

# Pakistan's right-wing populist Imran Khan-led government facing likely defeat in no-confidence vote

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Pakistan's National Assembly is to begin debate Thursday on a no-confidence motion brought against the country's Islamist populist prime minister, Imran Khan, and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI—Pakistan Movement for Social Justice)-led coalition government.

Popular support for the government has plunged due to its imposition of International Monetary Fund (IMF)-dictated austerity and its ruinous response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the ruling elite, meanwhile, there are sharp divisions and major misgivings over Khan's foreign policy, in particular Pakistan's ever-widening estrangement from Washington.

Everything suggests the government will lose the confidence vote, scheduled for Sunday, April 3, and fall from office. Following weeks of political infighting and skullduggery, the opposition parties appear to have succeeded in peeling off more than enough MPs from the government to bring it down. This has involved both defections from the PTI and the coaxing of coalition partners to cross over to the opposition.

In the 75 years since Pakistan was created, no prime minister of an elected government has ever completed a full five-year term.

The military, the country's real power broker, has apparently given tacit support to the opposition's attempt to unseat the government. The victory of Khan and his PTI, hitherto an also-ran in Pakistan politics, in the 2018 elections was widely attributed to the machinations of the military, but the latter has reportedly soured on the government. Last October, there was a public spat between the army top brass and Khan over the appointment of the head of the ISI, the military's menacing intelligence arm. Ultimately Khan was forced to back down.

There are also widespread reports that the military is angered by Khan's refusal to heed demands from Washington and its allies that Pakistan label Russia the "aggressor" in the war over Ukraine—a war the NATO powers themselves deliberately provoked through their military-strategic encirclement of Russia and arming of Ukraine.

The Pakistani elite's two traditional parties of government, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), together with the Islamic fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) have spearheaded the campaign to remove Khan. The opposition parties have no fundamental disagreement with Khan's pro-investor economic policies. When in office, they themselves

have imposed one anti-worker IMF "restructuring program" after another, and in January they ensured the government got the approval of parliament's upper house, where it did not have a majority, for the latest IMF austerity measures.

Yet the opposition parties are cynically exploiting the seething anger among Pakistan's workers and toilers to dislodge the government.

Food and fuel price increases have pushed the official inflation rate above 12 percent. Living standards have been further squeezed by the government's recent imposition of a standard 17 percent tax on previously subsidized goods, including medicine, as part of a package of measures to secure the latest tranche of an IMF loan. Other measures included recommitting to a sweeping privatization program, and rolling back subsidies for foodstuffs and energy products, including gasoline and electricity.

Throughout the pandemic, Khan has prioritized profits over lives, opposing any health measures that would impede profit-making, while providing no more than famine relief to the tens of millions who lost all income as a result of the pandemic's economic fallout.

Recent research into excess COVID-19 deaths has exposed Khan's lie that his government managed the pandemic relatively well compared to other countries in the region, especially India. Officially, Pakistan acknowledges 30,350 pandemic deaths, but a study published in the medical journal *The Lancet* this month estimated the true total to be more than twenty times that, 664,000.

Popular support for Khan and his PTI has fallen sharply, especially over the past two years. In December, the PTI suffered a rout in elections for local government bodies in its traditional Khyber Pakhtunkhwa stronghold. The mass rally Khan held last Sunday to mobilize support for his government was dwarfed by the protest the opposition mounted the following day.

While the opposition demagogically attacks Khan over the price rises and mass joblessness, they are utterly indifferent to the plight of the Pakistan's workers and toilers. They are moving against the PTI to gain access to state patronage and working in collusion with the military, as Pakistan's ruling elite gropes to deal with intersecting economic, political and geopolitical crises and forestall swelling opposition from below.

In response to the ever-expanding military-strategic alliance between the US and India, Pakistan's historic rival, Islamabad

under successive governments has deepened its “all-weather partnership” with Beijing. An important element in this partnership is the \$60 billion-plus China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has provided a much-needed economic shot-in-the-arm for Pakistan, while allowing China access to the Arabian seaport of Gwadar.

However, sections of Pakistan’s elite have become increasingly concerned that Islamabad has become too estranged from the western imperialist powers and above all Washington, whom it loyally served as a Cold War and Bush “war on terror” ally. They were taken aback when the US and European powers backed Modi’s patently illegal “surgical strikes” inside Pakistan and gave Islamabad no support in its protests over Modi’s 2019 constitutional coup in Indian-held Kashmir.

Khan and the Pakistani military had hoped to mend ties with Washington by proving useful in helping put together a “political settlement” to end the Afghan war. But that stratagem fell apart when Biden decided to unilaterally withdraw US forces from Afghanistan so that the Pentagon could concentrate on “strategic conflict” with Russia and China, and the Taliban swept to power.

The Biden administration continues to insist that Washington views Islamabad as a valued “strategic” partner. However, Biden has refused to so much as take a phone call from Khan since assuming the presidency 15 months ago.

It is within this context that Khan has come under sustained attack publicly in the Pakistani press and behind the scenes from the military for his stance on the Russia-Ukraine war.

Khan—who was in Moscow on Feb. 24 when the war broke out as part of a Beijing-encouraged attempt to expand military and economic ties with Russia—has declared Pakistan “neutral.” To the consternation of much of the elite, he accused the western powers of bullying and a double-standard in their treatment of Pakistan and India, when 23 heads of foreign missions in Pakistan, including Britain, France, Germany and Canada, issued a letter that demanded Islamabad condemn Russia.

Even before the flap over the letter, *Deutsche Welle* reported that Pakistan’s military was concerned about Khan’s attempt to build closer relations with Moscow at the cost of relations with the West. Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa, it noted, “was meeting with EU officials in Brussels,” when Khan was in Moscow. It quoted a Brussels-based Pakistani analyst, Khalid Hameed Farooqi, saying that “Pakistan’s military leadership wants to keep distance from Russia, unlike Imran Khan.” The military “doesn’t want to provoke the West, as Pakistan’s security infrastructure relies on the West’s support,” said Farooqi. “The generals,” he added, “are pro-West.”

Within Pakistan’s military and political establishments there is clearly a powerful faction that believes Islamabad could use the Russia-Ukraine war to mend fences with Washington and exploit India’s strategic predicament. To Washington’s chagrin, New Delhi has tried to navigate the geopolitical storm by abstaining on UN Security Council and General Assembly motions denouncing Russia, and otherwise made clear that it is not prepared to jeopardize or even downgrade its decades-long close military-security ties with Moscow.

No doubt the US, Britain and the European Union powers would

welcome Pakistan’s condemnation of Russia. However, their greater concern by far is Islamabad’s ties with China, which are exponentially more important.

Pakistani press reports suggest up to 20 PTI legislators and most of the coalition parties will desert Khan in the no-confidence vote. The Balochistan Awami Party joined the opposition on Monday, and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), after prolonged bargaining with both sides, deserted Khan on Tuesday. On Wednesday, the Muslim League-Q (PMLQ) announced it had reached an agreement with the opposition, spurning a PTI offer it take the chief minister post in Punjab, Pakistan’s largest state.

In recent days, Khan has resorted to all manner of anti-democratic maneuvers in a desperate attempt to alter the course of the developments. These included unconstitutional delays in convening parliament and mobilizing his supporters to intimidate PTI defectors. This culminated in their breaking into a building housing parliamentarians in Islamabad’s high security “red zone.” Subsequently, Khan justified the violent attack as legitimate anger against “illegal” defections.

Khan is also attempting to intimidate the defectors with the aid of the Supreme Court. He has asked it to impose a lifetime ban on PTI legislators who defect “from the party line” ever sitting in parliament again. With far reaching consequences, Khan is also demanding the Supreme Court interpret the constitution in such a way that votes by parliamentarians that are in contradiction with the “party line” are declared invalid and not counted.

In response, the court has asked the higher courts in each of the four provinces to submit written statements giving their opinion.

Previous no-confidence motions have failed. The elected governments were ousted either by politically-driven Supreme Court rulings or, as has more often happened, by the direct intervention of the US-backed military.



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