

# Mass opposition rally heightens political crisis in Pakistan

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28 December 2011

Up to 150,000 people took part in an anti-government protest in Karachi on Sunday organised by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice or PTI). While Khan, a former cricketer turned conservative bourgeois politician, is seeking to constrain the opposition to narrow limits, the demonstration reflects mounting popular hostility to the government and its support for the US-led AfPak war.

In a demagogic speech to the rally, Khan declared: "Nobody can stop this tsunami." He held a similar demonstration of 100,000 in Lahore in October. Declaring that he wanted "a new Pakistan," the PTI leader promised "a new foreign policy that will free Pakistan from the clutches of slavery," and to "end corruption and injustice from our society."

Khan has criticized US drone strikes in areas of Pakistan bordering Afghanistan, leading a two-day protest in Karachi in May. Far from opposing the US war on principle, he argues that it is unwinnable and is fuelling support for Islamist organisations.

He is concerned that continuing the Pakistani bourgeoisie's alliance with US imperialism in its current form could lead to a political explosion in Pakistan and might bring the working class into struggle against the Pakistani regime.

"Pakistan must get out of this alliance [with the US] to stop the radicalisation of our society," Khan told a press conference on December 19.

Together with Khan, various Islamist parties are seeking to exploit popular anger over US attacks on Pakistani soil, which escalated after the NATO

airstrikes on two border posts on November 25-26 killed 26 Pakistani soldiers. Some 30,000 people attended an Islamist rally on December 18 in Lahore to condemn the attack and openly support the Pakistani army.

The raid followed the flagrant US violation of Pakistani sovereignty in May, when two US helicopters violated Pakistani airspace and dropped US Special Forces in the Pakistani city of Abbottabad to murder Osama bin Laden. This also provoked widespread outrage.

Confronting mass hostility, the Pakistani government has been compelled to take limited retaliatory measures, including halting all land shipments via Pakistan to US-NATO forces in Afghanistan, and ending US access to a Pakistani airbase used to launch drone attacks inside the country's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). The sharp tensions between the government and the military were evident last week, when Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani warned of conspiracies to oust his administration—a claim denied by armed forces chief, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

Sections of the Pakistani ruling elite are backing the PTI as a means to contain popular alienation from the ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and also the opposition Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

A string of top-level defections have taken place from both parties, including former PPP foreign minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, and former PML-N leader Javed Hashmi. Others are Jahangir Tareen, a minister

under former military strongman Pervez Musharraf, and a former head of the civilian intelligence bureau, Masood Sharif Khattak.

Amid chants of “Go, Zardari, Go,” Qureshi told Sunday’s rally that to have “an independent, sovereign, prosperous, credible and strong Pakistan”, the country must elect a leadership that “could offer their heads rather than surrender”.

President Asif Ali Zardari is currently embroiled in the so-called “memo-gate” affair, involving an alleged secret offer to the Obama administration. Zardari purportedly gave carte blanche for US military operations inside Pakistan and pledged to install a pro-US army leadership in return for support against a possible coup. Despite Zardari’s denial, the military is pressing for a Supreme Court investigation.

Washington is clearly nervous that its relations with Islamabad could deteriorate further. An article in Sunday’s *New York Times* made clear that the US is seeking to establish a new modus operandi with the Pakistani government. While the CIA has put drone strikes on hold since November 16 so as not to further inflame public opinion inside Pakistan, the Pakistani government is drawing up new arrangements for military collaboration.

US officials told the newspaper that the outcome “will likely be a series of step-by-step agreements on military cooperation, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism operations, including revamped ‘kill boxes’, the term for flight zones over Pakistan’s largely ungoverned borderlands where the CIA drones will be allowed to hunt a shrinking number of Al Qaeda leaders and other militants.”

According to the *Long War Journal*, the CIA has conducted 64 drone missile attacks inside Pakistan this year, compared to 117 last year and 53 in 2009. The Obama administration dramatically increased the number of such strikes that have provoked bitter opposition inside Pakistan. While the US claims the victims were all “militants”, multiple Pakistani sources indicate that the attacks have slaughtered hundreds of civilians—men, women and children.

The Pakistani military, which has longstanding relations with the US, has no intention of breaking off ties. The *Times* reported that US Joint Chiefs chairman General Martin Dempsey phoned his Pakistan counterpart, General Kayani last Wednesday. Asked if the military relationship between the two countries could be repaired, Kayani said “he thought it could, but that Pakistan needed some space.”

Similarly Khan has no intention of breaking with Washington. Backed by sections of the army, he is functioning as a useful political safety valve to defuse popular anger, as the two militaries work out new arrangements. In the event that Zardari and the PPP government are forced from office, Khan is being promoted as a possible alternative.

Khan has only been able to posture as “anti-war” in the absence of any principled opposition to the war from the various pseudo-radical organisations inside Pakistan. These groups have either promoted illusions in the PPP as the only political alternative to the right-wing Islamist organisations, or refused to criticise the war. In doing so, these ex-lefts have blocked any independent movement of the working class and oppressed masses against the US war, and the government that supports it.



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