

Amid mounting social unrest:

Pakistan's government threatens to illegalize the country's most popular party

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Pakistan's minority government has threatened to illegalize the country's most popular political party, the Imran Khan-led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Social Justice or PTI). The threat comes amid mounting opposition to the government's implementation of another round of International Monetary Fund-ordered austerity measures and its greenlighting of a new military offensive against Islamist and ethno-nationalist separatist insurgents.

In response to a series of court decisions favourable to the PTI and Imran Khan, who has been jailed since last summer on a series of politically manipulated charges, the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led coalition government announced last week that it was moving to ban the PTI.

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar told a July 15 press conference that the government was also planning to prosecute Khan and two other PTI leaders—the country's ex-President, Dr. Arif Alvi, and ex-deputy speaker, Qasim Sur—under Article 6 of the constitution for “high treason.” This would make Khan, who served as Pakistan's prime minister from August 2019 to April 2022, potentially subject to the death penalty.

Tarar justified the impending ban with accusations of PTI involvement in “anti-state activities.” These included, he said, leaking state secrets and getting a resolution passed in the US Congress “against Pakistan,” a reference to a recent House of Representatives' motion calling for an independent investigation into ballot-rigging and voter-suppression in Pakistan's highly manipulated Feb. 8 national elections. Tarar also denounced the May 9, 2022 mass protests against Khan's violent arrest, accusing the PTI of organizing the ransacking of government and military installations, which he labelled “terrorism.”

Declared Tarar, “A case against foreign funding is established, the attacks of May 9 are established, the cipher case is established, the resolution in the US is established; therefore, the federal government has decided that, in view of all the evidence, we will move a case to ban the PTI.”

Tarar's announcement was akin to throwing gasoline on a raging fire. The PTI, a right-wing Islamist populist party that rose to power with the support of the military only to lose the favour of the top brass, responded with a post on the social media platform X in which it warned of civil war. “No patriot,” it declared, “can think of banning the largest and most popular party of the

Pakistani country. Doing so is tantamount to shaking the foundations of Pakistan and sending the country towards civil war.”

The next day the government drew back, saying it would further study the issue. This followed an announcement from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), upon whose votes the PML (N)-led government is dependent for its parliamentary majority, that it would not support the outright illegalization of the PTI and worried editorials in the corporate media.

The overriding fear is that the bitter factional struggle within Pakistan's ruling elite could inadvertently provide an opening for the emergence of mass popular opposition to social inequality, crushing poverty, state repression and the vast political and economic power exercised by the military high command.

A related fear is that the government/state campaign targeting the PTI is undermining the unity of the army, which is both the ultimate bulwark of the Pakistani bourgeoisie's rule and the cornerstone of its decades-long alliance with US imperialism. The top ranks of the officer corps are apparently united in their opposition to Khan, who lost their trust after he, in their view, recklessly imperiled US-Pakistani ties by seeking to establish closer relations with Moscow at the outset of the US-NATO-instigated Ukraine war. However, there is evidence Khan enjoys considerable support among junior and retired officers.

Amid mounting protests—over both the dire economic situation and the military's “dirty war” tactics against insurgents—there have been increasingly alarmed warnings that Pakistan could soon be convulsed by a mass popular uprising akin to that which chased Gotabaya Rajapaksa from power in Sri Lanka in July 2022 or that currently roiling the government of Kenyan President William Ruto.

In both countries the anti-government protests were fueled by anger over savage IMF-dictated austerity measures, including regressive tax hikes, the wholesale sell-off of state-owned companies and infrastructure, and sweeping cuts in social spending.

Writing in the London-based Financial Times (FT) July 22, Murtaza Syed, a former IMF and State Bank of Pakistan official, warned the measures the Pakistan government is taking to secure a \$7 billion emergency bailout from the IMF threaten to spark country-wide social unrest, while burying Pakistan under a

crushing mountain of debt.

The loan program, wrote Syed, “will impose unbearable austerity on a population already laid low by stagnant per capita income over the past decade, a historic cost of living crisis and endemic political dysfunction. As witnessed in Kenya last month, it could spark a major social rebellion in the world’s fifth-largest country.”

The *Dawn* made a similar warning in an editorial published the day before Syed’s piece appeared in the FT. It began by noting that “civil unrest” has erupted in recent days in two of Pakistan’s four provinces, with large protests in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan culminating “in violent confrontations between security forces and unarmed protesters.”

“So far,” continued the *Dawn*, “the protests have focused on various security-related matters: in Balochistan, activists have agitated against continuing enforced disappearances, while KP has seen major disturbances over the (security forces’) killing of a poet” and the government’s plans to launch yet another anti-insurgent dragnet operation.

“However, with the impact of the new taxation regime becoming more pronounced as the first month of the new fiscal year draws to an end, there remains a very real possibility that public dissatisfaction over rising costs of living could also spill into the streets soon. This is a serious challenge for the government, which currently seems to be too preoccupied with legal and political developments to be paying enough attention to the deteriorating law-and-order situation.”

At the conclusion of a cabinet meeting Wednesday, the government announced it is still deliberating on whether to proscribe the PTI. Otherwise, it and the military are continuing with their legal vendetta against Khan and his party.

No sooner did the courts absolve the PTI head of some charges earlier this month, including a trumped up bigamy case, and order his release on bail on others, than the authorities laid additional charges so as to ensure he remains behind bars.

On Monday, police and Federal Intelligence Agency personnel raided the PTI’s headquarters in Islamabad, the national capital, as part of their investigation of its involvement in “anti-state activities,” and arrested its aged and ailing chief spokesman, Raouf Hasan.

Both the PTI and PPP have now initiated legal challenges to a recent Supreme Court ruling that overturned an Election Commission decision that arbitrarily denied the PTI a share of the parliamentary seats reserved for women and minorities. If the Supreme Court does not reverse its July 12 order, the PTI will become the largest party in the National Assembly, and the government and its allies will lose any chance of assembling the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed to make constitutional changes.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif made further threats against the PTI Wednesday. Significantly, he couched these threats in the form of a defence of the army and its chief of staff, General Asim Munir. The PTI has accused Munir of being the true boss of the government and orchestrating the repression against it.

Shehbaz is reported as having told a cabinet meeting, “The kind of things being propagated about General Asim Munir and his

family on PTI’s official website is woeful, something that we have never heard or seen before ... We will, under no circumstances, tolerate such actions against our motherland, innocent people, or the armed forces of Pakistan.”

A political maverick who courted the military’s support to gain office and readily used the levers of the state to persecute his establishment rivals, Khan has been the beneficiary of popular outrage over the military’s obtrusive attempts to sideline and jail him.

But he and his PTI represent no progressive alternative to the PML (N) and the PPP, the two parties that dominated Pakistani parliamentary politics from the late 1980s through 2018, or to the military and state bureaucracy, for whom “managing” elections and running roughshod over democratic rights is standard procedure.

Since falling out with the military in 2022, Khan has frequently railed against Munir and his predecessor as Chief of Army Staff, Qamar Javed Bajwa. For a time, he even accused Washington of instigating the removal of his government via defections and a non-confidence vote. But the PTI supremo has always emphasized his staunch support for the military and never called into question the Pakistani-US strategic alliance. Indeed, many of those who served in his government were veterans of the US-backed dictatorial regime of General Pervez Musharraf that served as the linchpin for Washington’s neo-colonial invasion of Afghanistan and turned much of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (since fused into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) into killing fields.

Significantly, while Khan and his PTI are at loggerheads with the rest of the political establishment and trading threats, Pakistan’s largest political party has been studiously silent on the government’s IMF-dictated austerity budget and the wave of privatizations, regressive tax increases, subsidy cuts and other “pro-investor” measures the government has had to agree to secure a new IMF bailout.

During its four years in office, the Khan-led PTI government imposed one of the most brutal IMF restructuring programs in Pakistani history, which along with the COVID-19 pandemic plunged millions more into poverty.

The PTI’s silence on the latest IMF austerity measures underscores that, no less than its rivals, it is entirely beholden to the venal Pakistani bourgeoisie and international capital, and that like them, it is terrified at the possibility of an explosion of social anger against mass joblessness, soaring prices, the ravaging of social spending and rampant social inequality.



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