FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 11.05.2023 | Niels Hegewisch

Reshuffling the cards in Pakistan's political crisis

The arrest of ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan has caused nationwide protests. In Pakistan's opaque politics, this is business as usual

It was like a scene straight out of an action movie. On the afternoon of 9 May 2023, heavily armed paramilitary units of the Pakistan Interior Ministry stormed a building of the Islamabad High Court. Their objective was the arrest of ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan. While his lawyers protested, Khan was forcibly escorted to an armoured vehicle and taken to an undisclosed location. And so the long-running political crisis in Pakistan reached yet another high point.

The National Accountability Bureau, Pakistan's anti-corruption authority, is accusing Khan of having used his influence as head of state for the benefit of a Pakistani businessman and taking compensation for doing so. But observers suspect that there is actually more at stake. On his way to the court, where Khan had to answer for one of the more than 130 proceedings against him, he sent an emotional video message to his followers. In it, he accused one particular high-ranking intelligence officer of having planned the assassination attempt on him in November 2022. As a result, after Khan's arrest, the anger of supporters of his PTI ('Pakistan Movement for Justice') party was directed primarily at the military. In Rawalpindi, PTI supporters stormed an entrance area of the army headquarters. In Lahore, protesters ransacked the residence of the local commander and then set it on fire. Violent clashes between PTI supporters and security forces were also reported in other cities.

A spectacular victory and comeback

Open – and even more so violent – protests against the army are actually taboo in Pakistan and of great symbolic importance. The troubled region, with arch-rival India to the south and chronically unstable Afghanistan to the north, has led to decades in which security needs and their related narratives have dominated Pakistani politics and society. Consequently, civilian governments are only one of several centres of power and have

been repeatedly overthrown by the military throughout Pakistan's history – most recently from 1999 to 2008 under General Musharraf. For a long time, the army was able to benefit from a strong reputation among the population. Compared to dynastic and corruption-ridden politics, the military was considered a professional guarantor of political stability. Thus, the collision course that Imran Khan and his supporters are now on with the security establishment is all the more remarkable.

The backstory begins with Imran Khan's spectacular election victory in 2018. The captain of the 1992 Pakistani cricket world champion team, as an outsider, managed to break the decades-long dominance of the established parties PML-N and PPP. At the time, it was rumoured that Khan had managed to do this with the at least tacit support of the security apparatus. However, the government, which started out with high hopes for a fundamental change in politics, society and the economy, soon disappointed many of its voters. None of the announced reforms were implemented and Khan's policies followed the well-trodden paths of his predecessors. When the ailing Pakistani economy experienced a full downturn as a result of the Corona pandemic and the effects of the Ukraine war, the initial euphoria gave way to widespread fear of decline. And so the charisma that brought populist Khan into office was largely considered gone by the time he was overthrown by a vote of no confidence in April 2022.

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But Khan managed to make a spectacular comeback within a very short time, even by the standards of Pakistan's volatile political life. On the one hand, he successfully staged himself as the victim of a conspiracy by his political opponents that involved influential parts of the security apparatus. He not only accused them of organising a majority for the vote of no confidence but also of having prevented successful government action. Khan now presented himself as a champion for civilian government, despite his previously suspected closeness to the security apparatus. On the other hand, Khan succeeded in obscuring his own responsibility for the decline of the Pakistani economy and in blaming the economic situation – which was once again significantly worsened by the devastating flood disaster in 2022 – exclusively on the successor government.

Khan's perspective resonates with many Pakistanis that are deeply

frustrated by the elites. The government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto has failed to come up with an effective counter-narrative. Instead, it seems as if the government is unable to decide and idly watching the dramatic fall in the national currency, the threatening shrinkage of foreign exchange reserves to just around $4.5 bn and inflation skyrocketing to over 35 per cent. And right on the day of Khan's arrest, the rating agency Moody's reported that Pakistan's sovereign default was possible as early as June due to the government's inability of reaching an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since October 2022 on the disbursement of the last tranches of a $7 bn rescue package. Without the IMF program, Pakistan will not be able to service its stifling foreign debt. Many jobs have already been lost due to the lack of foreign currency in Pakistan's import-dependent economy. The country is economically dependent on its supporters in China and the Gulf, but they now are growing increasingly impatient.

A never-ending political crisis

In this gloomy situation, Imran Khan sees himself as a saviour with the power of auto-suggestion and knows he shares the opinion of many Pakistanis affected by poverty and unemployment. And so, it is hardly surprising that Khan is currently by far the most popular politician in Pakistan and that the chances of victory by his PTI party in the parliamentary elections, planned for autumn 2023, could hardly be better. But the 71-year-old knows that promising future perspectives do not necessarily have to result in real gains in power. In view of the multiple crises, the upcoming elections could be postponed. Therefore, Khan is using a strategy of maximum pressure to push for early elections. He is mobilising his supporters with daily video messages, demonstrating his party's strength at regular meetings and marches, and using risky political manoeuvres to limit the central government's scope of action – for example, by having the PTI majority force the dissolution of the influential provincial assemblies in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

But so far, Khan's campaign has not achieved its goal and instead succeeded in closing the ranks of his opponents. Khan has reacted to the impending loss of political momentum in recent months by continuously escalating his rhetoric. He has been criticising the government, and especially the security apparatus, more and more openly. This strategy electrified many PTI supporters and secured him a permanent presence in the media. On the other hand, the price for this is an extreme polarisation of the political debate, which, by now, extends to the highest judiciary. With the political camps facing each other in irreconcilable hostility — neither willing nor able to find a joint solution to the

country's enormous problems.

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Khan's arrest has now reshuffled the cards in Pakistan's ongoing political crisis. The developments of the last few days indicate that he has finally gone too far. The further course of events is completely open. As always, in the barely visible background, alliances are being forged, intrigues spun and allies betrayed. Conceivable scenarios range from Khan's release in a few days, as the anti-corruption agency's investigation is still ongoing, to a long-term prison sentence. This latter fate has indeed befallen some of his predecessors in office. Protests by Khan's supporters may continue and escalate, which could lead to a ban on the PTI. If they remain peaceful, the protests could lay the groundwork for a PTI victory in the next parliamentary elections. But should Khan disappear from the political stage for a long time, it will be difficult for the party to remain a politically influential force in the long run, since it is oriented entirely toward him and, moreover, is poorly organised.

In Pakistan's chaotic and opaque politics, it is business as usual: if one thing is certain, it is that nothing is certain. Once again, this political situation makes for certainly impressive theatrical thunder but does nothing to solve the deep structural problems of a country that in many ways is moving perilously close to the abyss.



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