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The Demise of ‘Hybrid’ Democracy in Pakistan: Case of Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Arrest

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Former PM Imran Khan’s Arrest and the Political Turmoil in Pakistan

Participatory political cultures and genuine democratic norms are nurtured only when democratic processes have been rigorously and uninterruptedly practiced over a significant period (Pavone 2014). The primary cause for the unsuccessful democratization of Pakistan’s social and political structure stems from the persistent interference of the military establishment in the country’s political sphere. This is not only marked by multiple martial laws throughout the country’s history, but also the ceaseless interference by the military even during democratic governments (Altaf 2019, 4). The current political crisis haunting the country can also be seen against the backdrop of this historical problem.

On May 9, 2023, party workers of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) stormed various government and military establishments after its Chairman, Imran Khan, was arrested by the rangers who apprehended him at the Islamabad High Court (*The Express Tribune* 2023). This arrest had long been anticipated, as various attempts by the government to arrest him from his residency in Lahore were averted by the party workers, resulting in numerous clashes and even deaths. In a show of unwavering support, Khan’s supporters united, proclaiming that the former Prime Minister was their “red line” (Qarar and Gurmani 2022). A state of intense disorder and chaos ensued following the arrest of Khan.

The Aftermath of Arrest

The May 9 attacks were unprecedented. The General Headquarters (Pakistan Army) was attacked and vandalized, and the residency of Lahore’s corps commander was stormed and everything of value was taken away by people before the building was torched (*The Express Tribune* 2023). For the next few days, images circulated on social media showing people with food, vases, and even peacocks that had been kept in the house. Consequently, Khan was granted bail by the court and his arrest was termed unconstitutional (*Arab News* 2023). This also resulted in an unprecedented criticism of the

military on social media as well as on the streets – it seemed as if the people in Punjab were finally recognizing what those from the periphery had long been trying to draw attention to. A score of people came forward expressing their readiness to confront the military, whom they believed was the prime suspect that removed Khan from power through a vote of no confidence (Baloch and Ellis-Pettersson 2023).

But this apparent show of power that had momentarily positioned PTI advantageously during the crackdown soon started to crumble. The military retaliated in the following days—cases were registered in almost every district in Punjab, various members of the party leadership were arrested, and party workers’ homes were ransacked by security forces. In the span of a few days, hundreds belonging to PTI were either detained or forcefully disappeared. This included the majority of PTI’s local leadership, as well as notable pro-PTI journalists and influencers like Imran Riaz Khan, Orya Maqbool Khan, and Khadija Shah (IFJ 2023; *Daily Pakistan Global* 2023). They were charged with being the masterminds behind the May 9 attacks (*Daily Pakistan Global* 2023). Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif referred to these attacks as Pakistan’s “Capitol Hill moment” and called for the perpetrators to be punished the same way the US government dealt with the stormers of the Capitol Hill (*The Express Tribune* 2023).

In the last few days, many notable members of the PTI leadership have been released, only to head straight to a press club and announce that they were either leaving PTI or politics altogether. Shireen Mazari, former Human Rights Minister, Fawad Chaudhary, former Information Minister, Jamshed Cheema, Mussarat Jamshed Cheema, Malaika Bukhari, Asad Umer, Fiaz-ul-Hassan Chauhan, among others, have announced their resignations thus far, with more names anticipated to follow suit. There have also been reports that these individuals were coerced into announcing their resignations through a cycle of repeated arrests. Security forces kept re-arresting them after they were granted bail in a particular case. Shireen Mazari, for instance, experienced this cycle of arrest and release four times (Hussain 2023). The message was clear: give up or we will continue to find new charges to keep you behind bars.

It was also announced during this time that the arsonists and abettors of May 9 attacks will be tried in military courts (*Geo News* 2023), which many lawyers and human rights activists have termed as unconstitutional and undemocratic. The impact of these military court trials will likely be most severe for party workers, who will not have the chance to clear their names by publicly announcing their retirement from politics in a press conference. They will face trial without significant support from their own party; nearly the entire PTI leadership, including Khan, has condemned the attacks and asserted their lack of involvement (*Business Recorder* 2023).

The crackdown against PTI seems to be the latest attempt by the military establishment to dismantle a political party, albeit this time targeting a party they had previously helped come into power. During Khan’s regime, Pakistan saw a similar crackdown on dissenters, including women, religious and ethnic minorities, human rights activists, and students. His regime was characterized as a ‘hybrid’ one, where the military would enjoy a sizable political role, supported by a civilian government (IFJ 2023).

In his book, *Pakistan's Hybrid Regime: Growing Democratization, or Increased Authoritarianism*, Ian Talbot provides a comprehensive analysis of post-Musharraf Pakistan. Hybrid regimes are political systems that combine both democratic and authoritarian elements. Pakistan has experienced periodic military interventions and direct military rule. However, since 2009, instead of outright military coups, multi-party elections have been held alongside the presence of military retaining reserved powers, particularly in the domains of security and foreign policy (Talbot 2021, 141). The same relationship was observed during the PTI's alliance with the military in 2018.

According to PTI's own narrative, when Khan and the military leadership disagreed on the governance of the country, the military allegedly orchestrated PTI's allies in the parliament to switch sides and join the opposition. Subsequently, through a vote of no confidence, Khan's government was ousted from power.

Many of the PTI leaders who left the party before or after the state crackdown against the party post-9 May protests, have joined another "king's" party: the "Istikam-e-Pakistan Party" (IPP) (Adnan 2023). IPP is a newly launched political party, led by two former close aides of Imran Khan, Jahangir Khan Tareen and Abdul Aleem Khan.

First as Farce, Then as Tragedy

This crisis is a continuation of a tainted chapter in Pakistan's history, where the military helps build a civilian facade for its hegemony and discards it once it becomes a nuisance. However, this time, the civilian leadership has attempted to fight back. Regardless of the outcome of this crisis, Pakistan's democratic order will remain dysfunctional until the power to form or dismiss political regimes is taken away from generals and entrusted to the people of the country.

This lesson stands as the most significant takeaway from the Pakistan's own history. The country's democratic journey formally started around twenty-three years after its inception, when the first general elections were held in 1970. The Awami Muslim League (AML) in East Pakistan, led by Sheikh Mujeeb, emerged as the most popular political party of the country. However, its mandate was rejected, leading to the tragic events of the Fall of Dhaka in 1971, where the majority of the country chose to separate itself from the minority (Altaf 2019, 2).

The breakthrough in reviving democracy in what remained of Pakistan was the formulation of the 1973 constitution under the left-leaning populist leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Although the constitution of 1973 clearly stated under its Article 6 that any individual guilty of abrogating the constitution would face death penalty, it could not prevent military interventions. Soon, democracy faced another blow with Zia's martial law, which was preceded by the highly controversial and infamous execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the architect of the same constitution. Zia's ten-year military rule (from 1977 to 1988) once again relegated democracy into the 'waiting room of history' (Altaf 2019, 26).

A decade later, in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf declared an emergency and assumed total control as Chief Martial Law Administrator. Under mounting pressure from democratic forces within and outside the country, Musharraf's dictatorship ended in 2008, leading to the calling of general elections (Altaf 2019, 49). The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) won the elections and formed the federal government under the presidency of Asif Ali Zardari (now Co-Chairman of the party).

The return to democracy saw landmark constitutional reforms that took place during 2008 to 2013. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the incorporation of the idea of decentralization and devolution of power between center and federating units (provinces) in the 18th amendment marked a major step forward in achieving the ideals of a federation and democracy. Another value-adding development for a sustainable democracy was the signing of the charter of democracy between the two most popular and rival mainstream parties, the PML (N) and PPP. For the first time in Pakistan's political history, an elected government completed a full five-year term and conducted the next general elections without any interruptions.

In the 2013 general elections, the PML (N) emerged as the majority, and Nawaz Sharif became Prime Minister of Pakistan for the third time. This was followed by a smooth transition of power from one democratic party to the other. However, the tradition of peacefully transferring power among varying political parties did not last long. During the second half of Sharif's tenure, he was disqualified from serving as Prime Minister while facing opposition from the military-backed forces of PTI. Following his disqualification, some of his thoughts on his removal bore an uncanny resemblance to Khan's. As a result, in the 2018 general elections, PTI won majority seats and, through the inclusion of independent candidates and coalition with religious parties, formed the government at the national level as well as in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) (Hashim 2018).

Upon assuming power, Imran Khan, the cricketer turned politician and now a former Prime Minister, took swift actions against the opposition parties accused of corruption charges. Apart from raids, arrests, and convictions of opposition parties (mainly carried out under the pretext of corruption charges), PTI also suppressed critical voices raised in favor of the marginalized and powerless. At the beginning, Imran Khan as a Prime Minister reassured that his government and military were on the same page (*The Economic Times* 2018), emphasizing that the military did not exert excessive influence over the civilian administration. He claimed to have built efficient and effective civil-military relations. However, upon completing the third year of his term in office, Khan faced Pakistan's historical democratic tragedy of failing to complete the five-year term (IFJ 2023).

In 2020, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), a coalition of major opposition parties, emerged as a united front against the ruling PTI government. Despite the Prime Minister's own brother being removed from power not long ago, the current government has taken a leading role in cracking down on the PTI and openly supporting military trials of its leaders. On 10 April, 2022, the coalition successfully ousted Khan through a no-confidence motion, after which the PDM formed its own government with the opposition leader Shehbaz Sharif as the country's prime minister. This surely would not have been possible without both the open and tacit support of the military for the PDM (Chaudhry 2023). Recognizing the military's significant influence in shaping

and dismantling governments in Pakistan, prominent figures in the PDM, including Nawaz Sharif, Shahbaz Sharif, and Asif Ali Zardari, took maximum benefit of the situation and presented themselves as experienced and the only viable alternative in the absence of PTI.

The Gloomy Prospect of Democracy in Pakistan

All of this is happening at a time when Pakistan grapples with a historic devaluation of the Pakistani rupee, rising inflation, unemployment, and the cost of living. These economic challenges have further eroded public confidence in the government's ability to effectively manage the economy (*Profit by Pakistan Today* 2023).

Amidst the political chaos within the country, the PDM government lacks popular support, while the most prominent party in the country appears to be facing a rapid decline. The most concerning element is the fact that political polarization has reached new heights, both within the state and in society at large. State institutions themselves also seem to be divided based on their political affiliations.

In order to restore balance in the existing imbalance in the state apparatus, it is crucial to recognize that the fault in Pakistan's democracy resides in the veto power of the military in the political arena. Given the historical dominance of Pakistan's military as an "over-developed" institution, it is clear that its role poses a structural obstacle to the functioning of Pakistan's democracy. Structural reforms are therefore necessary to curtail the military's influence and align it with the constitutional framework of Pakistan.

Furthermore, it is imperative that political parties stop negotiating with the military establishment for their own vested interests. Instead, they should realize their own significance, strength, and central role in fostering a functional democracy. They should build a bare-minimum consensus and uphold their integrity by ensuring that the military does not sit in the driving seat of the democratic process.

Whatever the outcome of this power struggle might be, the common people in the country are not represented in any discussion regarding the country's future. They are the ones bearing the brunt of record inflation and militarization, with little agency in determining which political force will ultimately govern them once the dust settles. ■

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