

Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan shot in failed assassination attempt

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4 November 2022

Former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan was shot and injured on Thursday while leading an anti-government “long march” to the capital, Islamabad. After the shooting, which killed one and injured at least 10 others, Khan was rushed to a hospital with four gunshot wounds to his leg and thigh.

On Friday evening, Khan, the country’s prime minister from August 2018 until last April, addressed the nation from a wheelchair in his hospital room. He called on his supporters—some of whom had clashed violently with police earlier in the day—to continue protesting until the senior government and military figures he has publicly accused of orchestrating his attempted assassination are removed or resign.

Thursday’s shooting is the latest expression of the thoroughly degenerate state of Pakistan’s bourgeois politics. Political leaders routinely incite communal violence and physical attacks on their opponents, while the US-backed military top brass, which has a long record of overthrowing elected governments, engages in countless intrigues.

The attempt on Khan’s life comes just weeks after he managed to win six of the seven parliamentary seats he contested during by-elections held in October. The results confirmed that Khan, who is posturing as an opponent of IMF austerity and US bullying of Pakistan, retains a substantial base of popular support even after his ouster via a parliamentary no-confidence vote last April, held amid protests over soaring food and energy prices. In comparison, incumbent Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s Muslim League (PML-N), which is governing in alliance with the Pakistan People’s Party, failed to win any seats.

Khan, who condemned the no-confidence vote against him as a conspiracy between his political opponents and Washington, defied all government attempts to pre-empt his “march”—which is in fact a convoy of pick-up trucks and other vehicles that is moving from town to town, and mass rally to rally, on its way to Islamabad.

Prior to the gun attack, Khan was making increasingly aggressive demands that the interim government immediately call fresh elections, which are not due until August 2023.

Khan’s Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) immediately denounced the attack as an “assassination attempt.” Accounts differ as to

whether there was more than one gunman involved, the position maintained by the officials who arrested a man with a 9mm pistol at the scene. At least one PTI leader questioned the identity of the purported gunman. Others reported hearing automatic gunfire in a video clip that allegedly captured the shooting. Khan was mounted on a specially arranged container truck at the time of the shooting.

From his hospital bed, Khan accused Sharif, interior minister Rana Sanaullah and Major General Faisal Naseer, who heads a “wing” of the feared intelligence agency, ISI, of being behind the attack. PTI Secretary-General Asad Umar said that Khan “had the information beforehand that these people might be involved in the assassination attempt on him,” but did not elaborate if any actions were taken to enhance his security or if the details were imparted to any security agency prior to the incident.

Sharif and the military have condemned the attack and rejected Khan’s accusations as baseless. While calling for an immediate investigation, PML (N) leaders have attacked Khan for proceeding with his march/convoy if he knew an attack was imminent and thereby putting lives at risk. It is not clear what level of security was provided to Khan and whether the police or military had any prior knowledge of an impending threat to his life.

In December 2007, ahead of general elections scheduled for January 2008, two-time prime minister Benazir Bhutto was targeted by a combined attack, involving a suicide bomber and gunmen while she was addressing an election rally. Before her assassination, Bhutto identified in a letter to the country’s US-backed dictator-president, Pervez Musharraf, two top intelligence heads and two political leaders who were allegedly threatening to kill her. Despite widely known threats and a previous assassination attempt, an investigation by the UN concluded that she was not provided with “adequate security measures.”

Behind the current political crisis is a devastating socioeconomic crisis that the Islamabad elite fears could unleash mass upheavals akin to those that convulsed Sri Lanka this spring and summer and forced the then president, Gotabaya Rajapakse, to flee the country and resign.

Sections of the Pakistani elite are worried that by appealing to

anti-government sentiments among the masses, Khan could inadvertently ignite a popular movement that comes to threaten the capitalist order. Under constant threat of economic default, the servile Islamabad elite is enforcing brutal austerity measures on the population as prescribed by the International Monetary Fund to pay back \$130 billion of foreign debt.

Mass resentment and anger against the government are being fuelled by the skyrocketing cost of living. The annual inflation rate rose to 26.6 percent in October. Rising prices for food and energy are being compounded by the ongoing devaluation of Pakistan's currency. The government's disastrous response to the unprecedented flooding from June through October, which directly affected 33 million people and caused damages exceeding \$40 billion, has further exacerbated social tensions.

Speaking to the London-based *Financial Times*, Sharif, who assumed office after Khan's ouster, pondered over the precarious situation of his government in the face of Khan's challenge following the by-election results. "We are obviously concerned because if there is dissatisfaction leading to deeper political instability and we are not able to achieve our basic requirements and goals, this can obviously lead to serious problems," Sharif told the FT. "I'm not saying it in terms of any kind of threat, but I'm saying there's a real possibility." Sharif did not elaborate on the kind of threats he is worried about.

A right-wing Islamic populist, Khan presents himself as a born-again Muslim and anti-corruption campaigner. Having no significant association with Islamabad's role as a satrap for Washington prior to his 2018 election victory, Khan was able to present himself as an opponent of the imperialist powers' occupation of Afghanistan and the CIA-led, Islamabad-sanctioned drone war that devastated Pakistan's tribal regions in the northwest.

After assuming office, Khan implicated almost every significant opposition leader in corruption cases, which they claimed were "politically motivated." Khan himself was on the receiving end of similar treatment this summer when the new government brought corruption charges against him. Citing these charges, a court recently issued an order disqualifying Khan from taking up any of the seats he won in last month's by-elections. Khan is appealing that decision.

Khan was widely criticized within powerful sections of the Islamabad elite for his attempt to expand ties with Russia at the cost of Pakistan's relations with Washington, which have become increasingly strained. A major factor in the cooling of Islamabad-Washington relations is Washington's aggressive courting of Pakistan's arch-rival, India, with the aim of transforming New Delhi into a frontline state in US imperialism's diplomatic, economic and military-strategic offensive against China.

But what sealed Khan's fate was when he reintroduced government subsidies for energy in February, in defiance of his government's IMF commitments. After he was removed from

office via a no-confidence vote in parliament and the Sharif-led coalition of PML-N and PPP government took office, Khan became a nuisance for the Islamabad elite. The editorialists of major news outlets have frequently joined the government in chastising him for his populist rhetoric, warning that it could impede, even help derail, implementation of the IMF agenda.

Khan and his PTI are no opponents of the IMF's hated austerity, privatization and other "pro-investor" policies. Quite the contrary, Khan oversaw the implementation of two rounds of some of the "toughest" IMF-dictated austerity packages and "structural reforms" in Pakistan's history. The first came shortly after coming to power in August 2018, and the second last January.

However, Khan has been able to exploit and channel mass anger against PML-N and PPP policies, particularly among sections of the middle class, behind his right-wing Islamist agenda. He has also exploited popular anger over Washington's bullying of Pakistan and revulsion against US imperialism's devastating intervention in Pakistan and Afghanistan through his persistent claims that Washington was behind his ouster as prime minister.

At the same time, he continues to venerate Pakistan's military, which has always been and remains the pivot and anchor of the Pakistani bourgeoisie's reactionary partnership with Washington. Khan has never suggested that the military participated in the "conspiracy" to oust him.

On October 31 Khan boasted that he is in discussions with the military. Despite being widely considered to have played the key role behind the scenes in bringing Khan to power in 2018, the military fell out with him earlier this year and cast, as the *World Socialist Web Site* commented at the time, "the most important 'non-confidence vote'" during his ouster.

In his October 31 remarks, Khan declared his support for the military once again, despite his criticism of a "few officers." During his time in office, Khan allowed the military to vastly expand its direct control of the economy, including by granting it a top role in the \$60 billion strategic China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative.



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