

Political tensions escalate in Pakistan as protests demand PM's resignation

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21 August 2014

Pakistan's political crisis continued to mount yesterday, as twin protest marches demanding Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's resignation reached the parliamentary precinct of the capital of Islamabad.

Protest leaders vowed to storm Sharif's official residence inside the city's high security zone but postponed any action last night after negotiations began with government officials. The talks, which are due to resume today, remain deadlocked over the central demand for the prime minister's resignation.

Former cricketer Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Canada-based right-wing Islamic cleric Tahir ul-Qadri's smaller political group, Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT), are heading separate but simultaneous protests.

On Tuesday night, they entered Islamabad's so-called "red zone," which houses the Supreme Court complex, government buildings and foreign consulates as well as luxury hotels, in breach of previous agreements not to do so.

A huge contingent of 30,000 security personnel has been mobilised in the capital to face the protests. The "red zone" is the most tightly secured, with a layer of police in riot gear backed by paramilitaries and a 700-strong army unit closely guarding important locations.

According to the police estimates, up to 55,000 people remain involved in the protests, six days after the "Freedom March" left Lahore on August 14. After deadly clashes with police prevented PAT supporters from holding a march in Lahore on August 10, Qadri has mostly synchronised his protest with that of the PTI.

Among its list of accusations against the 15-month-old government, Khan insists that Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) was elected in a rigged

election. Qadri condemns the government as corrupt, insisting that it be replaced.

Last Sunday, Khan issued an ultimatum for Sharif to resign. "After two days, I'll no longer be able to stop this tsunami," he said, referring to his supporters. The next day, he announced that the 34 PTI deputies in the 342-member national parliament would resign, and the same would happen in provincial parliaments, except in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI heads the government.

In a further attempt to exploit popular anger against the Sharif government, Khan called for "civil disobedience," urging people to refuse to pay taxes and utility bills.

On Tuesday, Khan vowed to march into the "red zone," raising the possibility of violent clashes with security forces. Protesters were allowed to clear their way into the zone by using a crane and wire cutters to remove shipping containers and barbed wire fences. Both Khan and Qadri moved into the zone in bullet-proof containers on the back of trucks.

Khan then threatened to storm the prime minister's residence and turn the parliamentary area into "a Tahrir Square," referring to the Egyptian uprising that deposed Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

Sharif's failure to contain the protests has led to media speculation of military backing for the marches, and the possibility of a coup. However, in comments to the *Wall Street Journal* yesterday, analyst Simbal Khan suggested: "It suits the military better to weaken Nawaz Sharif, not get rid of him, so that they can then have their way with the policies they want."

Last week, Sharif sent two of his close aides to meet army chief General Raheel Sharif. According to one media report, they were told that the military had no intention of conducting a coup, but "if the government

wants to get through its many problems and the four remaining years of its term, it has to share space with the army.”

At the very least, the military is exploiting the situation to insist on a greater say inside the political establishment. The military has directly ruled Pakistan for half the period since the state’s creation in 1947. Even under so-called civilian governments, the military has wielded considerable power behind the scenes.

Sharp tensions have emerged over the past year between Sharif’s government and the military, particularly over the trial of former military dictator Pervez Musharraf for treason. Now Sharif is attempting a reconciliation. He spent most of Tuesday afternoon in discussions with General Sharif.

Following Sharif’s meeting with the army chief, the military protecting Islamabad was placed on “high alert.” After Khan called for the storming of the prime minister’s residence, the military for the first time warned against such a move.

Military spokesman Major General Asim Bajwa said buildings in the “red zone” were “national symbols” protected by the army, and therefore their sanctity “must be respected.” He urged negotiations to “resolve the prevailing impasse” in “the larger national and public interest.”

Khan’s and Qadri’s calls for “democracy” and their feigned sympathy for the toiling masses are fraudulent to the core. They are attempting to exploit growing mass disaffection for their own political advantage. Neither party opposes the policies of successive governments that have produced extreme poverty and mass unemployment for the vast majority of Pakistanis, nor the military operations demanded by the US in the tribal regions bordering Afghanistan.

The Obama administration, which considers Islamabad pivotal for its geo-political strategy in the region, has so far indicated it does not favour a military intervention, fearing the popular upheaval that could result. US State Department deputy spokesperson Marie Harf said yesterday: “We are carefully monitoring the demonstrations in Islamabad. We urge all sides to refrain from violence, exercise restraint, and respect the rule of law.”

A considerable section of the Pakistani bourgeoisie is also anxious that the situation could get out of control. The country’s main stock market in Karachi recorded a

fall of about 400 points in its principal 100-share index on Tuesday, continuing a pattern of decline. Major newspapers have published editorials and comments condemning Khan and Qadri for destabilising “democracy.”

The uncertainty has been deepened by sharp disagreements between the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the government over its failure to meet the conditions laid out for the IMF’s emergency \$US6.8 billion bailout last year. Despite 12 days of discussions with the government, the IMF has not agreed to the release of the next \$550 million tranche of the loan.

According to *Dawn*, the main contentions were the government’s failure to grant full autonomy to the State Bank of Pakistan and to increase electricity prices. Sharif delayed the power tariff hike for fear of further arousing mass opposition ahead of the protest marches, but the IMF insists that the issue must be addressed “over the next three weeks.”



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