

Amid mounting social discontent, Pakistan's opposition parties to step up campaign for new elections

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With Pakistan in the throes of mounting social, economic and geopolitical crises, Prime Minister Imran Khan and his right-wing populist Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI) government are being pressured by a ten-party opposition alliance to step down and call fresh elections. An ultimatum on January 31 for the government to step down passed with no response. The opposition alliance subsequently announced that it would expand its campaign. Previous attempts by the government to stop opposition rallies by declaring them illegal have failed.

Formed last October, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) is led by the dynastic Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N). These longstanding parties of the Pakistani bourgeoisie have been widely discredited by their implementation for the past three decades of International Monetary Fund-dictated pro-market "reforms," and their support for Washington's neo-colonial Afghan war and the seven decades-old partnership between the Pakistani military and the Pentagon.

Both parties are now posturing as strong opponents of the right-wing policies of the Khan government. Almost as soon as he assumed office in August 2018, Khan unceremoniously dropped his election campaign rhetoric about building an "Islamic welfare state" in favor of further pro-market reforms demanded by the IMF.

The PDM claims the PTI government is illegitimate because the military rigged the 2018 election to ensure a PTI victory and Khan's assuming office. At the time, both the PPP and PML-N rejected the election results, but they soon reconciled themselves to sitting on the parliamentary opposition benches. While there was acknowledgment that the military—which has repeatedly staged coups and effectively controls the country's foreign and national security policies—pulled strings behind the scenes on the PTI's behalf, there was little to no popular support for the corrupt PML-N and PPP's challenge to the election outcome.

However, amid rising popular dissatisfaction with the PTI government due to the skyrocketing cost of living, its privatization measures, destruction of jobs, and the paltry support it provided during an inadequate and ill-prepared COVID-19 lockdown, the PDM has been able to gain some popular traction.

From December 2019 to March 2020, prices were rising at a double-digit annual rate, peaking at 14.6 per cent in January. Since then, inflation has hovered between 8 and 10 per cent, making it increasingly difficult for many to put food on the table.

At the IMF's urging and in the name of reducing the budget deficit, Khan imposed a wage freeze on all government sector workers as part of the budget for the 2020-21 financial year. At the same time the government increased the defense budget by 12 per cent, and to 18 percent of all state expenditure.

In November, Pakistan Steel Mills laid off 4,544 workers as part of the

Khan government's privatization drive. The government's pledge to the IMF that it will sell off a long list of state-run enterprises has provoked widespread opposition. These include protests this year by Water & Power Development Authority workers against the privatization of the state-run utility and its power distribution entities. Health care workers have also continued to voice their opposition to the government's plans to privatize the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, the top hospital in Islamabad.

The impact of these economic policies is especially devastating for young workers. In running for office, the PTI not only postured as an alternative to the corrupt parties of Islamabad. It promised it would significantly expand youth employment opportunities.

The Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Popular anger towards the government has been exacerbated by the ever-worsening socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic domestically and globally.

The official figures show Pakistan with relatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths, 555,000 and 11,830 respectively. However, given Pakistan's ramshackle health care system and teeming slums, and the widespread prevalence of hunger and disease, these figures undoubtedly understate the pandemic's true impact.

The government responded to the pandemic with callous indifference towards the poor. Apart from a face-saving measure of four monthly payments of 12,000 rupees (about US\$74.50) to 12 million low-income earners, nothing has been done to assist the estimated 20.6 million workers who have lost their jobs since April. Khan refused to implement comprehensive lockdown measures to prevent the spread of the virus, because "people would die of hunger."

Undermining the government's claim to be overseeing an economic and jobs recovery, official figures indicate that poverty has increased by 10 million since the onset of the pandemic, meaning that 60 million Pakistanis now live in poverty.

Other data shows that poverty was in fact much more widespread in the country prior to the pandemic than the government cares to admit. Hafiz A. Pasha, an internationally recognized economist and former minister in past PML-N and PPP governments, told the *Express Tribune* in December 2019 that the PTI government was implementing "probably the toughest" IMF program in the country's history and that this would result in the pauperization of some 20 million people. Pasha projected that the number of people in poverty would increase from 69 million in June 2018 to 87 million by June 2020.

Despite the health emergency and the severe economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the government has continued to push through IMF-dictated anti-worker policies, whilst removing the limited lockdown measures instituted in the spring. Its main aim has been to meet the IMF targets and obtain a resumption of payments from a suspended \$6 billion loan.

In addition to hypocritically posing as opponents of the PTI's ruinous economic policies, the PML-N and PPP leaders have made limited criticisms of the military and intelligence apparatus for routinely violating democratic rights.

The support the Pashtun Tahaffuz [Protection] Movement (PTM) has given the PDM helps the PPP and PML-N leaderships deflect attention away from their own complicity in the military's crimes. Formed in 2018 to demand the military be held to account for abuses against the Pashtun population and especially the enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and wholesale violations of human rights it carried out in the Northwest region formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), the PTM attracted widespread popular support.

Although the PTM limited its demands for "justice" only to crimes against Pashtuns, its agitation struck a chord among millions of other Pakistanis who have suffered at the hands of the military—whether in Karachi, occupied since 2013 on the pretext of fighting "crime" and "terrorism," or Balochistan, where the military is brutally suppressing a Baloch ethno-separatist insurgency.

Pakistan's venal ruling elite, including governments led and supported by the PPP and PML-N, prosecuted war in the FATA region as part of its reactionary partnership with US imperialism. Washington, for its part, terrorized the region with industrial-scale killings by Predator drones.

The criminal role of Washington and the reactionary Pentagon-Rawalpindi axis, however, do not trouble the PTM. By joining the servile local agents of US imperialism in the Islamabad elite to form the PDM, and continuing to support it despite formally withdrawing from the alliance, the PTM has doubly demonstrated its own right-wing, pro-imperialist character.

Neither the PPP or PML-N, nor the PDM as a whole, represent a path forward for the workers and toilers of Pakistan against the destruction of their livelihoods and the gutting of democratic rights. Led by tried and tested elements of the ruling elite, the PDM merely intends to exploit mass dissatisfaction towards the Khan government for reactionary ends in the bitter factional feud unfolding in Islamabad. The anti-democratic character of this alliance is symbolized by its president, Maulana Fazalur Rehman of the Islamist fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazal (JUI-F). A fixture of the political establishment, Rehman for many years connived with the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf.

This "unlikely coalition," as some commentators have described it, has lasted longer than many initially expected. The PDM's continued ability to challenge the government reflects growing resentments within powerful sections of Islamabad's elite, which perceives the Khan government's policies as damaging to its interests.

Geopolitical crisis fuels factional disputes within the ruling class

With the backing of top military leaders, Khan has attempted to sideline the PTI's principal political opponents through corruption cases. However, powerful sections of the ruling elite, including elements within the military, apparently believe that this campaign has gone too far. Almost every significant leader of the opposition is facing corruption charges from the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), an agency with wide-ranging powers established in 1999 by Musharraf to intimidate or

jail those opposed to his coup regime.

The military has directly ruled Pakistan for almost half of its existence as an independent state. While Musharraf was forced from power in 2008, the military has remained very much the power behind the throne, including maintaining its own relations with Washington and fiercely rebuffing civilian attempts to assert control over foreign and security policy. Under the Khan government, it has significantly increased its economic role, exacerbating factional tensions in Islamabad. Khan has appointed serving or retired military generals to key economic, industrial and policymaking positions.

Over the past decade-and-a-half Islamabad's relations with Washington have become increasingly fraught because the latter has anointed its arch-rival, India, as its principal South Asian ally and made it a pivot of its anti-China strategic offensive. Islamabad and Beijing have responded by strengthening their longstanding partnership, with China making a point of privileging its ties with the Pakistani military. An expression of this is Beijing's favoring of the military over civilian authorities to economically and strategically supervise the building of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). A factor in Beijing's calculations was undoubtedly Khan's commitment to Washington, later reversed to, "review" the CPEC projects.

The CPEC includes large-scale infrastructure projects with investments exceeding \$US 60 billion. Generous kickbacks attached to large development projects certainly play a major role in the dogfight within the political establishment. It is likely that the generals are devouring the lion's share. These tensions are significantly exacerbated by the country's severe economic crisis amid ongoing global economic turbulence.

Foreign direct investment in the country remains abysmally low, while exports are virtually stagnant. The economy is essentially functioning on borrowed money. Under the Khan government, the public debt has increased as a ratio to gross domestic product from 72.5 per cent to 87 per cent. Repayments for foreign borrowings alone have increased to \$10.4 billion this year.

The IMF is demanding politically explosive measures, including a further raising of electricity tariffs and higher tax collection targets. Apart from the government's need to secure the resumption of its \$6 billion IMF loan, the IMF's approval of its economic policy is essential for Islamabad to borrow from other international banks and raise money by issuing bonds. The demand from Saudi Arabia for the early repayment of a loan of \$3 billion, of which \$1 billion remains outstanding after December and January payments, put significant pressure on Pakistan's dwindling foreign reserves.

Islamabad is also being rattled by the continuing crisis in its relations with Washington. During the Cold War, Pakistan was Washington's principal South Asian ally. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the extent of Islamabad's geopolitical crisis in recent years than Washington's public endorsement of India's 2016 and 2019 "surgical strike" attacks deep inside Pakistan's territory, under the pretext of "self-defense." On both occasions, New Delhi's aggressive actions brought the two countries to the precipice of an all-out war.

Washington has secured its alliance with India by providing New Delhi access to civilian nuclear technology and advanced US weaponry, and expanding cooperation between the two countries' militaries. In doing so, Washington has ignored repeated warnings from Islamabad that it is dangerously disrupting the "balance of power" in the region.

A further geopolitical setback for Islamabad came when the imperialist and great powers, China excepted, spurned its pleas that they oppose New Delhi's illegal stripping of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region of its semi-autonomous constitutional status. This reactionary power play was followed by a brutal security crackdown in Indian-held Kashmir that continues to this day.

Counting on Beijing's own fears of the growing Indo-US alliance,

Islamabad is desperately relying on Beijing to push back against India's belligerence. This intertwining of the India-Pakistan rivalry with the conflict between US imperialism and China is further destabilizing the entire region, and increasing the threat of a catastrophic war fought with nuclear weapons.

Biden's assumption of the reins of power in Washington has revived hopes among sections of Pakistan's ruling elite that relations with the US can be patched up. These sections believe they can get back in Washington's good graces by helping shepherd the Taliban into striking a deal with the US-installed government in Kabul along the lines demanded by Washington.

However, the Biden administration has made it abundantly clear that it intends to strengthen the Indo-US "global strategic partnership," as part of a further ratcheting up of US imperialism's drive to thwart China's emergence as a "strategic competitor." Any attempt by Islamabad to maneuver with Washington will therefore immediately come up against US demands that it should curtail China's growing influence in the country. That would include, above all, revisiting the CPEC projects opposed by both Washington and India.

US foreign policy specialists have indicated the Biden administration also plans to pressure Islamabad to endorse Washington's highly provocative and dangerous campaign against Beijing over of its treatment of the Muslim Uyghur minority in China's strategically situated Xinjiang province. Anthony Blinken, the incoming US Secretary of State, has expressed his support for the grotesque accusation by his predecessor, the Trump acolyte Mike Pompeo, that China is perpetrating a "genocide" against the Uyghurs.



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