

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

Political Debacle in Pakistan Detached from People's Life

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The vote of no confidence that led to the ouster of Imran Khan marks another major event in Pakistan's political and constitutional history. This has also considerably transformed the country's political landscape. This is the first time that the country's national parliament has voted out its leader since Pakistan's de facto restoration of democracy in 2008. This move left a notorious parliamentary record — the premature conclusion of the prime minister's rule.

Historical perspective

This is not the first time a vote of no confidence was initiated in Pakistan's National Assembly. Nonetheless, this was the only successful one. The practice was first initiated in 1957 against then prime minister I.I Chundrigar, who resigned before the vote could take place. The vote of no confidence has also been moved against former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Shaukat Aziz, both of whom survived the vote. There have also been many cases of no confidence and the *defection* of parliamentarians from within a ruling party in Pakistan's provincial assemblies; the latest was the ouster of Balochistan's former chief minister Jam Kamal Khan, who was then replaced by Abdul Qudoos Bizenjo last year.

These votes of no confidence have a tendency to result in major constitutional crises, allowing un-elected state institutions to step in and intervene both during and following the process. What differentiates Khan's ouster from its precedents is that by the time he faced the vote, relative constitutional safety for the parliament had been in place following the 18th amendment as well as the elimination of Article 58-2B.

Khan tried measures which earlier prime ministers might have pulled off: get the vote rejected through a ruling by the speaker, immediately dissolve the assembly, and announce fresh elections. With constitutional firewalls in place, the Supreme Court stepped in and declared all these actions to be contrary to the Constitution.

New Crises

Following the success of the no confidence vote against Khan and the election of Shehbaz Sharif as Pakistan's new prime minister, a variety of new crises have started to take shape. First, a war of narratives pertaining to the emergence and execution of this vote have unfolded. Khan's argues that a foreign country conspired against him, the opposition abetted this adventure, and state institutions failed to come to his rescue – he claims that the only closure to this crisis lies in fresh elections. Even though the National Security Committee confirmed that there was no evidence of an alleged foreign conspiracy and the Supreme Court also declared Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)'s actions of rejecting the motion and dissolving the national assembly unconstitutional, there have been a series of massive rallies and processions where the PTI continues to call for fresh elections.

The new government, however, says that Khan lost the trust of the House as his government failed on socio-economic fronts. Inflation has skyrocketed, pushing the public to look for alternatives. The PTI has now pinned its hopes on mobilizing the masses to demand fresh elections. They believe that they can come back with a two-thirds majority, something largely unprecedented in Pakistan's history. They believe that this would be possible, provided that the public perceives this as a conspiracy. The protests on the streets of Lahore and Karachi included slogans against the establishment, especially Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa. This was the first time such open criticism against the establishment took place on the streets of Pakistan's urban centers since General Musharraf's rule.

But does the PTI actually think that such support will help its cause? It might be true that the PTI's conspiracy narrative has gained traction among people, but to believe that this will result in a landslide electoral victory seems highly farfetched. Indeed, the PTI has managed to re-mobilize their urban middle-class support base, but there is little evidence to suggest that their narrative serves to expand this base, especially in areas where they did not have political presence earlier. This is also coupled with the fact that key allies and electables, who allowed the PTI to form a government despite having a low number of seats in the Punjab, defected and allied with the opposition parties to make PML-N's Hamza Shehbaz, the chief minister of Punjab. 25 defected members of the PTI have now been deseated by the election commission following the Supreme Court's verdict on defection.

Despite this, Khan's position on re-election remains firm; he recently said in a TV interview that he would prefer sitting in the opposition until he has a two-thirds majority in the parliament. The issue of a fresh election is dented by two major aspects of the current electoral landscape. First, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has already stated on record that they are currently not in a position to conduct fresh elections because of the pending delimitation following the new census and the merger of tribal districts into Khyber Pukhtunkhwa. Given that the issue of delimitation will persist until October 2022, it seems unlikely that fresh general elections will be conducted within this year. Furthermore, a case against the PTI for allegedly accepting foreign funding has come close to a conclusion at the ECP. There is a looming possibility that the PTI, as a party, might be disqualified if the ECP confirms evidence of foreign funding. This decision would severely dent the PTI's narrative and will inevitably impact the execution and outcomes of the next general elections.

There has also been talk regarding emerging cracks within the establishment following the failure of the so-called hybrid regime. Despite the PTI's failures on the economic front, Khan was able to establish major campaigns in terms of Pakistan's foreign policy following his tirades against

Islamophobia and Pakistan's involvement pre- and post-U.S.' withdrawal from Afghanistan. Some view that General Bajwa lost his trust in Khan, which is why he mobilized the opposition against him. Supporters of the PTI supporters have also used this narrative in their protests. However, some also view that the PTI continues to enjoy the support of some factions within the establishment, particularly those led by General Faiz Hameed, Pakistan's former Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence. Even Khan recently said in a podcast that his decision to give an extension in the tenure of his Director-General of Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI) was something that did not sit well with his opponents.

Regardless of how this war of narratives will end, the new government, despite its recent victory, stands at a crossroads. It now has to try and maintain control over a setup that they have alleged, has been considerably destroyed by Khan's policies and, while they are at it, try and deliver on various fronts so that they do not lose the public's trust before the next elections. For example, as soon as the new cabinet was sworn in, the government faced a major challenge in terms of fuel prices. The PTI's deals with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) included an increase in fuel prices. Since the PTI had maintained fuel prices through large subsidies, the new government now bears the cost of \$12 million per day to keep fuel prices where they are.

Finance Minister Miftah Ismail has tweeted that the talks with the IMF are underway in a positive manner and hoped that the economic situation in the country would improve soon. Government is seeking the revival of the stalled \$6 billion loan programme, for which the finance minister will also travel to Doha on May 24 to participate in the final round of negotiations. Nonetheless, it may remain stuck between the devil and the deep sea. It is left with two choices – to maintain fuel prices and keep the subsidies, not risking any public outcry by, or to let go of fuel subsidies to relieve massive pressure on the economy, causing fuel prices to increase substantially. In the latter case, the government will receive massive uproar from the public, which may cause a massive PR failure.

Elite War Detached from People's Life

For Pakistan's masses, the crisis plays out in an entirely different way. For an average Pakistani citizen, what does this crisis mean? Surely, they must make a choice in the next elections, but what's more to it? Did their lives transform for the better under the PTI's rule? Is there any hope for a better future under either Khan's or Sharif's rule?

It hasn't yet been a quarter since the vote of no confidence against Khan succeeded in the parliament and the Pakistani public is already facing electricity outages, rise in inflation. It is the people that will have to bear the eventual brunt arising from the government's decision on May 24th; both in the case of rising fuel prices or in the case of a rise in inflation due to massive fuel subsidies. Speaking entirely in these terms, it seems as if the entirety of this vote of no confidence and its outcomes do not mean anything more than an elite infighting within Pakistan's power echelons, which have no utility for the masses other than a constant political drama taking majority of the airtime on mainstream media.

The main reason behind this massive lag between what happens in power centres and at its margins is that no political force, until now, has emerged with a clear-cut plan regarding how to solve

the major fault lines that have come to define Pakistan's crisis of inequality and deprivation. There has been a historical tension between the center and disproportionately developed federating units. Pakistan's economy has largely remained anti-people and drenched in IMF's structural programs. Inflation has hit a historic high while wages have remained as they were. On top of it, levels of danger consequent of dissent have also remained at an inhumane level. Cases of enforced disappearances have continued and speaking truth to power still poses an existential threat. In this context, what difference would it make if the PTI is replaced by the Pakistan Muslim League (PML)-N or the Pakistan Peoples Party loses power to PML-Q? The PTI leadership has carefully constructed a narrative over how and why their government was ousted by a foreign hand. But they are unlikely to claim that that they deserve a two-third majority in a fresh election because they are actually able to deliver what the people mandated through their vote. Similarly, the earlier opposition and the new government also do not seem to have a radical plan of action to rid Pakistan of the fundamental ills that pose a threat to the dignity of the people.

Their best bet is to remain functional until the next election, whenever they are conducted. The recent vote of no confidence has led to a clear infight between Pakistan's major power sharers; be it the establishment or political parties. But, as history suggests, the dispossessed people of Pakistan has always been the consistent victims in this fight for power regardless of the victor. ■

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