

COMMENT 253 - Pakistan's Political Chaos

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On Tuesday, March 14th, [violent clashes erupted](#) between security forces and political opposition members in several urban areas. The epicentre of the confrontation was the residence of Imran Khan, former Prime Minister (PM) and chairman of the political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). The events were triggered by two arrest warrants¹ against Khan and the subsequent efforts by the police to implement these court orders. Being [concerned with the security](#), even life, of their party leader, crowds of PTI members blocked the entrance to Khan's house in Lahore. The current leader of the opposition claims that the [government is planning to assassinate him](#), especially if he is to [appear in court](#) and become deprived from the opportunity to protect himself.²

Both sides, police and PTI, accused each other of initiating the violence. On Saturday, March 18th, after a multi-day standoff and a short-termed [halt](#) of law enforcement action, finally the police pushed their way through into Khan's home. But Khan was already out and on his way to [Islamabad for a court appearance](#). However, the ex-PM was not able to enter the judicial complex due to the another [clash](#) between police and PTI supporters. In the course of the escalating turmoil, the court [cancelled the actual arrest warrants](#) against Khan and adjourned the hearing

¹ The police wanted to hand over Khan [two arrest warrants](#). The first is corruption-related, based on the alleged concealing of state gifts retained from the Toshakhana, a repository of items received from foreign governments. The second arrest warrant was issued in the context of terrorism, as Khan allegedly threatened a female judge during one of his speeches in 2022. A lower court in Islamabad had also issued the warrants against Khan for defying orders to present himself in court over these charges.

² According to Khan, he had already appeared at several courts but '[there was just no protection](#)'. In other words, for the ex-PM going to court means risking his life.

until March 30. This is obviously an attempt by the authorities to temporarily calm the situation.

[Dozens](#) of both security personnel and protesters were injured during the clashes. [Hundreds](#) of Khan's partisans involved in the riots in Lahore and Islamabad were arrested. Additionally, the police conducted raids on locations frequented by people involved in the unrest. The Lahore city-police filed around [2,000 charges](#)³ against PTI supporters in the immediate aftermath of the clashes. New charges against Khan, as well as claims that PTI supporters were [abducted and tortured](#),⁴ are increasing tensions.

Observers are wondering about the outcome to this turmoil. To find an answer, one needs to recall what led to this confrontation in the first place. Since Khan was [ousted from office](#) in April last year, several important developments took place: As the new leader of the political opposition, Khan started a campaign against the successive government of PM Shahbaz Sharif by holding large-scale rallies. Khan considers the toppling of his government as a [conspiracy led by the](#) ruling coalition of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) – backed by both the military and the US and thus with '[no democratic legitimacy](#)'. He [took](#) 'all possible institutional measures to enforce a snap general election', a demand rejected by PM Sharif. The resignation of national assembly members belonging to the PTI, made the holding of by-elections for the vacant seats in the parliament necessary. Khan [swept](#) the first round of these by-elections. He duly interpreted this victory as '[a referendum on his popularity](#)'. According to observers, the results of this first round of by-elections [show](#) 'that elections cannot be relied on to keep him from power'. According to the [Public Pulse Report](#) by Gallup Pakistan, published on March 6, 2023, 'PTI Chairman Imran Khan is with a big lead the most popular politician in the country. In numbers, Khan was "positively rated" among 61 per cent of Pakistanis, whereas only 32 per cent have a "good opinion" about current PM Nawaz Sharif and 36 percent about Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari'. Additionally, the [survey](#) also noted that a majority of the respondents, 62 per cent,

³ The [charges](#) 'include attempt to murder, punishment for abetment, criminal conspiracy, armed rioting, criminal intimidation, obstructing public servants, causing public nuisance, mischief by fire or explosive substance with an intent to damage public property, among others.'

⁴ It is also held that one PTI member [died in custody](#).

blamed the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)/PML-N for the current economic crisis, while only 38 per cent blame the previous PTI government.

Khan intensifies his populist rhetoric by pushing the notion of a conspiracy against him. He creates the narrative that the government is afraid of his return to power due to his growing popularity. Khan argues that everything the authorities are doing related to him is politically motivated, foremost the increasing number of allegations and charges.⁵ This he sees as part of the efforts intended to ensure he is unable to contest this year's provincial and general elections. Khan and his supporters are also convinced there is a plot to [assassinate him](#). In response, government officials describe Khan not only as a dangerous populist who is [capitalising](#) on the socio-economic grievances of the nation but also as a terrorist willing to instigate anti-state violence among the citizenry. Interestingly, Khan's narrative finds partial support among some observers, who question the terrorism charges against both Khan and PTI and ask the authorities '[to charge protesters under "appropriate" laws.](#)'

The unrestricted power struggle between the government and Khan once again reveals one of Pakistan's core problems: the lack of unity and the inability to build national consensus among the political elites on essential issues. Instead, both the PTI camp and the ruling PDM coalition remain stuck in paralysing political patterns. Political deadlocks are not solved through parliamentary debates but addressed through public unrest, street power, and violence. The politics of vengeance is once again dominating political behaviour and action in Pakistan. But it would be too narrow interpretation of the current situation to blame Khan alone for all this. There are no doubts that both the PTI and its affiliates are willing to ignore the rule of law and enter violent confrontations with the security forces. It also becomes clear that any government and law-enforcing agencies must respond to such a challenge to the state's authority – albeit with respect for the principle of proportionality. The disproportional use of coercive force, including '[abusive measures](#)', by the state against Khan and PTI members also contributes this vicious conflict. The large-scale raids against PTI affiliates immediately after the outbreak of clashes are not being interpreted as a justified attempt to implement court orders

⁵ At least [85 cases](#) have been filed against Khan at courts across the country, and their numbers continues to rise.

or as due measures intended to maintain law and order. Instead, state action is seen as a systematic crackdown on the legitimate political opposition – and an attempt to escape from free and fair elections. These perceptions seem confirmed by statements indicating that the government is [considering](#) a ban on the PTI. Equating and [outlawing the main oppositional party with a ‘militant gang’](#) is just another sign of the country’s dysfunctional political-administrative structure, emphasizing once again how the country is far from what is called a consolidated democracy.

In consequence, the range of possible upcoming scenarios is broad. From a best-case scenario in the form of scheduled elections leading to a democratic transfer of power, until a worst-case scenario as both Khan and his PTI are banned in an attempt to eliminate the opposition (which could lead to an outbreak of armed civil unrest), much is possible. The most powerful actor in the country, the army, seems to so far remain silent; however, a direct military intervention – including a coup – cannot be ruled out. It even gains further significance as one considers the economic and financial crisis as well as the rising threat of both terrorist and separatist movements. Never before has Pakistan witnessed political chaos of this magnitude.

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