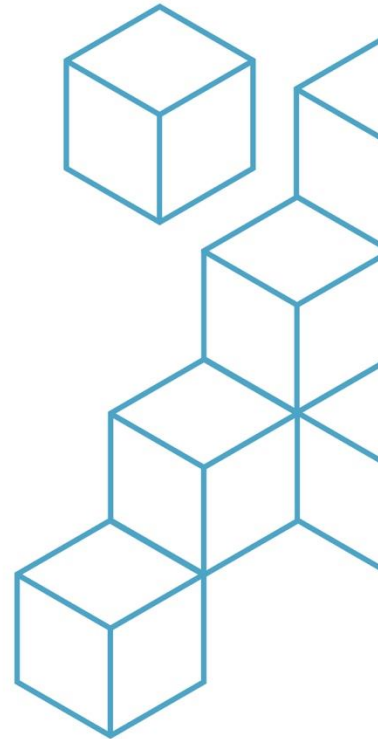


ANALYSES

Khan's Fall: The Dynamics of Pakistan's Political Crisis



* Syed Mohammad Ali
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Khan's downfall is due to an array of domestic factors rather than any insidious international plot to overthrow him. [Al Jazeera]

Imran Khan, the cricketer turned philanthropist and then politician, has been dislodged from power in Pakistan after several days of tumultuous political drama. Khan had managed to assume power in the 2018 general elections with backing from the country's powerful military and due to the public appeal of his promised "tsunami of change," which was meant to sweep away corruption, nepotism and the shackles of foreign dependency. Just three and a half years into his term, however, Khan was unable to retain his grip on power due to a confluence of factors, including misgovernance, a growing economic crisis, fractures within his party's ranks and the alienation of coalition members.

Final act

The more immediate events surrounding the dismissal of the Khan government are dramatic. Not only are these events full of suspenseful twists and turns worthy of a Hollywood political thriller, they also have major implications for the democratic aspirations of this populous Muslim nation.

While Pakistan has a federal parliamentary system of governance, the country has been ruled by military government for 33 years of its 74-year-long history. While there has not been a military coup for the past 15 years, no prime minister has completed a full five-year term in office. Due to rapid turnovers, Pakistan has the dubious distinction of having had 29 prime ministers, 18 of whom were dismissed either by martial law administrators or the judiciary, or forced into resignation by their own presidents. (1) Yet, the Khan government was the first one to be successfully dismissed through a no confidence vote. Khan tried to dodge the no confidence vote, but he did so in a manner which would have further undermined the democratic process in Pakistan. Having lost the number of parliamentary votes needed to stay in power, Khan instructed his party stalwart, the deputy speaker of the National Assembly, to refuse his opponents motion to file a no confidence based on the assertion that this move was part of an insidious foreign conspiracy to oust the prime minister of Pakistan. On the heels of this drastic move, the president then dissolved the parliament, also as per the instructions of the prime minister. Through these back-to-back manoeuvres, Khan had hoped that the country would head into early elections, which would give him the chance to win another term. Yet, the blatantly partisan way in which the deputy speaker and president acted led to a constitutional crisis with the opposition and the Khan government accusing each other of treason. (2) The Supreme Court then jumped into the fray and passed an expedited decision terming the actions of the deputy speaker unlawful, and instructing that the parliament be reinstated so that the no-confidence motion could be allowed to proceed.

While the Supreme Court of Pakistan has in the past endorsed extra-constitutional measures to assume power, its decision to do away with the so-called “doctrine of necessity” and prevent the Khan government from evading the no-confidence motion has won it much praise. (3) However, the fact that Khan had linked the joint opposition’s effort to initiate a no-confidence move against him to a Western (specifically American) conspiracy to overthrow him will have lingering consequences.

While his opponents were planning the no-confidence motion against him, Khan began hinting that there was a broader foreign conspiracy afoot to dislodge him from power due to his refusal to do the bidding of powerful states and instead pursue an independent foreign policy. Khan initially alluded to this supposed conspiracy at a massive gathering of his supporters late last month. Then, he summoned a meeting with the National Security Council to discuss this issue, and later reiterated these accusations in a live address to the nation, specifically naming the United States for allegedly being behind the conspiracy to dislodge him. Khan was basing his accusations on the documentation of the outgoing Pakistani ambassador to America of an informal conversation with the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State, where the latter apparently remarked that America's relations with Pakistan would only improve if Khan left office. The United States has been guilty of regime change in many "developing countries" around the world, and has also backed military leaders in countries like Pakistan to further its own strategic goals. Nevertheless, a private conversation between two diplomats does not qualify as an attempt to overthrow the Khan government. Khan did not only suggest that the United States was trying to overthrow him, but that his political opponents were actively conspiring with the United States to achieve this goal, after which they would presumably assume power and comply with U.S. dictates.

External dynamics

Khan had been steadily ratcheting up his anti-imperialist agenda to distract attention from his government's dismal economic performance and his personal frustration over not getting the attention he desired from the current U.S. administration. The United States and Pakistan have had a tumultuous

relationship over the past two decades despite Pakistan being declared a non-NATO ally. (4) Pakistan often accused the United States of being primarily interested in maintaining a transactional relationship with Pakistan to achieve its own strategic goals in Afghanistan and not appreciating Pakistan's sacrifices in the "war on terror." America, on the other hand, suspected Pakistan of duplicity and kept trying to pressure it to do more against the Taliban. Ultimately, however, Pakistan did play an important role in facilitating talks between the United States and the Taliban. Still, the United States is not happy about the close ties between the emergent hard-line Taliban regime and Islamabad.

While the Pakistani military has immense influence on Pakistani foreign policies, Khan has also been a vocal critic of U.S. policies in Afghanistan and the United States' use of drone strikes. Khan preemptively refused to allow the United States to use Pakistani soil to undertake "over the horizon" strikes to contain Al-Qaeda and Islamic State militants in Afghanistan after the U.S. military's withdrawal. While Khan seemed to have developed a personal rapport with President Trump, the Biden administration and the Khan government remained unable to develop a working relationship. Khan felt rebuffed when he was not invited to Biden's climate summit in April 2021, and in turn refused to attend Biden's Summit for Democracy in December 2021.

Conversely, in effort to create more foreign policy options for Pakistan, Khan decided to plan a visit to Russia while Putin was poised to invade Ukraine. Khan landed in Moscow to discuss a gas deal amongst other bilateral issues hours after the Russian military launched its offensive in Ukraine. While Khan claimed that he had urged Russian leaders to pursue a diplomatic solution to the Ukraine crisis, his laying a wreath on the tomb of the unknown soldier in Russia made for terrible optics. Khan subsequently has referred to his decision to go to Russia as being a major reason for the United States wanting to see his government toppled. The United States has indeed been pressuring small and large states to object to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It was not pleased to see Pakistan, as well as Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, abstain from a UN Security Council vote against Russia. However, for

Khan to think that his unwillingness to side with the United States on the Ukraine crisis was a salient enough factor to trigger a covert American attempt to topple him is rather fanciful.

Khan has also not shown much acumen in terms of managing relations with a host of nations other than the United States itself. For instance, Khan had accepted an invitation by Malaysia in 2019 to join an alternative moot of Muslim nations including Iran, Turkey and Qatar, but then embarrassingly had to cancel his trip due to Saudi displeasure. While he was still campaigning, Khan had promised to ensure greater scrutiny and transparency of projects being implemented under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, but soon fell in line like preceding political leaders in unequivocally welcoming Chinese investments in Pakistan. Despite claiming to champion the cause of Muslims at large by drawing attention to the problem of growing Islamophobia in the West, Khan refused to join the growing chorus of concern regarding the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang. Khan's attempts to bring a semblance of tolerance within the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, or his desire to achieve even loftier goals, such as facilitating rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran or even between China and the United States, have remained unrealised goals.

Domestic dynamics

Ultimately, however, Khan's downfall is due to an array of domestic factors rather than any insidious international plot to overthrow him. Khan had long been rallying against dynastic rule by corrupt political leaders, which he felt was the underlying reason why Pakistan remained unable to realise its potential. But he too had to rely on the "electables" or local influentials with personal clout, who are repeatedly wooed by different political parties to win elections, to win parliamentary seats. (5) Many of the "electables" who joined the Khan government have been accused of corruption. But Khan's accountability agenda has primarily focused on persecuting his political opponents. Khan remained reluctant to devolve power to local governments. His decision to appoint a political novice as the Chief Minister of the Punjab, a province with a population of over 80 million, evoked much resentment within the bureaucracy and the public at large. Khan also aspired to create a single national curriculum

aimed to unify the country, remove class divisions and eliminate the 'mental slavery' that the British colonial system of education had imposed in the Indian subcontinent. However, much of the content created for this new curriculum was viewed by his critics as outdated, myopic and hyper-nationalistic. As the Khan government became increasingly insecure, it increasingly started muzzling dissent and curbing media freedom.

Of course, some good things did happen under Khan's tenure as well. His government's handling of the COVID crisis and efforts to put environmental issues on the national agenda are applaudable. Khan also tried to tackle poverty by making the social safety net more comprehensive and improving health insurance coverage. Nonetheless, Khan remained unable to alter the top-heavy nature of power and wealth distribution in Pakistan. His economic policies were more populist than progressive, and hence could not really be sustained.

The inability of the Khan government to get the economy back on track, alongside ballooning debt and rising inflation, severely undermined confidence in his ability to govern. While he initially invited a renowned Princeton economist, who happened to be a member of a religious minority, to be a part of his Economic Advisory Council, he rescinded this invitation due to pressure by the religious right. This was another instance showcasing Khan's inability to stand his ground. Khan had often railed against the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the past, but his government was compelled to go back to the IMF to ask for further loans. Khan even asked a serving IMF employee to retire and become governor of the State Bank of Pakistan. Khan had often criticised letting the rupee depreciate, which he argued caused a ballooning of foreign debts; but the rupee has experienced unprecedented depreciation during his term.

Khan may not be money hungry, but he certainly has a lust for power. Like other South Asian populists who have relied on Hindu and Buddhist religious nationalism in India and Sri Lanka respectively, Khan has whipped up religious nationalist sentiments within Pakistan as well and is trying to capitalise on

the pervading sense of anti-American sentiment. His decision to drag the foreign office and the parliament into an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory is a glaring sign of his desire to cling to power. The military also parted ways with Khan precipitated by his attempt to assert his will over the nomination of the powerful chief of intelligence. Military leadership was also not comfortable with Khan's growing anti-imperialist rhetoric against important states like the United States, which remains a major supplier of armaments and Pakistan's biggest trading partner.

Khan does still enjoy immense popularity in urban centres, especially amongst the youth, which comprise over sixty percent of the country's population. His framing of his loss of power as an American conspiracy furthered by corrupt local leaders against a nationalistic leader who aimed to make Pakistan truly independent and self-reliant has won him a lot of sympathy. Less generous assessments of Khan's efforts to rally his supporters are being compared to the Trumpian tactics that led to the storming of the Capitol building. (6)

Challenges ahead

Having lost the vote of no confidence, Khan is now out of power. Shahbaz Sharif, the former Chief Minister of Punjab, who is currently out on bail from prison due to money laundering charges, has been nominated the new Prime Minister. Khan has asked his party to resign from parliament en masse. Nonetheless, the opposition has the majority needed for the parliament to continue to function for the next year and a half. It is still likely that Khan will try to build up public pressure over the coming weeks and months to try and compel the establishment to hold early elections.

Khan's opposition includes an amalgam of mainstream parties with a lingering history of bitter rivalries that were set aside momentarily to unite against a common enemy. It remains to be seen whether these politicians will be able to continue working together if all or most of the parliamentarians affiliated with Khan decide to resign.

It is encouraging that the military did not directly take over the reins of power once again and that the judiciary was instead able to rise to the occasion in defence of democratic norms. While Pakistan has narrowly managed to avert a constitutional crisis, there is much work to be done in terms of stabilising the economy, repairing ties with Western countries, and convincing international lenders and investors to resume financial flows to Pakistan. However, it is quite possible that the rest of the world will remain wary of engaging with Pakistan till it can get its political house in order.

***Syed Mohammad Ali** is a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C.

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