

Pakistan's Government in Military Hands — Again?

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Imran Khan, Pakistan's leading ex-cricketer, became the country's prime minister in August after his political party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), or the Pakistan Justice Movement, won an election marred by shocking violence—including two suicide bomb attacks in Balochistan province that killed or injured more than 180 people—and allegations of massive rigging and military manipulation. The PTI did not win a majority of seats in the national assembly and is ruling in a coalition with smaller parties.

The European Union's election observer mission to Pakistan stated that "the election suffered from the lack of a level playing field, and that irregularities had been reported in the vote-counting process." The mission criticized "a systematic effort to undermine the former ruling party (the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, or PML-N) through cases of corruption, contempt of court and terrorist charges against its leaders and candidates." The EU was also concerned about "concerted efforts by state and non-state actors to stifle the reporting environment."

Six political parties including the PML-N, whose leader Nawaz Sharif was ousted as prime minister, have alleged vote-rigging. This is backed up by the Free and Fair Elections Network (FAFEN), a Pakistani observer group. The PML-N has accused the army of rigging the election in favour of the PTI and censoring media outlets. Pakistan's powerful military has directly or indirectly ruled the country for almost all of its 71-year history.

Ironically, as Ryerson University professor Tariq Amin Khan told me, Sharif won the 2013 Pakistan election also mainly due to rigging by the military, but that time in his favour. This underlines the farcical nature of the Pakistani political system, which is a façade for army control.

Shortly before the election, Sharif was convicted of corruption, jailed for 10 years and barred from politics for life by a politicized judiciary known to collaborate with the military. The former prime minister wanted improved relations with India, which the Pakistan army opposes, and he insisted that the latter end its support for terrorist groups within the country that attack India and kill thousands of people domestically. The army will not be told what to do on this issue either.

The sad fact is, Pakistan's military has not let any civilian leader complete her or his term in office. Sharif probably is corrupt, like much of Pakistan's elite, but his sins in this regard pale in comparison to the Pakistani military's economic dominance of the country.

"The military runs a parallel economy in Pakistan, and there is very little

knowledge of how the military runs its business affairs and there is absolutely no accountability,” explains Amin Khan. “Pakistan’s economy is on life support while the military’s web of industrial interests, banks, insurance companies, airline, and housing and land development seem to be thriving.

“This economic strength of the military underlies the exercise of power and control, and needs to be recognized as such,” he continues. “By reducing the military’s economic power to corruption, the pitfall is to minimize the gravity and scale of the problem.”

In her 2007 book, *Military Inc.*(Fernwood), Ayesha Siddiqa exposes just how deep and entrenched the military’s ties are to the wider economy. She calls it “a militaristic, totalitarian system” in which the army runs a multibillion-dollar empire. For example, Pakistan’s largest business conglomerates, the Fauji Foundation and the Army Welfare Trust, are both military outfits.

“This military capital also becomes the major driver for the armed forces’ stakes in political control,” she writes, adding that this “does not nurture the growth of democracy or rule of law.”

Others, including Alfred McCoy of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and *Whiteout* authors Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, have documented the Pakistani army’s involvement in the Afghanistan drug trade.

Khan takes over a politically volatile country on the verge of bankruptcy and riven with terrorist violence, a separatist insurgency and massive poverty and illiteracy. He ran as an anti-establishment candidate (despite the obvious army backing) who promised to curb corruption and create an “Islamic welfare state” by building five million houses for the poor and creating 10 million jobs.

However, given the almost empty public treasury, Khan has already had to approach the International Monetary Fund for a bailout, which will inevitably come with austerity conditions that would make poverty-fighting measures difficult to enact.

In spite of his railing against the corruption of the Pakistani establishment, Khan has let many of its chief operators into his party, including 10 ministers who formerly served in the cabinet of General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan’s last military dictator (2001– 2008). In his first month in power (to September 18), the new prime minister had stepped back from election promises and cabinet decisions 16 times. This includes his decision to increase gas prices, which will only contribute to worsening poverty.

The Khan government’s most crucial problem is Pakistan’s depleted coffers, which require an immediate infusion of US\$12 billion (over \$15 billion CAD). Pakistan’s budget deficit jumped 43% to \$18 billion in the fiscal year ending June 30. In mid-September there was only enough money to pay for two months of government operations.

To raise funds, Khan initially turned to Saudi Arabia, where he travelled on September 18 for his first state visit. The Saudi royal family is a close ally of Pakistan, protected by thousands of Pakistani soldiers stationed there.

Khan asked Saudi leader King Salman to join Pakistan and China in their joint infrastructure project called the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). CPEC is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the largest infrastructure project in the world (see my March-April Monitor article), which includes more than 60 countries. The Saudi government pledged to send a delegation to Pakistan to examine the prospects of investing in CPEC.

According to the Pakistani newspaper The News,

“The Saudi delegation will finalize the details of financial assistance required by Islamabad in the form of Saudi investments in CPEC, provision of oil on deferred payment and dollar deposits in Pakistan to boost the country's foreign exchange reserves.”

Khan also plans to ask China for financial assistance, but about US\$8 billion of the US\$12 billion he needs will likely come from the IMF.

Pakistan has received loans from the IMF and friendly countries in the past, but these have not relieved its deep-seated economic malaise, which stems from the country's domination by the military and a landlord class, both of which (in collaboration) have obstructed industrialization and economic development by monopolizing national resources.

The military takes the lion's share of national wealth including foreign loans and investment; landlords keep most of the income generated by agricultural activities. Land is still the main source of wealth inside Pakistan and most of the population lives in villages. Given this military-feudal power structure, no positive economic change such as poverty reduction can be expected.

The army's dominance over Pakistan has been enabled by 70 years of U.S. military and financial backing that is now being replaced by Chinese support, with Beijing emerging as Islamabad's main ally over the past few years after the latter's relations with Washington have soured.

As Amin Khan puts it, Pakistan is at risk of being “mired in colonial-era social relations,” wherein “the feudal elite continues to exercise monopoly power in the rural sector and rides roughshod over the peasantry.” For him, Pakistan's biggest problems, and the new government's main challenges, are the lack of accessible public education and a high poverty rate, along with the deplorable treatment of women and the lack of public health care.

Amin Khan recommends that the new Khan government come up with a land redistribution policy to provide “livelihood to people in order to reduce poverty and the strain on cities [from migration],” but he admits there will be “considerable opposition to these changes [from] vested interests.”

Another major challenge for the PTI- led government will be the separatist insurgency in Balochistan province where ethnic Baloch are fighting against a Pakistan army accused of numerous human rights violations. Since 2005, an estimated 18,000 Balochis have been forcibly disappeared by the Pakistan army, but Naela Quadri Baloch, president of the World Baloch Women's Forum, claims the actual numbers may be much higher—between 60,000

and 100,000 people.

“We Baloch are a nation and country occupied by Pakistan,” she tells me, adding that Prime Minister Khan “has no mandate [from the Baloch people] and no vision. He is just a mouthpiece for the army and follows its orders.”

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