

Right-wing populist Imran Khan sworn in as Pakistan prime minister

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The right-wing, Islamic populist Imran Khan was sworn-in as Pakistan's prime minister last Saturday, amid protests from opposition parties that Pakistan's "deep state" had muzzled them during the campaign for last month's national and provincial assembly elections and rigged the results.

A onetime cricket star whose Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (or Movement for Justice) was long an also-ran in Pakistani politics, Khan is assuming the reins of government of a country whose economy is teetering on the verge of collapse. Moreover, Islamabad's relations with the United States, for decades its most important ally, have become so estranged that Washington is threatening to nix an emergency loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Khan devoted much of his first televised address as prime minister to blaming the parties that respectively led the country's last two governments and have dominated its politics for the last three decades—the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP)—for the economic crisis. "Never in Pakistan's history have we faced such difficult economic circumstances," said Khan. "In our entire history," he continued, "we haven't been as indebted" as "we have become in the last ten years."

Khan, who has vowed to slash expenditures across the board, announced the formation of a committee to mount a nationwide drive to "cut expenses." In an attempt to lend legitimacy to an austerity and privatization drive that will further impoverish Pakistan's workers and toilers, Khan pledged to fight corruption, increase tax collections from the rich, and eschew the perks of office, including by reducing the prime minister's personal staff from over five hundred to just two.

In the July 25 election, Khan's PTI captured 151 of

the 342 National Assembly seats. Its parliamentary majority is dependent on the support of smaller parties, including the Karachi-based MQM-P and the Balochistan National Party-Mengal, and independents.

In last Friday's National Assembly election for prime minister, Khan polled 176 votes as against 96 for Shehbaz Sharif—the current PML (N) president and brother of the former prime minister, Nawaz Sharif. The latter was stripped by the Supreme Court of the prime ministership in July 2017, after being found guilty of corruption charges, and was jailed in the run-up to this year's election in what was widely perceived as a politically-motivated and manipulated prosecution.

The PPP had initially indicated that it would vote for Shehbaz Sharif as a show of protest against the military, judiciary and bureaucracy's machinations in favour of Khan and his PTI. But in the end, the PPP abstained in the prime ministerial election.

A similar spectacle occurred in Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province and the traditional PML-N stronghold. Although the PML-N had won narrowly more Punjab Assembly seats, the PTI, using the leverage gained from its victory at the Centre, was able to rally independents and smaller groupings, including the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), the party set up by General Musharraf to support his US-backed dictatorship.

For four years beginning in June 2013, Nawaz Sharif headed a right-wing government that imposed IMF austerity, collaborated with the US in waging war in Afghanistan, and bowed to the military's demands for greater powers, including the reinstitution of military courts and the death penalty, and the expansion of "anti-terrorism" operations to large parts of the country.

Nevertheless, Sharif and the military crossed swords over his attempt to pursue closer relations with India,

and over whether the civilian government or military would wield supervisory authority over the \$60 billion, geo-strategically significant China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

That the July 25 election was far from free or fair is incontrovertible. But it is also true that there has been a huge erosion of popular support for both the PML-N and PPP, because of their imposition of IMF austerity, connivance in the US occupation of Afghanistan, and flagrant corruption.

For the time being, both Pakistan's ruling elite and international capital, as attested by commentary in the likes of the *Economist* and *Financial Times*, view Khan, given his image as a political outsider and populist appeal, as the best frontman for a government that will be tasked with imposing socially incendiary spending cuts and pushing through a fire-sale of state-owned enterprises.

The records of those Khan has chosen for his cabinet underscore the incoming government's pro-austerity orientation and its eagerness to work hand-in-glove with the military, which has directly ruled Pakistan for almost half of its seven decades as an independent state and continues to effectively control its foreign and security policies.

Twelve of the 21 top appointees—16 ministers and 5 advisers—served in Musharraf's dictatorial regime and five were ministers in former PPP governments.

Khan's appointments to the Finance and Foreign Affairs portfolios exemplify the unbroken link between the PTI and the anti-working class and pro-imperialist policies of its predecessors.

Finance Minister Asad Umar was until recently reputedly Pakistan's highest paid CEO. In recent weeks, he has been boasting of an IMF-backed plan to swiftly reorganize the management and corporate structure of 200 public sector enterprises, so as to ensure they make profits and can be rapidly sold off to investors.

As his foreign minister, Khan has named Shah Mehmood Qureshi, who served in the same capacity in the PPP-led government from 2008 to 2013. Qureshi is known to be well liked in Washington. During his previous tenure as foreign minister, the Obama administration dramatically escalated the illegal US drone war in Pakistan's the tribal areas with the tacit support of the Pakistan government and military,

killing thousands of innocent men, women and children.

Khan first gained significant popular support by demanding an end to drone war and denouncing the PPP government's relations with Washington as "slavery." However, he has long scaled back such rhetoric. Under conditions where the Trump administration has threatened to punish Pakistan, including by stripping it of its status as a "Major non-NATO ally," if it does not more slavishly implement the US Afghan war strategy, he has limited himself to calls for a more equitable relationship between Islamabad and Washington.

Khan's appointment of Qureshi is clearly meant to signal that his government is anxious to mend fences with Washington.

Khan's vapid promises of an "Islamic welfare state" will quickly prove to be a cruel hoax.

A self-avowed rightist, who promotes himself as a "born-again Muslim" promoting "Islamic values," Khan has long cultivated close ties with the military and the religious right, including through his support for the country's draconian "blasphemy laws" and the state persecution of the Ahmadiyya Muslim minority.



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