

# Pakistan: Opposition protests demand government's resignation

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Violent clashes took place in Pakistan on Friday and Saturday between police and anti-government protesters led by right-wing Islamic cleric, Tahir ul-Qadri, who has vowed to bring down the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Eight Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT) supporters and one policeman died when police attacked protesters converging on Lahore, the provincial capital of the Punjab. Hundreds more were wounded. The police also arrested over 500 protesters most of whom were transferred to prisons, out of concern that local police stations would be attacked.

The Canada-based cleric, Qadri, who led an anti-corruption campaign against the previous Pakistan People's Party (PPP)-led government last year, returned to Pakistan in June making similar accusations against the Sharif government. Nine of his PAT supporters were killed in clashes with police in Lahore just prior to his arrival.

On Saturday, Qadri called off the protest march and condemned the government, saying it “wants a massacre in the name of a crackdown.” Qadri called for a “martyrs day” on Sunday and announced he would join a march on August 14 organised by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the country's third-largest parliamentary party.

PTI leader Imran Khan has called the *Azadi* [freedom] march in Islamabad on Pakistan's “Independence Day” and said that a million people will take part. Khan claims that the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was elected in “the most rigged election in Pakistan's history.” The PTI is demanding a recount of votes in rigged electorates and a mid-term national election—in effect calling for the government's resignation.

The Punjabi provincial government blocked

highways to Lahore with hundreds of containers to prevent protesters reaching the city and kept them in place for the protest march later in the week. It has also tightened fuel supplies to restrict vehicular movements. Hospitals and a fleet of ambulances have been prepared for further violent clashes.

The calls for the government to step down have raised concerns in the ruling class. The *Dawn* has dedicated several editorials to the issue, denouncing Qadri for attempting to bring down an elected government. But in a different tone, the paper has also called on the ruling PML-N and opposition PTI to “back down” and to find “some kind of middle ground.”

Other opposition parties—the PPP and Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami—are reportedly trying to broker a deal between the government and the PTI, indicating nervousness in the ruling elites that the protests could trigger broader social opposition.

The Pakistani press is rife with rumours of a military takeover. Various analysts have suggested that the military could exploit the political crisis and might even have been encouraging the protest marches. However, political columnist Ejaz Haider commented to Reuters: “It's not something that the military has choreographed, it is just benefiting from the civilian government's weakness.”

The Reuters article did note: “Both Qadri and Khan have at times been seen by some Pakistanis as close to the military or even as being used by the military to pressure the government.” The PTI has denied any such connection with military, but Imran Khan has suggested the military could intervene, saying: “The responsibility will lie squarely on Nawaz Sharif if the army steps in.”

The army leadership is hostile to the government's

decision to pursue treason charges against military strongman, General Pervez Musharraf, who ousted Sharif in a coup in 1999. Yesterday, Musharraf told a convention of his party via telephone that the government was to blame for the country's problems, and, if it could not solve them, it must go.

At the same time, the government is dependent on the military to contain and suppress the opposition. On July 25, it invoked constitutional laws to mobilise the army in Islamabad for three months to "help the civilian administration." On Friday, based on a colonial-era law, the government prohibited "all kinds of gatherings of five or more persons... at any public place" in Islamabad.

Although the Sharif government came to power with a majority in the national assembly, it is now in deep crisis just one year later. The PML-N won the election, not because of its own popularity but because of mass hostility to the former PPP administration which implemented the International Monetary Fund (IMF) austerity program, backed the US-led AfPak war, bowed to US demands for military repression in areas bordering Afghanistan, and is widely regarded as corrupt.

For all their denunciations of government corruption and its anti-democratic methods, the opposition parties organising the current protests do not oppose the IMF's measures or the Pakistani military's current offensive in North Waziristan. In fact, the PTI voted in support of the offensive in parliament, completely exposing its anti-war posturing during the election campaign. The PTI and PAT are attempting to exploit the growing hostility to the government among workers and the poor for their own political ends and at the same time block any independent movement of the working class.

Washington is clearly concerned. The *Dawn* reported that US Ambassador Richard Olson is holding talks with government and opposition political parties and also with military leaders. It noted that Olson had told the various political leaders that the US was for governmental change via "constitutional means" and "constitutional change would be perfectly legitimate."

What hypocrisy! Not only have US administrations worked with and supported every Pakistani military dictator in the past, Washington would do so again. It has very close relations with the military hierarchy, on which it relies as a partner in suppressing the

continuing resistance to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. The US is concerned that a military intervention in the present political crisis could trigger a social explosion in the working class.



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