

Mass protests erupt across Pakistan after military seizes opposition leader Imran Khan

Keith Jones
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Pakistani authorities deployed troops to cities across the country Wednesday, amid a second day of mass protests against the violent arrest and detention of former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Khan was seized by Army Rangers outfitted in riot gear, when he showed up for a court appearance Tuesday, then declared to be under arrest in a separate corruption case.

Khan's detention immediately triggered mass protests across the country, led by supporters of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or Movement for Justice.

One protester was killed in Quetta on Tuesday and at least four more Wednesday in Peshawar.

In addition to deploying the military to the capital Islamabad and three of Pakistan's four provinces, Punjab, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the government has suspended mobile data services across the country. This effectively cuts off the vast majority of the population—at 220 million people, Pakistan is the fifth most populous in the world—from access to the internet and social media, so as to suppress information about the protests and the extent of the state repression.

In both Islamabad and Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province and the traditional political stronghold of the incumbent prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif and his Muslim League (Nawaz), the government has imposed "Section 144" of the Criminal Code, thereby banning any gathering of more than four people and empowering security forces to violently repress protests at will.

At least 1,400 people have been arrested just in Punjab, and hundreds more elsewhere.

The police-military crackdown has thus far failed to quell the protests, which not only target the current coalition government, but also have given voice to mass popular anger against the Pakistani military brass, the backbone of the capitalist state.

"The protests have escalated not just in the federal capital, but also in other parts of the country," reported Al Jazeera correspondent Osama Bin Javaid around 2 p.m. Wednesday, Pakistan time. "We are hearing reports that at least seven PTI supporters have been killed. We have been seeing pictures of protesters opening fire on security forces and the security forces retaliating."

At a cabinet meeting Wednesday, Prime Minister Sharif called for protesters accused of involvement in arson and violence to be charged under the country's draconian, anti-democratic "anti-terrorism" laws. Also yesterday, Khan, who was the country's prime minister only 13 months ago, appeared at a police headquarters that had been temporarily transformed into a court. He denied the charges against him and expressed concern for his personal safety. But the court brushed all this aside and ordered him held for questioning for eight days.

After a mass movement of workers and rural masses in April-July 2022 chased Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapakse from power, the Pakistani ruling class fears that these protests could trigger a far broader movement in the working class.

For masses of people, including broad swathes of the middle class, the economic situation is increasingly unbearable. Annual inflation now exceeds 35 percent, and the IMF is demanding harsh austerity and privatization measures. As Pakistan teeters on the brink of state bankruptcy, manufacturers are slashing production because they cannot get dollars to pay for imported parts and raw materials. This further drives up mass joblessness.

To convince the IMF to pay a \$1.1 billion tranche of a bailout package first negotiated by Khan, the current Pakistani government is further slashing subsidies. However, despite months of wrangling the IMF has yet to provide the funds. Washington, which dominates the IMF, is demanding geopolitical concessions from Islamabad, including secret arms and munitions shipments to Ukraine, as a precondition for disbursing the funds.

Khan is a right-wing Islamic populist, whose political rise, including his election in 2018, was facilitated by support from the military. Once in office, he and his PTI quickly abandoned their demagogic promises of an "Islamic welfare state" and imposed arguably the most savage IMF structural adjustment program in the country's history.

However, the military top brass and much of the ruling class soured on Khan after he backtracked, in the face of mass popular anger, on imposing IMF-demanded energy price increases in the first months of 2022. Khan also damaged Islamabad's already frayed relations with Washington by signalling his willingness to seek closer ties with Moscow in

the first weeks of the NATO-instigated Ukraine war.

Since he was ousted as prime minister 13 months ago in a parliamentary regime-change operation orchestrated by the military and encouraged by Washington, Khan has rallied popular support by demagogically casting himself as an opponent of IMF austerity, Washington's bullying and the machinations of the military.

The PTI's principal base of popular support is in the urban middle class. Nevertheless, there is great apprehension in ruling circles, that amid acute economic distress, Khan's calls for elections could create fissures through which the long-suppressed anger and opposition of the masses of workers and toilers could erupt.

Especially concerning for these elite layers is the destabilizing impact of Khan's attacks on the military brass—the bulwark of the Pakistani capitalist state and the linchpin of the reactionary decades-long alliance between the Pakistani bourgeoisie and US imperialism.

Relations between the Pakistani military and government, on the one hand, and Khan on the other have become ever more fraught in recent months. The decision to seize Khan at the courthouse on Tuesday was apparently triggered by Khan's decision to again accuse a top military intelligence officer, Major General Faisal Naseer, of being responsible for an assassination attempt last November that left him wounded.

In an editorial Wednesday, Pakistan's leading English-language daily, the *Dawn*, expressed grave concern that the military and government's actions are accelerating the emergence of deep opposition in the working class to the Pakistani capitalist state. "Removing Mr. Khan from the picture solves nothing," declared the *Dawn*. "Instead, as the protests yesterday showed, arresting him may have deeply fractured the historic compact between the people and the country's armed forces." It continued:

Violence and confrontation are never an answer to political challenges, especially not when the economy is on the ventilator and the people looking to vent their anger over the daily despair that now defines their lives.

The provocation of Mr Khan's arrest has only led the government and establishment deeper into controversy and will engender even greater public distrust in their policies. This is the last thing the country needs, teetering as it is on the verge of an all-out default. ... As long as elections continue to be postponed and the public silenced, continued confrontation will only drive even more wedges between the people and the state.

The military is also in political crisis. On Wednesday it issued a statement denouncing May 9 as a "black day," in which "attacks were perpetrated on the army's properties and

installations while anti-army slogans were raised."

"Any further attack," vowed the statement, "on the army, including all law enforcement agencies, military and state installations and properties will be retaliated severely against the group that wants to push Pakistan into a civil war and has repeatedly attacked them."

Pakistan's workers and toilers must oppose the brutal crackdown against the protests. Undoubtedly, the military—which has directly ruled Pakistan with Washington's support for almost half of the country's history—is seeking to use the current crisis to expand its repressive reach and political power.

Above all, the confluence of political, economic and geopolitical crisis underscores the urgency of the working class intervening as an independent political force, rallying the rural toilers behind it, in opposition to imperialism and all factions of the Pakistani bourgeoisie and their political representatives.

An ex-cricket star turned Islamist politician, Imran Khan is a fraud, who during his political career has repeatedly criticized the US, the IMF and military one day only to embrace them the next. He won government in 2018 as an outsider, then immediately promoted a cabal of former members of ex-dictator General Pervez Musharraf's government to his own. Today, he cries foul over the actions of the National Accountability Bureau, the politically manipulated "anti-corruption" agency. However, when in power he similarly used it to jail and silence his political rivals.

As for the PPP, the dynastic party led by the Bhutto family and that in an earlier period postured as "left," for decades, it has done the IMF's bidding and courted Washington. This included trying to help George W. Bush provide a "democratic" face-lift to Musharraf's foundering dictatorial regime, then greenlighting Obama's drone war, which devastated parts of Pakistan's northwest starting in 2009.

The three-quarters of a century of independent capitalist rule in Pakistan have confirmed Leon Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution. In countries of belated capitalist development, the most basic democratic and social aspirations of working people, including genuine independence from imperialism, can only be realized via the struggle for workers' power in unity with workers around the world. This requires the building of a revolutionary workers' party, a Pakistani section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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