

# Pakistan's Supreme Court orders no-confidence vote, paving way for change in government

Sampath Perera  
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Pakistan's Supreme Court has ordered parliament to meet Saturday and remain in session until a vote on an opposition motion of "no-confidence" in Prime Minister Imran Khan and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)-led government is concluded.

According to all reports, the motion is all but certain to pass. Such an outcome would legally compel Khan and his cabinet to resign, paving the way for the opposition parties to form an alternate government, which would aim to hold office until the next regularly scheduled general election in 2023.

With the military, the power behind the throne in Pakistani capitalist politics, signalling that it no longer supports Khan, the government has suffered significant defections in recent days. Both PTI coalition partners and PTI legislators have crossed over to the opposition.

The National Assembly had been due to act on the opposition no-confidence motion last Sunday, April 3. However, capping weeks of desperate manoeuvres to prevent a vote or exclude those who had defected from the government from participating, Khan prevailed on Deputy Speaker Qasim Khan Suri, a staunch Khan loyalist, to void the motion and shut down parliament. Khan then instructed the largely ceremonial president, Arif Alvi, to dissolve parliament and call a snap election. But the PTI leader retained his full powers as Prime Minister pending the setting of an election date and the formation of an interim election-campaign government.

Suri justified his suppression of the opposition motion—on the face of it a flagrant violation of basic constitutional norms—by claiming Khan and his government were the victim of a "foreign conspiracy." This only echoed the assertions of Khan, including in a televised address to the nation, that a foreign power—understood to be the United States—is determined to remove him from office.

Over the course of four days last week, a five-judge bench of the Supreme Court heard the petitions from the opposition

parties challenging the legality of Deputy Speaker Suri's actions.

In a short ruling issued Friday evening, the court unanimously declared Suri's voiding of the no confidence motion "contrary to the Constitution and the law and of no legal effect." It further declared parliament "to have been in existence at all times, and continues to remain and be so," thereby annulling the presidential dissolution order. Making clear that no further delay in acting on the opposition's no-confidence motion should be brooked, the court stipulated parliament must meet no later than 10.30am on Saturday and remain in session until the vote on the motion is taken.

The Supreme Court ruling has received enthusiastic backing from the establishment press, further indicating Khan's loss of support within the capitalist elite. In an editorial highly critical of Khan, *Dawn*, the country's most-widely read English daily, welcomed the court ruling, which it said had "defeated a most egregious assault on the country's democratic order."

The political-constitutional donnybrook in Islamabad is unfolding amid a massive economic crisis that compelled the Khan government to again seek International Monetary Fund (IMF) support at the beginning of the year and has fueled seething popular anger over soaring inflation, mass joblessness and endemic poverty.

As of April 1, the country's foreign reserves had declined to \$11.3 billion, which is not even sufficient to pay the country's import bill for the next two months. Yet the IMF has announced that it will halt its bailout program until a new government is formed and presumably recommits to the massive austerity program the PTI coalition government agreed to implement.

The COVID-19 pandemic and now the NATO-Russia war over Ukraine have dealt body-blows to an already crippled economy.

Pakistan's central bank has said inflation in March was higher than expected, acknowledging a major spike in the

cost of food, diesel and other essentials. Persistent double-digit inflation has already substantially increased food insecurity across the country, including among salaried workers. As part of the IMF bailout package, subsidies have been slashed and sales taxes, whose burden fall far heaviest on working people and the poor, hiked.

The economic crisis, coupled with the government's privatization and austerity policies and its ruinous mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic, have drastically eroded the popular support for Khan and his PTI.

Prior to coming to power, Khan had demagogically denounced his opponents' repeated implementation of IMF austerity and "structural readjustment" programs. But once in office, he quickly reneged on his claim he would never turn to the IMF and has worked with it to impose the full burden of the country's economic crisis on the backs of the masses.

Khan's indifference to the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the already unbearable living conditions for the vast majority of the population. His government has only officially acknowledged 30,361 pandemic deaths. A study published in the medical journal *The Lancet* in March estimated the true death toll to be more than 664,000.

The opposition parties are exploiting the mounting popular anger against Khan. Moreover, the Islamabad elite is aware of the increasing danger that the simmering popular anger erupting against the government could rapidly develop into an open rebellion against the utterly corrupt political establishment as a whole. Sections of the ruling elite are no doubt following the emergence of mass protests in Sri Lanka with increasing alarm.

Ultimately, however, it is the military, the real powerbroker in Islamabad, which has directly ruled the country for over half of its existence and controls its foreign and security policy, that is playing the decisive role in the almost certain ouster of Khan. Two main issues are at stake in the power struggle unfolding in Islamabad.

The opposition campaign, which is led by the PML-N and PPP, the two parties that dominated parliamentary politics from the late 1980s to Khan's election in 2018, is animated by more than just lust for pelf and power. Large sections of the ruling class have concluded that Khan is incapable of implementing highly unpopular policies dictated by the IMF. After Khan attempted to slash prices of fuel and electricity to placate growing mass anger, the IMF criticized the government's "one step forward, two steps back" approach in March. Khan had just received a \$1 billion loan tranche in February. Khan's critics fear that the country's economy will be in freefall if it fails to secure IMF support.

Secondly, serious differences over foreign policy are being

bitterly fought out in Islamabad. Khan's professed policy of "neutrality" in the US-NATO war with Russia over Ukraine has been sharply condemned by the US and other Western powers and opposed by the Pakistani military.

Addressing a security conference in Islamabad on April 2, the day before parliament was originally to debate the no-confidence motion, the Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa contradicted Khan. "Sadly, the Russian invasion against Ukraine is very unfortunate," Bajwa said. "Despite legitimate security concerns of Russia, its aggression against a smaller country cannot be condoned."

The military top brass hope to patch up Pakistan's seriously frayed relations with the US, which have deteriorated sharply over recent years as Washington has made India—Pakistan's regional rival—a frontline state in its diplomatic, military, and economic offensive against China. Pakistan's military believes it can take advantage of India's significant economic and military dependence on Russia to present Islamabad as a more dependable ally to the US than Delhi.

Broad sections of Pakistan's elite, which have found themselves ever more economically reliant on China under conditions in which Washington has made India its principal South Asian ally, are hoping to restore some type of precarious balance in its relations with its two principal traditional partners.

After the vote on the no-confidence motion was scheduled, Khan publicly accused the US of demanding his ouster. He stated that a diplomatic communication in Washington he received through his ambassador warned of "dire consequences across the world" for Pakistan if he is not voted down in the parliament. There is no doubt Washington would welcome his ouster. However, Khan's rage did not extend to the military establishment that was clearly opposing his foreign policy and tacitly allowing the challenge of the opposition to gain steam.

The military has a long history of close ties to Washington and the Pentagon that were always separate from the relations of the civilian government with the US. The military is widely acknowledged to have orchestrated Khan's 2018 election victory from behind the scenes, but later distanced itself from the government, especially over the past year.



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