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). External funding brought a short-term reliever but not without strict conditionalities which involved a rise in taxation and energy tariffs.

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 the lowest during Imran Khan's tenure. He couldn't resist being openly critical of the US, holding his compulsive victimhood card without realising that the military was keen to revive its ties with the US given its military relationship and 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 the Nazi ideology in every possible forum.

Imran'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 Imran after a rather unprecedented delay.

Imran Khan's unpopularity started to reflect in Punjab, Pakistan's most important province, where the Chief Minister, Sardar Usman Buzdar (who resigned on March 28) was accused of corruption charges and incompetence. This rang alarm bells in Rawalpindi, which views Punjab as the most crucial province, as 70 per cent of the military has its roots in Punjab. While Imran's popularity declined in Punjab, the PML (N) used the opportunity to revive itself in the province which represents more than 50 per cent 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 did not want to be associated with Imran anymore.

### IMRAN KHAN'S TENURE: AN ERA OF NARRATIVES

Imran Khan disappointed his supporters but if there was one thing that Imran did dedicatedly and passionately during his unsuccessful 3.5 years of political tenure as a Prime Minister, it is the building up of a series of narratives and driving them on varied forums in an attempt to fetch strategic dividends. It would be interesting to analyse the narratives Khan created within the country and on international platforms.

In 2018, when Imran came into power with the military's blessings, a narrative of a clean politician, free of the baggage of corruption was created and propagated to counter the leaders of the opposition parties who were grappling with corruption charges and accused of misusing national funds and manipulating national policies to reap economic dividends for their family and friends. The cricketer projected himself as *a selfless leader* who has had a successful and glamorous life as a Sportster, understands the world well and is driven to politics solely for the welfare of the Pakistani *Awam*. Although during his tenure Imran Khan couldn't do much to cure the corruption menace, the narrative of him fighting hard against corruption against all challenges was repeated frequently to remind the nation of his selflessness which he (wrongly!) anticipated would compensate for his incompetence.

Khan blamed the economic crisis on Nawaz Sharif's government and the narrative of him *carrying the baggage of economic desperation from the past* is not new. Every democratic regime in Pakistan tries to pass the blame for Pakistan's persistent economic desperation to its predecessors and Imran was no different.

With India, the narrative has been that India is going on a dangerous path and is being driven by the *Nazi ideology under a Hindutva regime* that is intolerant of the minorities. The attempt has been to build a perception that India is dangerous for not only the Muslims of India but also the Muslims of the world. The

efforts turned aggressive after the revocation of Article 370 by the Government of India in August 2019 and the narrative which emerged was that Kashmir is not only a concern for Pakistan but a global responsibility and the world needs to address the issue of Kashmir. He tried to use the 'nuclear threat' in his Kashmir narrative and highlighted the threat of a probable nuclear war in case the Kashmir problem persists and goes unaddressed. In his article in *The New York Times* titled, "The World Can't Ignore Kashmir. We are all in Danger", August 30, 2019, Imran Khan wrote: "If the world does nothing to stop the Indian assault on Kashmir and its people, two nuclear-armed states will get ever closer to a direct military confrontation."

His narrative of *Islamophobia* was pursued at all the international forums and he tried to drive home the point that suppression of Muslims is the root cause of radicalisation. His annual speeches to the United Nations had several references to Islamophobia. In September 2019 in his speech at the UNGA, he said, "I always imagined what I would say and educate the world about Islam if I ever stood on this forum."

Pakistan's relationship with the US has gone through highs and lows. It has had three crucial phases of strategic alliances with Washington that brought in much needed military assistance and weaponry and the strategic dividends which the military cherished. Imran Khan's *position with the US* is defined by three crucial perceptions that he tried to assert: First, Pakistan's biggest mistake has been to accept the US alliance post 9/11, and Islamabad has paid a heavy price in terms of lives and money for being a US partner in the global war on terror; and, terrorism and radicalisation in Pakistan are a result of its role in the war on terror; Second, a foreign power (the US) is behind the political instability in Pakistan and Washington would want him to go. Throughout his tenure, he has been on the see-saw of controversial statements against the US which certainly was discomforting for the military. Although, initially, he hesitatingly tried not to overtly name and blame the US for the current political turmoil, his intentions and indications were understood well; Third, Pakistan would want to pursue an independent foreign policy, which implies a foreign policy choice



free of the influence of the West. He slammed the Islamabad-based Western envoys who had urged Pakistan to condemn Moscow's actions in Ukraine.

Addressing the Islamabad Security Dialogue on April 1, the Army Chief, General Bajwa, did try to repair the damage inflicted by Imran Khan. General Bajwa's statements included an assertion regarding the long and excellent strategic relationship with the US. Bajwa's remarks do project some optimism as he called for a dialogue to resolve all disputes with India.

Imran Khan focused on a series of narratives but the narratives didn't yield the desired results for him. He probably overestimated the weight of the narrative of foreign conspiracy and Islamophobia. It remains to be seen what will be Imran's next narrative to seek a majority in the next elections. Will the narratives swing the polls in his favour?

## **WAY AHEAD AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-PAKISTAN RELATIONS**

While some critical questions will be unfolded in the coming months, two issues are critical to examine: What are the challenges and priorities for the new regime, and secondly, what does Imran Khan's exit imply for India?

Imran Khan, immediately after his exit from the PM office, went on a spree of speeches, rallies, and social media drive trying to prove his case of a foreign conspiracy, build narratives against General Bajwa and target the PML (N) and PPP candidates on account of corruption. Although his addresses received a noticeable audience initially, sustenance of the energy is already looking difficult (at the time of writing this paper). He has a noticeable following in the urban middle class. This can be attributed to the fact that in 2018 when he came into power he was projected as a corruption-free leader. His following amongst the Pakistani youth is not only owing to his charisma (given his sports background) but also a rejection by people of the 'corrupt' Sharifs and the Bhuttos. Reports suggest that he also has a support base in some sections of the military establishment, specifically the junior levels. However, his open and blunt targeting of serving Army Chief Bajwa has not gone down well with the

military as it tarnishes the image of the institution in a country where the Army holds the maximum power.

It seems Imran Khan has confidence in his ability to hold rallies and pull crowds, given the past record in 2014 when his *Azadi March* lasted for a record 126 days, received wide media coverage and eventually paved the way for his political success in the 2018 elections. However, it's unlikely that the current regime will absorb his tactics, and given past experience, it can be assumed that there are fair chances of Khan being embroiled in multiple court cases/charges which will subsequently impact his image and mass appeal. The 2014 foreign funding case against PTI is likely to gather much more momentum.

The regime under Shehbaz Sharif has multiple challenges to deal with. The most important task ahead of the new PM is to address the economic crisis which is largely dependent on external assistance. The nation faces \$6.4 billion in dollar debt due over the next three years.<sup>3</sup> Pakistan is negotiating hard with the IMF for programme revival. However, the IMF has "emphasised the urgency of concrete policy actions, including in the context of removing fuel and energy subsidies and the FY2023 budget, to achieve program objectives."<sup>4</sup> As a result, the prices of all the petroleum products have been increased, adding to the economic woes of the masses.

Pakistan's military and political leaderships are trying to revive their relationship with the US which is viewed as a critical partner. Imran Khan has done ample damage by repeatedly holding the US responsible for Pakistan's economic woes and radicalisation within Pakistan, and continuing to blame the US for conspiring in his departure.

Pakistan's relationship with the Muslim countries, specifically Saudi Arabia, has been on a low and Shehbaz Sharif is perhaps in

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3. Lilian Karunungan, "Pakistan Faces \$6.4 Billion in Foreign Debt as IMF Talks Drag On", Bloomberg, May 27, 2022, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-27/pakistan-faces-6-4-billion-in-foreign-debt-as-imf-talks-drag-on#:~:text=Pakistan%20faces%20%246.4%20billion%20in%20dollar%20debt%20due%20over%20the,by%20the%20International%20Monetary%20Fund>. Accessed on May 30, 2022.

4. "IMF presses Pakistan on 'urgency' of removing fuel, energy subsidies for programme revival", *Dawn*, May 25, 2022, at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1691452/imf-presses-pakistan-on-urgency-of-removing-fuel-energy-subsidies-for-programme-revival>. Accessed on May 27, 2022.

a better place to change the dynamics of the relationship given the history of the relations between the Sharifs and the Saudi Royal family.

Pakistan's relationship with India is not likely to change much. Shehbaz Sharif has issued expected statements that Pakistan wants to have good relations with India and this is conditional on the resolution of the Kashmir issue. Two developments have been critical indicators of the fact that there is absolutely no deviation from the past record: First, Shehbaz Sharif's aggressive statements following the execution of Yasin Malik. He tweeted:

Today is a black day for Indian democracy & its justice system. India can imprison Yasin Malik physically but it can never imprison idea of freedom he symbolises. Life imprisonment for valiant freedom fighter will provide fresh impetus to Kashmiris' right to self-determination.<sup>5</sup>

Pakistan's foreign minister Bilawal Bhutto also issued statements on similar lines. Second, in his first address to the nation on May 27, 2022, Shehbaz Sharif called upon India to restore Article 370.<sup>6</sup> It is clear from these statements that the political leadership wants to continue to use the Kashmir narrative to gain political leverage and distract the masses from their incompetence to resolve political and economic challenges.

In the past, General Bajwa has repeatedly conveyed his intentions of having stable relations with New Delhi and focusing on the economy and geo-connectivity. But nothing has been seen on the execution front. The only positive development has been the signing of the ceasefire agreement along the Line of Control in February 2021 which brought respite to the civilians on both sides of the border.

With Shehbaz Sharif coming into power, no breakthrough is expected in the stressed India-Pakistan relationship. For the bilateral relationship to see any change, Pakistan will need to alter the strategic dynamics and focus more on building strength within. India stands

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5. Shehbaz Sharif, Twitter @CMShehbaz, May 25, 2022.

6. PM Shehbaz Sharif First Address to the Nation, May 27, 2022, YouTube, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pjoXYX2px8>. Accessed on June 1, 2022.

firm on its position of zero tolerance for Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism. Pakistan, on the other hand, continues to hold a radical/hard position on Kashmir and continues to support terror infiltration. This leaves little space for the initiation of positive measures towards improving the strained bilateral relationship.