

Imran Khan Shooting: Pakistan Has Reached a Tipping Point

The former prime minister enjoys widespread public support, despite sabotage attempts by his political enemies

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Even as [Pakistan](#) grapples with the fallout from [severe flooding](#), throngs of people have continued to take to the streets to push for radical change. The shooting earlier this month of former Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) at one of these protests has brought the country to a tipping point.

Today, Khan's popularity as a political leader is [at its peak](#) – and this is precisely why he is now in trouble. Removed from office in April after losing a [no-confidence vote](#) orchestrated by his political enemies, he has displayed an indefatigable resolve to fight back.

What has followed has been nothing less than historic. Pakistan has seen many civilian politicians deposed unceremoniously, but the bulk of ordinary people have been fairly indifferent to such elite intrigues. The nation's curse has been that sometimes the civilian politicians in power, and their blatant plundering of the country, have actually made military rule seem better – or at least no different.

[Khan's ouster](#) engendered anger among large segments of the population, who believed that the "Khan experiment" was now dead. His decision to fight back is frankly miraculous in a country where wealth and power are so obscenely monopolised by the civilian and military elites who despise Khan.

Across the country, Khan has held rallies to reinvigorate a population that otherwise might have fallen into despair over the restoration of the old political order. In the scorching heat of the summer and through the devastating floods, Khan has not budged an inch on his simple core demand: that the country holds [elections](#) to determine who should govern.

Desperately seeking change

Yet, what seems like a fairly banal demand is anathema to the traditional mainstream political parties. The Pakistan Muslim League (N) in particular, whose leader Shehbaz Sharif has been [appointed prime minister](#) without a mandate from the people, is in panic mode. It has long been accustomed to dominating the most powerful and [populous province](#) of the country, Punjab, which was [reclaimed](#) in July by-elections by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

The rise of Khan's PTI has been no small feat, with the relatively young party breaking the stranglehold of the two-party duopoly that dominated the country's political life for decades. Clearly, Pakistanis desperately want change.

Pakistan's ruling elites have tried pretty much everything to curb this trend, seeking to [outlaw voting](#) by overseas Pakistanis, who overwhelmingly support Khan. Police hit Khan with absurd ["terrorism" charges](#), and the state's election commission recently [disqualified](#) him from contesting elections. Rather than addressing the gargantuan social and economic problems facing Pakistan, the regime is clearly fixated on destroying Khan.

But the government is not the only player in this saga. Khan enjoys [widespread support](#) within the ranks of the Pakistani military, perhaps explaining why the heavily militarised national security state has been so reluctant to repress popular mobilisations. If such orders were issued, there is a real risk that soldiers' guns could turn the other way, sparking a rebellion within the military.

These are the same armed forces that for the past two decades, have been forced to sacrifice and die for the American ["war on terror"](#). By this point, they are surely more attracted to Khan's pledge to be a friend of the [US](#) in peace but [not in war](#), than to any new orders the military high command might devise in connivance with Washington.

Meanwhile, illegal detentions, torture, and murders [are happening](#) on this government's watch. High-profile journalist [Arshad Sharif](#), who had exposed corruption in the regime, was killed last month in strange circumstances after he fled to Kenya. Pakistan's political groups have been thoroughly exposed for their hypocrisy, lies, and opportunism.

Uncertainty ahead

At this point, we can only speculate as to the motivation for Khan's shooting last week. He was wounded in the leg, in what his supporters have called an [assassination attempt](#). If a trained shooter from Pakistan's intelligence agencies wanted to kill Khan, many observers believe, then that would have been the outcome.

Rather, some say the shooting might have been a warning to Khan and his supporters, one of whom died in the same incident after [sustaining bullet wounds](#). But this explanation seems weak because the whole world knows by now that virtually nothing could deter Khan from openly confronting the powers-that-be, whether in Islamabad or Washington.

Whatever the motivation, this could backfire badly, adding momentum to Khan's push for change. The former prime minister has emphasised that his rallies and marches must [remain peaceful](#), and indeed, the demonstrations thus far have been incredibly disciplined.

At the same time, we must not lose sight of the larger geopolitical power plays at work here. Khan has accused Washington of being [behind a conspiracy](#) to keep him from the halls of power. At a time when the US has been humiliated by its former puppets – including [Saudi Arabia](#) and [India](#), which have refused to go along with the “new cold war” that the US is waging against China and [Russia](#) – Washington apparently wants to revive relations with the formidable Pakistani military.

Khan is no revolutionary socialist, but he believes that Pakistan has the right to maintain its own independent foreign policy. For that reason, he will remain an impediment to Washington.

While the outcome of this chaotic situation is deeply uncertain, one thing is crystal clear: The political battle is between Khan and the overwhelming majority of Pakistanis on one side, and the powerful and wealthy civilian and military elites (sponsored by Washington) on the other. Despite legitimate criticisms of how Khan governed when in power, progressives must be able to figure out where they stand now.

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