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POLITICAL CRISIS IN PAKISTAN

PAKISTAN'S politics have been in the eye of a storm now for more than three months. Political stability has remained a rather rare commodity within Pakistani politics since the departure of former President and military ruler General Pervez Musharraf and the restoration of democracy. Yet the current political upheaval has resulted in unseen levels of political and social polarization in the country and an unprecedented economic meltdown. For the first time, the possibility of Pakistan defaulting on its sovereign debt is now being seriously debated. In order to understand the determinants and drivers of the current political crisis, a deep dive into Pakistan's political history and country's civil-military relationship is warranted.

A CIVIL-MILITARY IMBALANCE AND THE FRACTURED NATURE OF PAKISTANI POLITICS

Since gaining independence, Pakistan's political system has remained fragile – a state which has been further exacerbated by a failure to develop strong and impartial institutions.

The one institution keeping its institutional ethos and integrity intact has been the Armed Forces of Pakistan. However, the abnormal strength of the military has contributed towards making Pakistan virtually a praetorian state. Democratically-elected governments have been repeatedly removed through military led coup d'états, often under the premise of bringing political order and economic stability. In total, military-led or dominated governments have ruled Pakistan for about

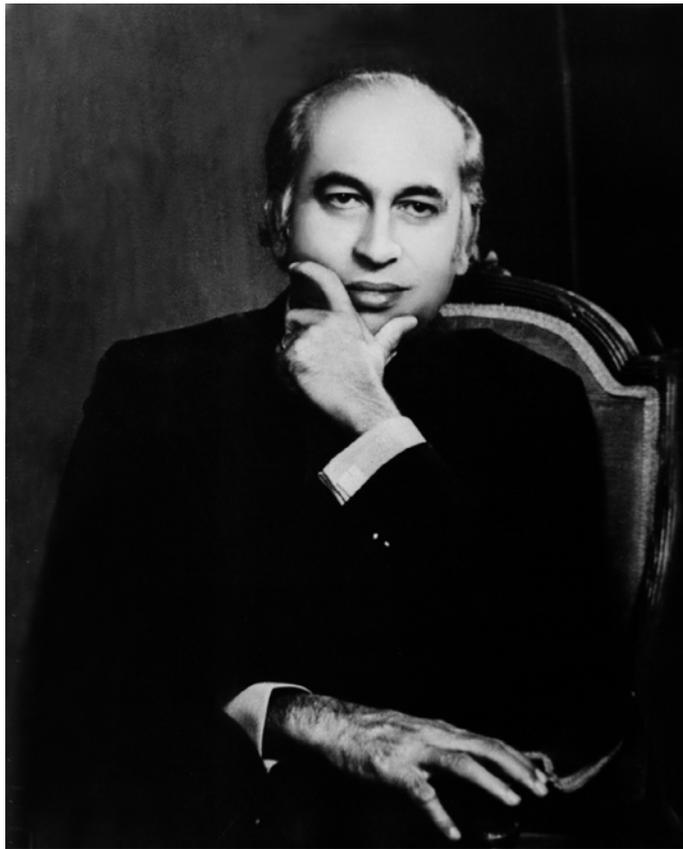
33 years. These military regimes gradually civilianized but the civilian partners never exceeded the level of a regime apparatchik, and the core decision making was primarily centred in the office of the military ruler, who remained both the head of state and that of the armed forces.

Even the termination of this military rule didn't lead to a complete departure of military from politics. With the exception of Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, who emerged as a political giant from the catastrophe of the fall of Dhaka in 1971, no civilian government has been able to rein in the military and reduce its institutional weight – and even PM Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto was removed from power in a military coup. Successive civilian governments were either compelled or obliged to strike

a bargain with the military leadership. These civil-military understandings in essence remained a power-sharing arrangement that recognised the military's role in policy making and led to the hybridization of governance and public policy making structures. This gave the military significant influence over the formulation of foreign and national security policies.

This imbalance in the civil-military relationship has not emerged simply owing to the determination within military rank and file to maintain its power and privileges, the unwavering discipline and professionalism amongst its ranks or an urge within military's leadership to interfere with the country's politics. But this disparity is also a product of Pakistani politics. Political spectrum in Pakistan remains inherently factious and political parties have largely been family led, or personality centred. As has been the case in other post-colonial societies, the flag bearers of democracy in Pakistan remain veritably undemocratic in their demeanour and treat their respective political parties as hereditary fiefs. These politicians once in power exhibit authoritarian tendencies not much different from military rulers and remain prone to bypassing and side-lining democratic institutions like the parliament that has empowered them. Similarly, there remains a strong tendency amongst the Pakistani political elite to marginalize and politicize public institutions in order to prosecute and suppress their political opponents. This is a key reason why the public has lost trust in state institutions which are considered corrupt and compromised.

Civilian governments in Pakistan are often a hodgepodge coalition of political forces hailing from diverse ideological, ethnic and class backgrounds. Such coalition governments often depend on



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the military and specially its intelligence infrastructure to hold these unnatural political alliances together. Civilian governments have never been reluctant to use military resources to prosecute and suppress their adversaries and for this very reason they need to maintain a working and even amicable relationship with the military leadership. This also means that in times of civil-military discord, the military can find political partners in the oppositional cadres which are ready to work alongside military cadres to dislodge the government. This political dynamic has also put the country's military in the unique role of a mediator or adjudicator in national affairs. In this manner the military emerges as the ultimate survivor

in every political confrontation with civilian forces and has been able to guard its professional and corporate interests successfully.

CURRENT POLITICAL CRISIS IN PAKISTAN

The current political crisis in Pakistan manifests all structural flaws of Pakistan's democracy and the implications of endemic civil-military imbalance. However, the ultimate departure of the government of Prime Minister Imran Khan also has been rather politically surprising. The election of Imran Khan as the Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2018 heralded some new trends in Pakistani politics. Khan became the first person after former Premier Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to land into power through the sheer force of

populism. Even more, he became the first premier in the modern political history of Pakistan to have the full backing of Pakistan's military leadership.

The close coordination between the government and the country's security establishment was evident in both the domestic and foreign policy realms. Khan's government's harmonious working relationship with the military was on display during the Balakot crisis in February 2019. This crisis started when 40 Indian security personnel were killed in a suicide bombing in the town of Pulawa in the Indian administered part of Jammu and Kashmir State. India retaliated by launching airstrikes against an alleged training camp of the Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), a militant organization that has remained involved in the insurgency in Kashmir. Pakistan in response launched its own strikes inside Indian-administered Kashmir, which eventually led to an aerial engagement between the two sides resulting in the downing of an Indian MiG-21 fighter jet and the subsequent arrest of its pilot. As this violent engagement took place between the two South Asian nuclear powers, Pakistan's civilian and military leadership coordinated their political and military strategies and decided in unison to respond to the Indian airstrikes on Balakot. Khan's government and the military leadership were also on the same page with regards to the situation in Afghanistan. The prime minister was satisfied with his rather ceremonial role, which was largely centred around cricket diplomacy and building bridges with Afghan youth while the military leadership devised the policy outlook.

Within domestic politics attempts by opposition to outmanoeuvre the government repeatedly failed. The pinnacle of government politics came as the government's supported candidate was elected

as senate chairman, even when the motion didn't receive a majority in the upper house of parliament. Even though there were dissensions within government ranks thanks to the rift between PM Khan and his close aide Jahangir Tareen, who had been virtually the political mastermind of Khan's electoral success, they never translated into anything politically threatening and the government continued to pass crucial bills from both houses of the parliament.

However, Khan's own political capital did take a reckoning thanks to his ominous governance record while in power. Khan's coalition government abjectly failed to deliver on its promises of good governance and structural reforms in government institutions. The incompetence of public office holders, the recurring focus on short-term development projects to entice voters rather than prioritising the highly underfunded health and education sectors and a failure to enforce a strict tax regime on the country's mercantile classes dismayed a significant chunk of the government's voting base, compromising mostly the salaried middle class. The jolt given by the Covid-19 pandemic to Pakistan's already ailing economy further dented Khan's political image. This meant that PM Khan was standing on thin ice for quite some time, and it was his alignment with the country's military that provided him much needed political cover and persevered his government. Pakistan's opposition leadership included several seasoned and shrewd political players, but despite attempts they failed to challenge the government in a serious manner.

This political calculus started to change owing to a transformation in the civil-military relationship and particularly the personal relationship between PM Khan and the country's army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa.



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“KHAN'S GOVERNMENT AND THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP WERE ON THE SAME PAGE WITH REGARDS TO THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN. THE PRIME MINISTER WAS SATISFIED WITH HIS RATHER CEREMONIAL ROLE, WHICH WAS LARGELY CENTRED AROUND CRICKET DIPLOMACY AND BUILDING BRIDGES WITH AFGHAN YOUTH WHILE THE MILITARY LEADERSHIP DEVISED THE POLICY.”

Cracks started to emerge between the duo when the military attempted to transfer Khan's trusted intelligence chief (also a military officer) and the prime minister's office refused to accept the move. This led to a short-term crisis between the two main power pillars in Pakistani politics eventually resulting in the transfer of the country's top spy. Furthermore, Army chief General Bajwa publicly rejected PM Khan's foreign policy stance on the Russian invasion of Ukraine calling it a huge tragedy. Previously, Khan had emphasized upon Pakistan's neutrality in the conflict and refused to denounce the Kremlin. This development was rather surprising as the military leadership had been on board vis-a-vis Khan's official visit to Moscow and agreed with the government that it should go ahead regardless of the escalating regional situation. The visit was in any case not a standalone event but rather the culmination of

attempts by Pakistani diplomats and security officials for over a decade to improve the country's political and strategic ties with Russia. The volte-face by the Army Chief suggested a clear rupture between the government and its military partners and was a sign that government's defence guard had left its position.

These developments incentivised the opposition to make its move and to start engagement with dissident parliamentarians within government ranks. This new political equation was a test of PM Khan's political and administrative skill. Khan was unable to confront this situation administratively even when he still had a good deal of governmental resources and power at his disposal. This included the civilian intelligence agency, Intelligence Bureau (IB), Federal Investigation Authority (FIA) and civilian law enforcement institutions. He could have used them to

monitor the meetings of his party dissidents alongside employing pressure tactics – something very common in Pakistani political culture – to ensure they remained politically loyal.

Khan instead took his rather favoured political path of discursive populism and alleged that the opposition political campaign to remove him was an American-sponsored regime change operation. Khan based this political campaign around an alleged “cypher” sent by the Pakistani ambassador to the United States back home that claimed in a meeting a US diplomat had conveyed to him that Washington wanted the removal of Khan's government and there would be consequences for Pakistan if he stayed in power. Khan's perspective did resonate at least within his own voting base as he started to rally big crowds in a bid to show his party's street power and dispel the notion that his government had lost public support. This campaign did raise the political stakes for the opposition and helped Khan recover some of the lost political capital but did not generate significant political pressure on his party dissidents to reverse their decision to switch loyalties.

Finally, the opposition alliance submitted a no-confidence motion against PM Khan. With this move, it was clear that opposition leadership had managed to sway the loyalties of some government lawmakers. Still more surprising was the departure of the government's loyal coalition partners who had stood with PM Khan for more than three years and remained resilient in the face of the opposition's enticements. In a last-ditch attempt, Khan's legal aides tried to manipulate the constitutional clauses and had the no-confidence motion rejected by the deputy speaker of the national assembly. This was followed up by the prime

minister's decision to dissolve the national assembly and a call for fresh general elections. For a moment it did seem that the government's legal ploy had worked, and the opposition might have to grudgingly settle for a new election. However, the strong intervention by the Supreme Court in favour of the opposition annulling proceedings of the house of parliament and order to ensure voting on the no-confidence motion ended all chances of government survival.

The last day of Khan's government was particularly eventful. The actions of different institutional and political stakeholders that day clarified the state of political balance of power and institutional inclinations. As the government tried to drag the debate in the parliament and derailed voting on the no-confidence motion, institutional pressure mounted on Khan to resign. It was against this backdrop that the principle legal entity of the capital, the Islamabad High Court, suddenly opened close to midnight in order to entertain a petition which sought the court's intervention to stop the army chief's removal after rumours started circulating in the capital that the government had decided to sack him. As these developments happened, Khan met a group of journalists and remarked that all political and institutional power holders had rallied against him, thus leaving him no option but to resign. Ultimately, Khan didn't resign and was voted out by the parliament.

NEW GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL ROLE REVERSAL

The end of Khan's government resulted in the formation of a new ruling coalition comprising of nearly a dozen different political entities hailing from a diverse set of ideological, ethnic and political poles. This political upheaval has also brought back into power Pakistan's traditional political elites, particularly the "Sharif" and "Bhutto" dynasties.



Picture: shon-pics/freepik.com

The new Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif is the younger brother of former three-time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and has remained the Chief Minister of Punjab, the most populous province of Pakistan. The younger Sharif has been credited with speedy completion of mega projects that have resultantly improved urban transport infrastructure and increased the energy generation capacity in the province. The famed administrative skills of the new PM still don't make him the main face of his political party, which continues to revolve around the image of his elder brother. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the new foreign minister, is the other big player in the new political setup. Being the son of former PM Benazir Bhutto and former President Asif Ali Zardari, Bilawal is the political face of the "Bhutto-Zardari" dynasty.

Over the period of the last three months, a role reversal has taken place within Pakistani politics. The former political partners of the country's military today seem to be turning against it. The rank and file of Imran Khan's political outfit Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) came out openly against the perceived role played by Pakistan's military in the removal of Khan's government. PTI

activists had been particularly critical of the statement issued by the military's chief spokesperson in which he denied Khan's claims that he was ousted as a result of a foreign-led conspiracy. Meanwhile, the anti-military voices and rhetoric in the current ruling coalition and particularly in Prime Minister Sharif's party – Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML-N – have suddenly gone silent hinting at a reset in the Sharif family's relationship with the military.

The government of PM Sharif does enjoy military support; however, it is also facing significant political and economic challenges. The biggest challenge for the new government remains the ongoing nationwide political agitation fomented by Imran Khan. The former prime minister continues to attract huge crowds in political rallies and is again threatening to hold a political sit-in in the capital Islamabad to force the government to hold a new election. The new government has only a two-member majority in the lower house of the parliament and therefore continuation of political turmoil may result in political squabbling between coalition partners and eventually the government losing its majority.

The challenges for the Sharif government are even intense on the economic front. The country's state bank reserves have fallen to a dangerous level of \$11 billion – barely enough to cover a month and a half's imports and a balance of payment crisis is in the offing. Not to ignore the fact that these reserves were already debt financed. Inflation has already been on the rise and is slated to increase by 15% by this summer, while the country's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are not making any headway. Government has been forced to take the politically unpopular measure of increasing petroleum prices. If the IMF programme is renewed, the government may again be forced to take further tough economic measures which will come with concomitant political costs.

Against this backdrop, difficult days lie ahead for the Sharif government, which remains politically embattled against a resurgent Imran Khan who is probably at the peak of his politics and an economy which has been in free fall. In this scenario, eventually all political and institutional stakeholders may have to agree upon holding a new election to resolve current political impasse.