

Pakistan's military strengthens hold over government, reinvigorates ties with Washington

Dr. Zayar
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With Washington's support, Pakistan's military has moved in recent weeks to strengthen its already tight grip on the reins of power.

As legally required, the discredited Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition government ceded power to a "pre-election" caretaker government at the beginning of last week. The man selected to serve as interim prime minister, Anwar-ul-Haq, is notorious for his close ties to the military.

The caretaker government is supposed to rule for no more than 90 days, while National Assembly and provincial elections are organized. However, rumours are swirling to the effect that Pakistan's military, backed by the ruling elite, will greenlight the postponing of elections under a manufactured pretext. The Election Commission has already announced that the elections should be held on the basis of the 2017 census, which would require a months-long process to delimit new electoral districts.

The world's fifth most populous country, Pakistan is in the throes of multiple, intersecting crises—socioeconomic, political, geopolitical, and environmental. Islamabad is dependent on financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stave off state bankruptcy, while the political establishment is embroiled in bitter factional conflicts, including over how to straddle the ever-widening geopolitical divide between China and US imperialism.

Powerful sections of the ruling class view a caretaker government, acting in close cooperation with the military and to a large degree at its command, to be its most effective means of implementing a new round of IMF-imposed economic restructuring in the face of mass discontent, while containing the factional warfare among its political parties.

On its first day in office, the caretaker government raised fuel prices, delivering yet another punishing blow to the country's impoverished masses. According to government data, prices rose 3.46 percent in July, pushing the year-to-year inflation rate above 28 percent.

Earlier this week, the caretaker government pushed through highly controversial changes to the Official Secrets Act and Pakistan Army Act that are aimed at shielding the military from criticism and preventing exposure of its crimes. The amendments were reputedly adopted over the objection of Pakistan's president, Arif Alvi, an ally of the now jailed ex-prime minister Imran Khan, raising a question mark over their legality.

Until his appointment as prime minister, Anwar-ul-Haq had a low political profile. But he has a well-deserved reputation as a staunch ally of the military. He has been a strident supporter of its brutal crackdown against an ethnically based separatist insurgency in his

home province of Balochistan, which has included widespread disappearances, torture and other crimes. The interim Prime Minister's appointment required the ascent of both the outgoing Pakistan Muslim League (Sharif)-led PDM government and the main opposition party, which is Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI—Pakistan Movement for Justice).

Agreement on a \$3 billion emergency IMF loan to avert imminent state bankruptcy was only reached at the last minute in late June and sanctioned by the IMF's board of directors in mid-July. During the months-long negotiations, Pakistan government officials repeatedly accused the US-dominated IMF of moving the "goal posts" and demanding ever more draconian, pro-global investor measures. While this is undoubtedly true, it is evident that there was also a parallel back-channel negotiation, in which US imperialism extorted significant secret concessions from Islamabad.

New military pact with Washington

In early August, it was announced that a key US-Pakistan military agreement, the "Communication Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement," which had lapsed in 2020 after 15 years had been renewed. The agreement, like similar such agreements with other important US allies, provides a framework for joint operations, possible US accessing of Pakistani military bases and logistical support, and weapon sales.

Since Pakistan's creation through the bloody communal partition of South Asia in 1947-48, Washington has backed a series of brutal military dictatorships in the country and viewed the alliance between the Pentagon and the Pakistan army as the lynchpin of its patron-client relationship with Pakistan's venal ruling elite.

US imperialism's embrace of India as a frontline state in its preparations for war with Beijing drove Pakistan over the past decade-and-a-half to develop closer economic and military relations with China, including through the \$60 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. As a result, Islamabad's traditional partnership with Washington has badly frayed.

In April 2022, Khan's and his PTI were removed from office after the military signalled that it had withdrawn its support, and the government lost a parliamentary non-confidence vote.

Since then, the military and, during its 16 months in office, the PDM government have sought to mend fences with US imperialism. Washington, for its part, is determined to exploit Pakistan's economic and geopolitical vulnerabilities for all their worth. There are growing indications that Pakistan may be supplying Ukraine with weaponry for its US-NATO proxy war on Russia though a third state or states. In

July, Ukraine Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba paid a two-day visit to Pakistan, the first such trip by a Ukrainian Foreign Minister in the more than three decades since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

On the domestic front, the state apparatus is continuing its campaign of repression against Khan and his PTI. While Khan was once a protégé of the military, the top brass—shaken by the targeting of military personnel and installations during the mass protests that erupted in early May following his seizure-arrest by paramilitary forces—are determined to subject him to exemplary punishment.

The PTI is a right-wing Islamic populist party. During its three-and-a-half years of rule, beginning in August 2018, the PTI imposed brutal austerity measures at the IMF's behest. Nonetheless, the PTI is currently believed to be the country's most popular party. This is a measure of the hostility among the masses to the military, the other establishment parties, and Washington, whose bullying and brutal conduct of the neo-colonial Afghan war, Khan has at times criticized from a Pakistani nationalist-Islamicist perspective.

At the beginning of this month, Khan was convicted of corruption and jailed for three years for having illegally profited from gifts given to him while Pakistan's prime minister. Corruption is endemic within Pakistan's elite and the country's governments, Khan's included, have routinely used corruption cases to victimize their political opponents, while eagerly stuffing their own pockets full. On Aug. 8, the Election Commission, citing Khan's corruption conviction, issued a five-year ban on his standing for election.

Khan faces dozens of other outstanding criminal cases, including potential terrorism charges. Hundreds of PTI supporters remain incarcerated following mass arrests aimed at quelling last May's mass protests and exacting revenge for their marked anti-Army character. The crackdown has prompted much of the PTI leadership, including many of those who had previously served as key officials in the Musharraf dictatorship, to abandon Khan and the PTI.

Leaked cypher points to Washington's role in Khan's ouster

Shah Mahmood Qureshi, the PTI's vice-chair and Khan's Foreign Minister, was arrested last Saturday amid claims that he leaked a 2022 diplomatic cypher (coded communication) from Pakistan's US ambassador in which he reported that Washington was urging Khan to be removed as Prime Minister. The cypher came in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, to which Khan, who was visiting Russia at the time, responded by declaring Pakistan's neutrality and eagerness to develop closer relations with the Putin regime.

The cypher was published by *The Intercept* earlier this month. Qureshi is expected to be charged under the newly amended Official Secrets Act.

The cypher included an account of a meeting between State Department officials, including Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of South and Central Asia Affairs, Donald Lu, and Asad Majeed Khan, who at the time was Pakistan's ambassador to the US.

It reports Lu as threatening things would be "tough" for Pakistan unless Imran Khan was removed from office. "I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds," said Biden's Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, "all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister. Otherwise," he continued, "I think it will be tough going ahead."

The military helped engineer Imran Khan's victory in the 2018 elections over the two parties that for decades had dominated Pakistan electoral politics, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) or PML (N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). But it soured on him after a

clash in the fall of 2021 over the appointment of the head of the main military intelligence agency, the ISI, and his decision, in the face of popular protests, to roll back energy price increases he had imposed in Jan. 2023 on the orders of the IMF. Khan's stance on the US-NATO war with Russia, which the military and most of the Pakistani ruling class saw as needlessly imperiling Islamabad's relations with Washington, was the last straw.

In April 2022, Khan was voted out of office, after issuing repeated statements charging a foreign power was orchestrating his removal. He subsequently shifted to accusing a senior military officer of leading the effort to oust his government. Over the past year, he has blown hot and cold on the issue, sometimes attacking the US and the military top brass and other times offering to work closely with them.

The Biden administration responded to the publication of the cypher with a hypocritical denial/non-denial. State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said, "Nothing in these purported comments shows the United States taking a position on who the leader of Pakistan should be." (Only who it should not be). Miller then declared he would not comment on private diplomatic discussions.

Shabaz Sharif, the head of the PML (N) and prime minister in the PDM government, termed the leak of the cypher to *The Intercept* a "massive crime," while the now ex-Interior Minister, Rana Sanaullah, called for Imran Khan to be prosecuted under the Official Secrets Act. "Khan," he declared, "has hatched a conspiracy against the state's interests and a case will be initiated against him on behalf of the state for the violation of the Official Secrets Act."

Under PDM rule, ruthless austerity measures demanded by the IMF were implemented. Social misery was compounded by last year's devastating floods, which impacted 33 million people, killed over 1,700, and left wide swathes of the country in ruins.

Conditions for Pakistan's workers and toilers will only worsen as the caretaker government implements further IMF austerity measures and Pakistan's economy is battered by the headwinds of global inflation, rising interest rates, and slowing growth.

Faced with growing social anger and unrest, the Pakistani ruling class is relying, as it has in the past, on state repression, led by the military, and fanning Islamic fundamentalism and communalism. Last week, mobs, whipped up by claims two Christians had desecrated the *Koran*, burned at least five churches to the ground in Jaranwala, a city in Punjab, vandalized more than 15 others, and terrorized a Christian neighbourhood, ransacking dozens of homes.



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