

## **Pakistan's Political Upheaval and the Future of its Foreign Ties**

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### **The unravelling:**

The past few weeks in Pakistan have been nothing less than turbulent for its actors. After multiple adjournments of the country's National Assembly by Imran Khan in a bid to evade the no-confidence motion against him, intervention by the Supreme Court and other high-intensity political events, Imran Khan was ousted from the Parliament on April 10. This is the first time in Pakistan's political history that a no-confidence motion has been successful. The Supreme Court's ruling was the final straw for Khan who was alleged to have acted unconstitutionally in blocking the no-confidence process and dissolving the parliament. What led Khan from the election victory in 2018 to facing a mutiny within his own party?

### **Weak support from the coalition:**

Inside the parliament, his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) which was hinging on a coalition, lost their support, which denied him the majority to defeat the no-confidence. At least three allies, including the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), the Pakistan Muslims League-Quaid (PML-Q) and the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) switched sides and joined the opposition. When Khan came into power, it was a PTI-led alliance with smaller parties and independent members with the support of which Khan's government had enjoyed a majority of 179 members.

MQM-P, which held seven seats in the parliament, was a key ally. Their decision to support the opposition, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) due to the country's worsening economic crisis and loss of faith in the ruling government came as a big blow to Khan.

According to Pakistan's constitution, a no-confidence motion requires 172 votes to be passed in the 342-seat parliament. Exceeding this requirement, 174 members voted against him thus successfully toppling the ruling party from power. Shehbaz Sharif, the leader of the opposition, was elected unopposed as the 23rd prime minister of Pakistan.

### **Army's influence:**

Imran Khan suffered massive blows within the parliament. The situation was no different outside the parliament as well, as Khan lost the support of Pakistan's powerful military, which is a central figure in the country's politics and is believed to have helped him win the 2018 general elections. Khan had alleged that the 'establishment', as the army is monikered in Pakistan, gave him three options: resign,

hold early elections or face the no-confidence motion. The army has however denied any involvement in this matter. Under General Qamar Javed Bajwa, the army has assumed a more sophisticated and more mature stature. Even if the military is intervening in parliamentary affairs, it is more likely to do so discreetly to get around the media. In all, what is evident is that Khan has not just soured his relations with the army by going off-script but has also failed to deliver what he had promised.

### **Economic crisis:**

Pakistan's burgeoning economic crisis under Khan has been at the centre of political and public ire. Fuelled by the Ukraine war, widening trade deficit and increasing debt, the Pakistan economy is struggling to stay afloat. If the situation worsens, it will have to resort to bankruptcy given the high level of inflation (above 12%) and devaluation of the currency by more than 50% in the last five years. A significant portion of the country's revenue is financed by external debt. The rollout of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a massive bilateral project to improve infrastructure in Pakistan and trade with China, has increased the debt burden. Not unlike neighbouring Sri Lanka, Pakistan owes more than 25% of its external loans to China. Moreover, the 2018 bailout by IMF along with its stringent requirements have plagued Imran Khan's government. Due to this, the country has been forced to rely on Saudi Arabia for help albeit at a much higher interest rate.

The question that needs to be answered now is whether the new government has what it takes to fix major structural problems to revive the economy. This requires massive growth in taxes by expanding the taxpayers' base and removing exemptions to the powerful, as well as the privatisation of certain state enterprises to reduce the gap between income and expenditure.

Further, structural economic reforms are needed to substantially raise productivity for boosting exports and paying import bills. The coalition may not have much time to undertake all these reforms, but it can initiate changes to restructure the economy for a sustainable turnaround in the longer term.

### **The American angle:**

Ever since allegations of incompetence and bad governance against Khan started emerging, he has not stopped relying on a myriad of conspiracy theories as to his final saving grace. One of them was a letter that he claimed showed a foreign country that with the support of his opponents was conspiring against him with the support of his opponents to bring him down and destroy his political career. In a debate held later in the parliament, he talked about America threatening him but corrected it to some foreign country. The US government has however termed his claims to be baseless. Further, Pakistan's security agencies have not found credible evidence to confirm Khan's complaint of a foreign conspiracy.

This points to the ruinous state of US-Pakistan relations under Khan. When former US President Donald Trump was in power and US support to pacify tensions between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir issue was promised, things were looking bright. However, with a change of administration, the attitude in Washington towards Pakistan has undergone changes. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Khan's increasing closeness with Putin has become a major diplomatic embarrassment. Constant siding with Russia and China and detachment from the West has not gone well with the US. Khan's criticisms of the country too only seemed to increase in scathing intensity with time. This growing bitterness is what has led to the current animosity between the two countries.

### **Future of bilateral ties:**

Imran Khan's governance has had threatening impacts on a number of key relations with foreign governments. The future of Pakistan's foreign ties under Shehbaz Sharif's rule will most likely assume a different form with a change in government.

### **India**

Due to a ceasefire between the two neighbours enforced in 2021, tensions have been low for some time. However, there have not been any formal diplomatic talks because of disagreement on a range of issues, including Khan's constant criticism of the Modi government. The situation could change with the new government coming into power. Pakistan's army is likely to pressurise Sharif to continue the ceasefire since the army chief had recently stated that Pakistan was ready to move forward on Kashmir if India agrees. Additionally, the Sharif dynasty has been known for its dovish initiatives toward India when it held power.

### **United States**

Imran Khan's visit to Moscow on the day Russia invaded Ukraine had been a "disaster" in terms of US relations amid other mistakes. Hopes are riding on the new government to mend ties between the two countries for the sake of Pakistan's international image and economic stability. The political crisis has had little impact on the US since the majority of efforts are being targeted toward the war in Ukraine.

### **China**

Shehbaz Sharif, during his time as the chief minister of the Punjab province, had signed infrastructure projects with China. He also played a critical role in pushing the CPEC. He has a reputation for getting major projects greenlit while avoiding political grandstanding, which could bode well with

China. Because of this, China expects ties to be better than they were under the new prime minister which could pose a problem for India.

### **Afghanistan**

When in power, Imran Khan was all for negotiations with the Taliban as their takeover in Afghanistan. He had also actively strived for international support for and engagement with the Taliban. However, after Khan was unseated, the relations between the two countries have become strained. Militant attacks in Pakistan have been on the rise since the takeover. The Taliban have been accused of providing a safe haven for the Pakistani Taliban and have close to nothing to restore peace and security. With the new government, a stronger Pakistani's readiness to use retaliatory military operations is expected.

### **The road ahead:**

The successful completion of the no-confidence motion and the election of the new leader of the house has momentarily ended the political instability. But the resignation of members of PTI and its decision to launch protest rallies has sown seeds of a fresh round of chaos. The new prime minister would have to face not only the unruly PTI taking to the streets but a weak economy that needs very careful handling. There are a lot of expectations of the masses from the new leadership to control inflation, which is a mammoth task.

Moreover, Shehbaz's PML-N has only 86 seats and the rest of the numerical support has come from the coalition partners who apparently have nothing in common except their rivalry for Khan and keeping them all satisfied will be a big challenge. On the security front, there has been a resumption of terrorist attacks in the country and Sharif will have to take quick measures to counter this. But Shehbaz's strength lies in the various political parties - old allies along with the opposition which switched sides - that are behind him. Furthermore, Sharif's good ties with the establishment will also be an asset to deal with all that he has to tackle.

Pakistan will go to the polls in 2023. Shehbaz Sharif may or may not hold power after that, but his current tenure, however short, is crucial. Apart from significant turnarounds in Pakistan's foreign policy, Sharif is expected to deal with colossal internal problems expeditiously. How this pans for India remains to be seen. Nevertheless, India should look with optimism, but cautiously.

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