

Pakistani talks to end anti-government protests collapse

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12 September 2014

Negotiations in Islamabad with opposition leader Imran Khan aimed at ending anti-government protests broke down on Monday, deepening the political impasse facing Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government.

Khan said he would not compromise on his main demand: the resignation of Sharif as the precondition for any settlement. "The sticking point is always going to be Nawaz Sharif," he told AFP on Tuesday.

Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, a close confidante of Sharif who heads the government's negotiation team, acknowledged the deadlock. He said "two contentious issues remain" and "one of them is not negotiable for us."

Khan vowed to "unveil" more evidence this Saturday on his charges of election rigging by Sharif. This "grand show" is intended to mark one month of protests. He also urged his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI or Justice Party) supporters to extend the protests by two weeks to bring down Sharif.

Separate negotiations with the other protest leader, right-wing Sunni cleric Tahir ul-Qadri and his Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT), have so far failed to convince him to withdraw his supporters from the tent city demonstration in the capital.

Earlier in the week, thousands of protesters retreated from the high security area where clashes with the police claimed three lives and injured hundreds on August 30 and 31.

The PTI and PAT campaign have nothing to do with any concern for democracy or the plight of workers and poor. Both parties have repeatedly stated their backing for the military and supported austerity measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). They function as a crucial safety valve for mass discontent with Sharif's government, while exploiting

it to advance their own political interests.

Amid the continuing political impasse, a Reuters report on September 5 revealed growing pressure within the military to oust Sharif. According to the news agency, during an emergency meeting convened by army chief Raheel Sharif on August 31, five out of eleven commanders pushed for an intervention.

After four hours of debate, however, the commanders agreed that "the time was not right to overthrow the civilian leadership," a position backed by the army chief. Among the generals who favoured a coup was the powerful Inter-Services Intelligence chief Zaheer-ul-Islam.

An Urdu language private channel reported the following day that the army chief, when he met the prime minister, demanded that he step down for three months until a judicial commission completed its investigation into the election rigging charges. Both sides later denied any such demand was made.

Sections of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (PMLN) and the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) believe that the army is backing the PTI and PAT protests to create the conditions for its reassertion of power. The generals reportedly resent being side-lined by the government on foreign and defence affairs. They reject attempted peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban and oppose the filing of a treason case against the former military dictator, Pervez Musharraf.

PPP leader Syed Khurshid Ahmed has urged the PAT and PTI to end their protests, essentially aligning with the government. However, all these parties, both the government and the opposition, depend on the military. The government has fully backed the ongoing three-month military offensive in North Waziristan, as have the PPP, PTI and PAT.

Khan told the *Wall Street Journal* this week that he

was opposed to any outright coup, or to replacing Sharif with a long-term technocratic civilian government that would be overseen by the military. But he insisted that Sharif had to step down to avoid a popular uprising. “You have only two ways of dislodging the status quo,” he said. “One is a bloody revolution, the other is a peaceful one, by mobilising the masses. There is no third way.”

The Sharif government’s weakness is increasingly visible. Fearful a move against him if he leaves the country, Sharif cancelled his participation in the NATO summit in Wales on September 4 and 5, where a major topic was the political future of Afghanistan. Sharif received a further setback when Chinese President Xi Jinping cancelled his visit to Pakistan and with it the prospect of important infrastructure projects, including in the crisis-ridden energy sector.

Washington’s concerns about the volatile situation were underscored by a Congressional Research Service report released on Tuesday. It warned that “more openly direct control” over security and foreign policy by the Pakistani military would have a “negative” impact on US interests in Pakistan and the region.

The report highlighted US fears that a Pakistani junta could try to counter the growing influence of arch-rival India in Afghanistan. The Pakistani military has always regarded Afghanistan as vital to its “strategic depth” in any conflict with India. Washington, however, has encouraged India to play a greater role in Afghanistan as a means of securing US interests in the country, particularly after it draws down troops at the end of the year. From the outset, the US occupation was aimed at transforming Afghanistan into a US base of operations in Central Asia and the Middle East.

The report cited a foreign policy expert on Pakistan who advised that “Washington’s most helpful role can come through full-throated support for the current government” in “strengthening Pakistan’s democratic system.”

At the same time, there is a considerable anxiety in Washington that the ongoing anti-government protests could inflame the growing popular opposition to the continued attacks on living conditions imposed on the working people as dictated by the IMF.

Despite its concerns about Afghanistan, there is no doubt that Washington would work closely with the generals in the event of a military takeover to forestall

widespread social unrest. The military has ruled Pakistan for half of the period since formal independence in 1947 and the US has backed every junta.



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