

Pakistan Elections: Khan vs. the Generals

Checkmate: Khan

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Pakistan's elections just days ago both lived up to expectations, and did not. What was predicted was the electoral tampering, rigging, and outright fraud that was a central feature of the Pakistani generals' plan. What was not anticipated was former Prime Minister Imran Khan's party, the PTI ('movement for justice'), capturing the most parliamentary seats of any political party.

Such a miraculous outcome, despite the horrendous levels of repression of the PTI, despite every single attempt by the military establishment to prevent the party from even contesting in the elections – not to mention the aforementioned manipulation of the election results.

The Pakistani military-intelligence apparatus, after its violence and terror campaign against the population following the ousting of Khan from power in April 2022, is the proverbial emperor that has no clothes. They stand manifestly exposed both for their reign of terror, corruption, and fraud, but also for their incompetence in delivering the political results desired by both internal and external power centers.

In many ways, perhaps the most analogous relatively recent event was the victory of Hamas in elections in 2006. The Israelis, the Americans, and the Gulf monarchies wanted to give legitimacy to their chosen occupation sub-contractor, the collaborationist and hopelessly corrupt Palestinian Authority (PA). These forces believed that they had adequately invested the financial and political capital to smoothly enable the PA to win 'elections under occupation.' Shock and horror – as well as a violent intervention – by these political actors were what followed the surprise victory of Hamas, despite every effort to marginalize and bury the appeal of this Palestinian resistance movement.

Similarly, the military and political elites in Pakistan had guaranteed themselves and their master-patrons in Washington that these elections in Pakistan were a done deal, a walk in the park. This narrative claimed that the appeal of the PTI had diminished, and any remaining popularity of Khan and his political party would be offset by the investment of tens of millions of dollars to buy off the military high command, politicians in all of the provinces, and crucially, the judges of the provincial high courts, as well as the Supreme Court itself.

The generals said they had plans B, and if needed, C, in case plan A did not work.

Plan A was the simple ousting of Khan from power in April 2022. It was thought this move would simply eradicate the 'Khan virus.'

To the surprise of many, including Khan himself, a massive, unprecedented outpouring of support, with rallies taking place across cities and towns, erupted spontaneously in every province of the country.

But that was fine, and military elites began the charge sheet against Khan to get him embroiled in one court case after the next – plan B.

That failed to work, and Khan's popularity continued to soar. Incessant reassurances were meted out from former Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Bajwa to Washington and the House of Sharif, the family in control of one of the two dominant dynastic political parties, the PML(N).

Gen. Bajwa claimed that the situation is under control and that his successor, COAS Gen. Asim Munir, would finish the job. Bajwa was lucky. All he agreed to was removing Khan from power, and he delivered. Though Gen. Bajwa also became detested, his safety valve was his exit from the political scene after a few months. Asim Munir was not so fortunate.

Plan C needed to be activated.

Public sentiment was turning so antagonistic towards the military top brass for their unashamed targeting of Khan that the 'final solution' needed to be implemented: assassination.

Two of those attempts, one of which injured Khan in the shin, proved fruitless as well.

There really was no plan D, and so one was quickly concocted: charge Khan with the most absurd but very serious charges: terrorism, treason, etc., and imprison him in complete isolation.

Charge him with leaking state secrets over the now infamous 'cypher-gate' – the accusation that Khan recklessly spoke of a top secret diplomatic cable sent to the Foreign Ministry by Pakistan's ambassador to the US. It stated, in no uncertain terms, Washington's desire that Khan be removed from power. Both the military elite as well as, sadly, a good chunk of the intellectual class, mocked Khan (and his supporters) for over a year for being conspiratorial and inventing this ostensibly fictional 'cypher.'

Only when the American online publication, *The Intercept*, confirmed the veracity of the contents – as Khan had described – of the diplomatic cable, did Gen. Munir and other senior

personnel in the armed forces not only concede that such a cypher does exist, but that Khan would now face charges of treason for revealing its contents. Supposedly, this leak by the former prime minister constituted a grave threat to 'national security.' In reality, it presented a palpable unmasking of the collusion of the American foreign policy establishment, Pakistani generals, and Pakistani kleptocrats of the two major political parties, one of the House of Sharif and the other the House of Bhutto-Zardari – in deposing Khan from power.

Once the hastily assembled plan D was put in motion, the idea was that it would seamlessly lead to the final plan E, that of ruthless repression of the PTI, so that by the time of elections in February 2024, there will be no sign remaining of Khan and his party.

What the election results of last week have shown – despite the fact that Khan's party members could not even run on their party ticket and had to run as independents – is the ongoing popular support for PTI.

There doesn't seem to be a plan F, considering the frantic responses of the army chief and the head of the intelligence agencies, or the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). COAS Gen. Munir is no longer concerned with his big picture 'obligations.' He has been reduced to being merely interested in saving himself. The only party that he is trying to somehow please at this point is the one footing the bill – the House of Sharif.

All of this has led to Gen. Munir perhaps being the most hated COAS in the nation's history. And that's not because of a shortage of competition.

How about Washington planners? How are they reacting?

As one senior State Department official very bluntly commented:

"These imbeciles can't even crush a political novice like Khan. They command one of the largest armed forces in the world, nuclear armed. What is all that for?"

The American foreign policy establishment, after the ouster of Khan, had outsourced the job of managing the old 'Af-Pak' theatre of the 'Global War on Terror' to the Pentagon.

Washington believed its old Cold War framework of dealing with the generals will produce a 'stable' and pliant Pakistan. There is no entity as irate at the incompetence of the Pakistani military high command as the US Department of Defense – to which both Gen. Bajwa and Gen. Munir promised the moon. Actually, State Department officials are equally incensed since they were tasked to prevaricate for almost two years to conceal Washington's role, as well as that of Pakistani generals, in this entire scenario.

The State Department denied any knowledge of the cypher. That began to change after the *Intercept's* publication of the contents of that diplomatic cable. At that point, it was not so much about asserting the non-existence of the cypher, but underscoring how such communication between two governments was nothing abnormal. Washington was willing to give Islamabad a few more months to fix everything by holding (s)elections that would quash Khan and his party once and for all.

And now, it seems clear that the American foreign policy establishment is in a state of vengeance, keen on punishing the generals who promised to engender a Pakistani political dispensation unashamedly docile and subservient. This is why there's been an explosion of

harsh criticisms – from the State Department to numerous members of Congress – of the Pakistani military's interference in these elections.

Undoubtedly, there were members of Congress, such as Rep. Ilhan Omar, who wanted to express their displeasure much earlier. But they also acquiesced to their Democratic Party leadership in the White house and in Congress – who hung on by a thread to the idea that 'stability' will be brought soon by the traditional political and military elites. The White House unceasingly maintained that 'our guys' in Islamabad will facilitate a smooth and relatively quiet transition to the post-Khan period, without raising any international alarm bells.

Of course, now, it's become patently obvious that Washington is radically revising its stance, one that effectively states to Pakistan's generals: you had your chance, you failed, and now you're making things worse. The American 180 turnaround in its position is an attempt to salvage some respect, or at least some tolerance, from the people of Pakistan that know full well Washington's role in the 'original sin' of the regime change operation. The generals have put Washington in a deeply embarrassing situation.

However, Washington apparatchiks may be unfair in their treatment of their client men in khaki in Pakistan. The former do not realize that it's the political has-beens that the generals can control, not the newbies like Khan. The old political bigwigs know the rules of the game – proper balance between the enrichment of both the political and military elites – and abide by it. The new kids on the block are too recalcitrant to even properly learn those rules, let alone comply with them.

In sum, Washington now considers Gen. Munir a dreadful liability, only after his first year as COAS. Gen. Pervez Musharraf, on the other hand, provided Washington 'stability in Pakistan' for 8 years until he also became a liability in 2007.

In this entire saga, what's truly been disappointing is the role of Pakistani media. The country's leading and, deservedly, most well-respected periodical, *Dawn*, suddenly begins to churn out columns praising the democratic "defiance" of the people in these elections. It's a shame that the people's defiance was not covered over the past twenty months, when apparently it was simply an expression of a cult-following, and the totalitarian and conspicuously undemocratic repression was not worth reporting. The resistance of the Pakistani people could have certainly benefited from some coverage then. Now, such voices in the media are commonplace. It's rather sad how Pakistani media seems to be taking its cues from the US State Department – when to cover/report, and when not to. *DAWN* columnists had many months to praise the democratic will of the people, but did not.

At this point, the divisions within the military officer corps have become evident. Gen. Munir and others in the top brass realize how dangerous it is to give the wrong orders to junior officers and soldiers. How many times will the Pakistani armed forces be commanded to open fire, imprison, torture, and disappear their population on a mass scale? The crimes of the military establishment in the provinces of Balochistan and KPK have been bad enough.

For almost two years now, the brutal suppression of the military establishment was meant to instill paralyzing trepidation in the population. But just as the people of Gaza, of Palestine, of West Asia, have overcome a psychological sense of fear of Israel, so too have the people of Pakistan. Pakistanis have increasingly lost fear of their national security state and its

violent shenanigans. This is a major development.

Whatever political configuration emerges after these elections, one thing is for certain: this round has been a resounding victory for former Prime Minister Imran Khan, smiling from his wretched jail cell, as well as the people of Pakistan, regardless of their political affiliation.

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