

Pakistan lurches to dictatorial rule as authorities launch vendetta against Imran Khan and supporters of his Islamic populist PTI

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The long simmering political crisis in Pakistan is now boiling over. Terrified that the campaign of ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan for immediate new elections could inadvertently precipitate an explosion of mass working class anger against brutal IMF-dictated austerity, soaring food prices and mass joblessness, the government and military are resorting to dictatorial forms of rule.

Last week's government-ordered, Army Ranger-executed arrest of Khan on corruption charges precipitated mass protests by supporters of his Islamic populist Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), or Movement for Justice, including widespread attacks on government and military installations.

The response of the government and military was savage repression. Internet and social media services were suspended for more than four days, depriving millions of people of their right to information. Army troops were deployed in the national capital, Islamabad, and all four provinces of Pakistan. Thousands were arrested and remain under detention. At least nine people were killed.

Clashes between security forces and Khan's supporters continued for four days. They only ended last Friday, after the Supreme Court intervened and declared the PTI head's arrest in the multi-billion rupee Al-Qadir Trust corruption case to have been illegal, and court orders were issued preventing Khan's re-arrest either on the original charge or others until May 17.

One week on, the situation remains highly volatile, with the cleavages within the Pakistani political elite and the institutions of the capitalist state only deepening.

The military and government have launched a vendetta against PTI leaders and supporters. Khan has claimed 7,000 PTI leaders and activists have been arrested. Media outlets are citing lower numbers, but agree that the total is in the thousands.

At the conclusion of a special Corps Commanders Conference, presided over by Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir, it was announced on Monday that protesters alleged to have been involved in the attacks on the military will be tried in military courts. Presided over by military personnel, such courts are closed to the public and media and their rulings cannot be appealed, even to Pakistan's Supreme Court.

The military's press office, the Inter-Services Public Relations bureau (ISPR), issued a statement after the corps commanders' meeting that stated, "The forum resolved that those involved in these heinous crimes against military installations, personnel and equipment would be brought to justice through trial under the relevant laws of Pakistan, including the Pakistan Army Act and Official Secrets Act."

This blatantly dictatorial measure and the ISPR statement underscore the degree to which the military top brass—which has long been the country's

most powerful political actor and has substantial economic interests—was rattled by the protesters' attacks. The ISPR statement suggested India, Pakistan's strategic enemy, had a hand in last week's events and that they threatened the unity of the armed forces. Commanders at Monday's meeting, declared the ISPR, "expressed concern over externally sponsored and internally facilitated orchestrated propaganda warfare unleashed against the army leadership. These efforts are meant to create fissures between the armed forces and the people of Pakistan, as well as within the rank and file of the armed forces."

The coalition government—which goes under the label of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) and is led by the two parties that prior to Khan's election in 2018 had long dominated Pakistani electoral politics, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) and the Pakistan People's Party—was quick to endorse dragging anti-government protesters before military courts and the invocation of the Pakistan Army Act and the Official Secrets Act.

A National Security Committee meeting on Tuesday, chaired by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and attended by top military leaders, endorsed the use of military courts, which under the 1952 Pakistan Army Act can be used to try civilians accused of "waging war" on the armed forces, attacking military installations or inciting mutiny. The meeting also vowed to arrest, within the next 72 hours all those involved in the attacks, their "facilitators" and "instigators."

On Wednesday, the government gave Khan and the PTI leadership 24 hours to hand over 30 "terrorists" whom it claimed were hiding out in Khan's expansive Lahore residence, Zamran Park. That deadline has now passed.

Police have surrounded Khan's residence and late Thursday evening a senior official in Punjab's interim government said police intended to conduct a search of Khan's residence Friday.

Meanwhile, the bitter dispute between the government and the Supreme Court, particularly the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP), Umar Ata Bandial, has intensified. The PDM accuses the CJP of being biased in favour of Khan and giving him "special treatment." It was Bandial who organized the three-member Supreme Court bench that ruled Khan's seizure by Army Rangers amidst another court proceeding illegal, overturning a lower court ruling that had upheld the arrest.

On Monday, the National Assembly passed a motion authorizing the establishment of a five-member committee to prepare and file cases against Chief Justice Bandial in the Supreme Judicial Council for his "misconduct" and "deviating" from his oath of office. Also Monday, the PDM held a sit-in outside the apex court, located in Islamabad's high-security "red zone," to demand the CJP's resignation. Addressing the

PDM supporters, Maryam Nawaz, the prime minister's niece and the daughter of three-time Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, said, "The decisions of the judiciary are responsible for the destruction of the country." Subsequently she clarified that she was not accusing all judges, but those on the Supreme Court who were "facilitating" Imran Khan.

The May 15 sit-in coincided with court proceedings regarding a petition moved by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), seeking to revisit another CJP-authored ruling setting the previous day, Sunday, May 14, as the date for Punjab Assembly elections. The national and interim Punjab government ignored that decision, which arose from a case launched by PTI supporters.

With the military's publicly expressed support, the government is insisting that elections for the two provinces, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, from which the PTI relinquished control over the government earlier this year as part of its campaign for immediate national elections, should be delayed until October so that they can be held in conjunction with the polls for the National Assembly and the other provincial assemblies.

Pakistan's political crisis is inextricably intertwined with and rooted in the acute economic and geopolitical crisis that is roiling the world's fifth most populous country.

The PDM government—which came to power 13 months ago, after Khan and his PTI were ousted through a non-confidence motion, orchestrated by the military—has seen its popular support collapse as it implements IMF-demanded austerity measures.

Last year the IMF did allow Islamabad to draw from an emergency bailout loan first negotiated by the Khan-led government. But as of yet, the PDM government has been unable to access an additional \$1.1 billion tranche despite months of negotiations and additional austerity and privatization measures, even as Pakistan teeters on the brink of default.

US imperialism, which controls the IMF, has been using the negotiations to press for geopolitical concessions, whether it be providing weaponry to Ukraine, new bases for military operations in Afghanistan, or weakening the longstanding Pakistan-China economic and military-security partnership.

Khan is a right-wing Islamic populist whose ascent to power was aided by the machinations of the military. Its earlier support for Khan is now an open secret, and even the army establishment does not deny this fact. In political circles, it is known as the "Imran Khan project."

However, the military top brass and much of the ruling class lost confidence in Khan after he equivocated last year, in the face of a popular outcry, on the imposition of IMF-dictated energy subsidy cuts. They also believe he needlessly antagonized Washington by publicly hailing the Taliban victory in Afghanistan and trying to improve relations with Moscow at the beginning of the Ukraine war.

Since being ousted from office, Khan has been able to rally public support, principally from sections of the middle class ravaged by the economic crisis, by demagogically recasting himself as an opponent of IMF austerity and by criticizing Washington's bullying of Pakistan and the army's outsized role in the political life.

Following last week's events, Khan accused current Army chief General Asim Munir of orchestrating his arrest and trying to eliminate him from political life.

In remarks Wednesday, Khan shifted gears. He tried to place blame for the rift between himself and the military top brass on his political rivals in the PDM. "The PDM leaders and [former Prime Minister] Nawaz Sharif, who is absconding in London, are least concerned whether the country's constitution is desecrated, state institutions are destroyed or even Pakistan Army earns a bad name," said the former prime minister. The PTI leader boasted that he has always defended the military, including on the international stage. "When I reprimand the army, it is like I am criticising my kids," he claimed.

Sections of the PTI leadership, many of whom served in the government of the US-backed dictator General Pervez Musharraf, are now distancing themselves from Khan. They fear that by so publicly attacking the military—the bulwark of the rule of the crisis-ridden Pakistani bourgeoisie and the linchpin of its reactionary alliance with Washington—Khan has overplayed his hand.

The working class has not mobilized and participated in the recent anti-government, anti-military protests. Class conscious workers are aware that all ruling-class parties are anti-democratic, pro-imperialist, and tied to finance capital. These parties have implemented and continue to implement harsh austerity measures dictated by the IMF, have supported imperialist wars in Afghanistan, have fomented Islamic fundamentalism as a tool of Pakistan's reactionary geopolitics and as a means to split and intimidate the working class, and have conducted brutal military operations within Pakistan.

While lending no political support to Khan or his PTI, working people must condemn the vicious state repression being unleashed against the anti-government protests and protesters, including the use of military courts. These dictatorial measures will be used to safeguard the crisis-ridden and corrupt capitalist system in the face of working class struggle.

The Biden administration has said next to nothing about the political crisis in Pakistan. But other US figures, such as the notorious one-time US ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq and the UN, Zalmay Khalilzad, have been conspicuously meddling in Pakistani politics. In recent tweets, Khalilzad has publicly backed Khan, stating, "I reiterate my call for the resignation of the current army chief and for setting a date for elections to put things on track."

In the USA, PTI members have been lobbying Congress regarding the political situation in Pakistan. Late last month, US Ambassador to Pakistan Donald Blome paid a visit to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Senior Vice-President Fawad Chaudhry at his residence, as revealed in a tweet shared by Fawad's wife, Hiba Chaudhry.

The masses' resentment and anger towards the government are fueled by decades of mounting economic insecurity and social inequality, now aggravated by soaring food and energy prices, and the continuous devaluation of Pakistan's currency. The government's inadequate response to last summer's unprecedented flooding, the halt and closure of many import-oriented industries due to the shortage of dollars, and the imminent shutdown of the pharmaceutical industry, which heavily relies on imports, are causing unemployment and hunger to spread like a pandemic. Additionally, the emergence of new variants of COVID-19 and attacks by fundamentalist terrorists are heightening social tensions.

The coming period will become still more explosive as the crisis in the Pakistani state becomes increasingly interconnected with geopolitical crises, such as the US-NATO proxy war in Ukraine against Russia. Tensions are escalating in the Eurasian region, as the US, supported by India, recklessly targets China, particularly in relation to the situation in Taiwan.

The only way forward for Pakistani workers and youth is to base their struggle on the strategy of Permanent Revolution. The most basic democratic rights and social aspirations of working people, including genuine independence from imperialism, can only be realized through the struggle for workers' power. The working class must rally the rural toilers behind it in opposition to all factions of the bourgeoisie and forge 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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