

Ex-Pakistani PM Imran Khan released on bail amid mass protests; authorities vow to jail him again

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Pakistan's ex-prime minister Imran Khan was released on bail Friday, after four days of violent clashes between his supporters and security forces.

Khan's violent arrest by army Rangers, who stormed a courtroom last Tuesday to seize him, sparked nationwide unrest. In response, the government deployed military personnel on the streets of Islamabad, the country's capital, and major urban centres in three of its four provinces; suspended mobile data services nationwide; and imposed a blanket ban on all assemblies of more than four people (Section 144) over wide swathes of the country.

At least 8 protesters were killed on Tuesday and Wednesday, and more than 2,000 have been arrested. Police also detained several senior leaders of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or Movement for Justice.

According to media reports, the protests declined in intensity starting Thursday due to the massive, violent military-police crackdown. An intervention by the Supreme Court also played a significant role. At a hearing of a three-member bench of the Supreme Court late Thursday afternoon, Pakistan's highest court found Khan's arrest to have been "invalid and unlawful." It ordered him immediately released, but with the proviso that he remain under the protection of the police for his own safety until a hearing by an Islamabad court Friday on the corruption charge for which he was illegally arrested.

That hearing, to the government's dismay, granted Khan bail, while ordering him to reappear before it in two weeks' time.

Khan is a right-wing Islamic populist, whose rise to power was facilitated by the machinations of the military. Once in power he quickly abandoned his demagoguery about establishing an "Islamic welfare state" and imposed brutal IMF-dictated austerity measures.

However, the military and large sections of the ruling class ultimately lost confidence in the ability of his PTI-led government to impose a fresh round of social spending and

price-subsidy cuts and an accelerated privatization program in the face of growing popular opposition. They also believed he had needlessly further frayed Pakistan's relations with Washington, including by seeking to improve ties with Russia at the outbreak of the US-NATO instigated Ukraine war.

Since Khan was ousted as prime minister in an April 2022 parliamentary non-confidence vote, orchestrated by the military top brass with Washington's tacit support, Khan has cynically recast himself as an opponent of IMF austerity, the army's dominant behind-the-scenes role in Pakistan's political life, and US bullying.

The world's fifth most populous country, nuclear-armed Pakistan is mired in an unprecedented economic crisis, which has been compounded by last year's devastating floods.

With inflation over 35 percent, the Pakistani state in imminent danger of default, and the new government imposing new brutal austerity measures in the hopes of accessing a previously negotiated IMF bailout, Khan has been able to rally considerable popular support, especially from economically battered sections of the middle class. Recent national and provincial assembly by-election results suggest his PTI would sweep the polls were his demand for immediate new elections conceded.

Certainly that is the fear of the government, now led by the two parties that long-dominated electoral politics—the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

However, the biggest fear of the Pakistani ruling class and military is that Khan's challenge to the government and his appeal to mass anti-army sentiment could provide an opening for an eruption of working-class opposition that would quickly escape the political control of all rival, warring factions of the elite.

Editorial commentary in the Pakistani press and western media interviews with ex-Pakistan officials and foreign

Pakistan experts reveal profound concern at the popular hostility to the military this week's protests have given vent to. Protesters, often at considerable risk to themselves, targeted military installations. In one case, the lavish Lahore residence of a senior military commander was stormed and set alight. The military has itself described the protests as a "black chapter," accused Khan's supporters of deliberately pushing the country to "civil war," and vowed future attacks on the military and state installations will be savagely repressed.

The military is the bulwark of Pakistani capitalism, which since the state's founding has been characterized by brutal exploitation, horrendous levels of poverty and social inequality, rampant corruption, and subservience to imperialism.

It is the linchpin of the reactionary alliance between the Pakistani bourgeoisie and US imperialism and has, with Washington's support, repeatedly ruled the country via dictatorship. The army top brass remains the power behind the throne of Pakistan's government and has come to wield immense economic power.

The government has responded with great anger and threats to the Supreme Court's striking down of Khan's arrest Thursday and his release on bail Friday, setting the stage for an intensification of the political crisis.

With various government officials, including Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah, vowing to arrest Khan again, a separate Islamabad court issued a ruling late Friday saying that the PTI leader could not be rearrested under any of the numerous charges against him, including any as of yet undisclosed charges. But this immunity from rearrest is only until Monday, May 15. The court further stipulated Khan can't be arrested on any new charges brought against him after May 9, including terrorism charges, until May 17.

Defence Minister Khawaja Asif told a press conference Thursday that the government could invoke "emergency" powers, giving it wide latitude to suppress basic civil liberties and empowering security forces to detain persons without charge. "The federal cabinet can decide about the enforcement of emergency in the country," said Asif.

Government officials, including Prime Minister and PML (N) leader Shebhaz Sharif have accused the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Umar Ata Bandial, of conniving with Khan and assisting him in fleecing the country through corruption. Bandial earlier clashed with the government over Khan's attempt to legally compel the immediate calling of new elections in the two provinces where his PTI resigned from government earlier this year, Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.

The government has said it will defy a Supreme Court order that it should hold talks with Khan on defusing the

country's political crisis, including resolving when new elections for the national and all four provincial assemblies should be held.

The Supreme Court "is giving relief to a criminal, a terrorist, a gangster who leads armed groups," declared Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb.

Government supporters have decried what they term the different and partial treatment given Khan by the courts, as opposed to other political leaders embroiled in corruption charges, including the three-time prime minister and longtime PML (N) leader Nawaz Sharif. Like Khan, Nawaz Sharif rose to political prominence with military support (he was a protégé of the US sponsored Islamist dictator General Zia ul-Haq), only to run afoul of the military top brass.

Earlier this week, Pakistan's most important English-language daily, the *Dawn*, sharply criticized the government for ordering Khan's arrest and precipitating a breach between the "people" and the military. Once again voicing fears within the ruling class that the political crisis is dangerously destabilizing capitalist rule, the *Dawn* has now published an editorial urging the former prime minister Khan to "plot his path forward carefully and with responsible consideration for the consequences his decisions might entail."

"Mr. Khan," it declared, "has a huge responsibility to ensure that his supporters and sympathisers do not get into any further confrontation with the state. He must condemn in clear words the violence that broke out after his arrest and ensure that there will be no more of it."

The IMF, meanwhile, has extracted a new commitment from the government that it will press forward with unbridled austerity targeting the working class and the most impoverished sections of the population. On Thursday, the government announced it is abandoning a scheme to charge better-off consumers higher prices for petrol and other energy products so as to partially offset the impact of the elimination of price-subsidies on the poor.

Whether this will be enough to convince the IMF to release a desperately-needed \$1.1 billion tranche of an existing loan remains to be seen. Behind the scenes, Washington, which controls the IMF, has been using the negotiations to press for geopolitical concessions, be it providing Ukraine with weaponry or weakening the longstanding Pakistan-China economic and military-security partnership.



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