Anti-government protests deepen Pakistan's political crisis

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Pakistan's political crisis has intensified after anti-government demonstrators demanding Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's resignation clashed with the riot police over the weekend.

Protestors attempted to march to Sharif's official residence and the adjoining parliament house in Islamabad. Three people were killed in the police attack and over 550 injured. Police also arrested more than 100 people.

Yesterday, protesters from Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) fuelled the tensions by storming the Pakistan state television headquarters and ransacking it, before leaving upon the arrival of army troops.

The Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif stepped into the political crisis last Thursday at the prime minister's request to mediate in the face of continued protests by the PTI and the Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT), which is led by Tahir ul-Qadri, a Sunni cleric with dual Canadian and Pakistani citizenship.

Sharif later denied asking the military chief to intervene, after widespread criticism in the media and from opposition political parties, accusing him of giving in to the military. The army's intervention was widely described as a "soft coup," with the military asserting its authority in defence and foreign affairs.

Interior Minister Nisar Chaudhry Ali Khan then ordered a crackdown on the crowds who resumed the protests on Saturday. The police rained down tear gas, and opened fire with live rounds, as well as rubber bullets.

PTI and PAT supporters organised protests in Lahore, Karachi and several other cities on Sunday opposing the police violence. Around 30,000 police and paramilitary forces have been deployed in Islamabad alone.

On Sunday evening, General Sharif called an emergency meeting of corps commanders to discuss the latest developments, underscoring the military's use of the crisis to strengthen its hand. After the meeting, its public relations office issued a statement expressing concern over "using force" to quell protests and insisting that "the situation should be resolved politically."

The statement in effect rejected the interior minister's justification for the police assault as being necessary to "protect state assets." It also challenged Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif's threat of a further crackdown on protestors.

Yesterday, General Sharif met with the prime minister to deliver the military's message. No details were issued. However, private TV channels, including popular Urdu language Dunya TV, reported that the army chief advised Sharif to resign as prime minister for three months while an investigation was held into the PTI's charges that Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) rigged the last election.

The government denied that the army chief made such a request. After a parliamentary joint session, Sharif vowed not to resign or go on leave for three months. The army's public relation office described the media reports as baseless. Whatever the exact circumstances, the eruption of the rumour itself shows the depth of political crisis and the belief that the military is rapidly making inroads.

After the parliamentary session, Defence Minister Asif praised the military as "apolitical" and claimed it was committed to democracy. He also revealed, however, that the government would take the military's advice to form a committee to hold discussions with Khan and Qadri.

Rifts emerged within the PTI, with party president

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Javed Hashmi calling a press conference yesterday to accuse Imran Khan of ignoring a party committee decision not to march to the prime minister's house. Hashmi alleged that Khan received a message from "outside" to proceed with the march, implying the army instigated the confrontation. Khan denied the allegation, while the army claimed it had given no support to the PTI and PAT.

The PTI and PAT posture as fighters against corruption and for good governance, democracy and equality. As much as Sharif, these parties depend on the army, highlighting the anti-democratic nature of their agitation. When the army issued its statement on Sunday opposing police violence, both parties hailed it.

For all the praise by the PML-N and the opposition parties of the military as "apolitical" and "upholding democracy," a discussion is now taking places within Pakistan's political establishment on whether the military should take power, or at least a major share of power. The army has ruled the country for half of the 67 years since Pakistan's creation in 1947. It consumes a large share of national income and controls much of the economy.

The *Dawn* newspaper, which previously ridiculed the demands of the PTI and PAT and opposed military intervention, yesterday published an editorial questioning the prospects of "salvaging" the government. It urged the government to "rally the democratic forces in the country to save the democratic system" and make "big concessions" to Khan and Qadri. This signals an accession to the military's intervention.

Following the storming of the TV station, the London-based *Financial Times* quoted a Western official in Islamabad who stated: "We are witnessing the continuous erosion of the government." He added: "This is raising questions over the prime minister's future."

The United States, the main powerbroker in Pakistan, issued a statement opposing "any efforts to impose extra-constitutional change to the political system." Washington has repeatedly indicated that it does not favour direct military intervention to topple Sharif's government, at least for now.

The Obama administration's main concern is that the military is discredited among the masses and the official political parties are in a fractious state, so that any coup attempt could unleash a worse political crisis.

There is deep discontent among the working class and poor, exacerbated by Washington's ongoing war in Afghanistan, the US drone strikes along Pakistan's western border and the American push for stepped-up repression inside the country. Washington provides $3 billion to Pakistan annually, with the lion's share going to the military.

There is a growing anger among working people over the attacks on public spending and growing unemployment resulting from the dictates of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). But Khan and Qadri fully support these measures.

Pakistan's economy is in a fragile state. Foreign debt is ballooning. The IMF withheld the fifth $US6.67 billion instalment of its current loan after the government failed to implement directives to increase power tariffs and restructure the central bank. The government did not raise electricity prices for fear of the eruption of mass struggles against it.

The fear in ruling circles is that the ongoing political crisis could trigger a social upheaval outside of the control of the army and all the political parties.

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