

## WORKING PAPER 22 - Pakistan's Pandemic Policies

By Siegfried Wolf  
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**Dr. Siegfried O. Wolf**, Director of Research at SADF (Coordinator: Democracy Research Programme); he was educated at the Institute of Political Science (IPW) and South Asia Institute (SAI), both Heidelberg University. Additionally he is member (affiliated researcher) of the SAI as well as a former research fellow at IPW and Centre de Sciences Humaines (New Delhi, India).

### Abstract

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan is not only leading to severe economic and social impacts but is also accompanied by negative political ramifications, particularly for the country's civil-military relations. Pakistan is also presently hit by one of the worst locust plagues in decades. The federal government's incapability to adequately handle the affairs of the state is perceived as the cause for the slump in most formal sectors and the collapse of the informal economy. The latter is leading to a severe disruption in the livelihoods of large sections of Pakistan's society, especially the poor – those most vulnerable to political and religious radicalisation. Experiencing an advancing Islamisation, embedded in Prime Minister Imran Khan's growing authoritarian style of governance and in a notable seizing of power by the military at the expense of civilian institutions, Pakistan is once again at the edge of a critical juncture. Observers start to put in question the stability of the current civilian set-up in the light of one of the most severe crises in the history of this South Asian country.

### Keywords

Pakistan, COVID-19, Imran Khan, Authoritarianism, Civil-Military Relations, Locust Plague, Pakistan Army, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, PTI, China-Pakistan-Economic Corridor, CPEC, Corona Tiger Relief Force, CTRF, Islamisation, China, Afghanistan

## Introduction

Pakistan has witnessed increasing popular discontent and rising tensions linked to Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan's indecisive and contradictory approaches in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. Declining economic and social conditions constitute additional risks for the stability of the Pakistani Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) administration. However, after contributing to the negotiations leading to the [U.S.-Taliban peace deal](#), Islamabad aims to take on a key role in the intra-Afghan dialogue. US-Pakistan relations were improving - despite PM Khan's eulogy of Osama bin Laden and the subsequent glorification of jihadism and international terrorism.

Currently, Pakistan's civilian and military leadership are trying to normalise their tense relations with the Afghan government through an increase in [high-level bilateral interactions](#)<sup>1</sup>. This is also undertaken in a trilateral context<sup>2</sup> including Beijing, who appears to have a growing interest in Kabul's political trajectories. Pakistan's relations with China, overshadowed earlier this year by [a slowdown](#) in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), received a fresh impetus due to agreements on new [major development projects](#) and the escalation of the [border conflict](#) between arch enemy New Delhi and Beijing. Despite emerging criticisms, the support provided by Pakistan's army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to PM Khan's administration continues and he was able to further strengthen his position. This might change if the Corona crisis reaches a highly critical level. Considering these regional and domestic parameters when assessing the political and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan, this SADF working paper argues that COVID-19 does not have much negative impacts on the CPEC – instead, the economic corridor benefits from the pandemic. After this development initiative slowed down since PM Khan came into power (especially during the last year), COVID-19 now functions as a 'booster'. Several new, major projects were added to the CPEC scheme so as to provide the initiative additional momentum. However, COVID-19 had severe ramifications in Pakistan as concerns good governance in general and the unhealthy civil-military relations in particular. It is stated here that COVID-19 provided further momentum to the process of shifting power from the civilian government to the military - and that it further increased the military's institutional role in the country. There are indications that COVID-19 led to rifts between the armed forces and PM Khan. According to observers, emerging dissatisfaction among sections of the army's top brass could lead to a change in the current 'civilian setup' (that is, a change of government).

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Wolf (2020, April 6).

<sup>2</sup> For example, through the (virtual) [3rd Round of China-Afghanistan-Pakistan Trilateral Vice Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue](#) on July 7, 2020.

It is stressed that COVID-19 is identified as an opportunity to repair ‘reputational damage’ and to ‘restore the military’s overall legitimacy’.

Besides the seizing of power and growing formal-institutional leverage by the military, PM Khan’s governance is increasingly characterised by authoritarian elements, another phenomenon enhanced after the outbreak of COVID-19. Pakistan is witnessing an emerging authoritarian style of governance by PM Khan. This, combined with accusations of being unable to handle the affairs of the state, present a risk for the governments’ stability. It is argued here that PM Khan’s governance approaches are further weakening the political-institutional structure in the country and deteriorating relations between the central government and the provinces. Consequently, the paper will conclude that the spread of COVID-19 is accompanied not only with a further reduction of the quality of democracy but also by a process through which the religious right successfully transformed its social leverage into political power and further Islamised Pakistan.

### The impact of COVID-19 on the CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)

One can state that besides [delays](#) in construction projects, the CPEC was not much affected by COVID-19. This is because the initiative just finished its first phase<sup>3</sup> (focusing on road construction, the Gwadar port, and energy projects). The second phase - focusing on the build-up of SEZs (Special Economic Zones; linked to industrialization) - started only briefly before the outbreak of the pandemic. Here, one should note that ‘[all business areas and business centres in the port of Gwadar are completely closed](#)’; however, the [Gwadar port remained operational](#). Both local and [Chinese workforces quickly returned](#)<sup>4</sup> to the construction sites and other projects<sup>5</sup>. Concrete economic damages related to the pandemic will probably be limited<sup>6</sup>. COVID-19 would have a much more negative impact on the CPEC were the SEZs already sufficiently established and operational, which is not the case. It is also important to note that CPEC planers are calculating within a timeframe of at least 15 to 20 years – short, temporary interruptions will have no negative impact on fundamental decision-making strategies regarding the corridor. In other words, delays must be relativized considering the long span of the CPEC initiative. Indeed, instead of being (severely) hit by COVID-19, the CPEC is benefitting from the pandemic.

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<sup>3</sup> Actually [90 per cent](#) of the first phase is completed; nevertheless, the second phase already started.

<sup>4</sup> After the [travel restrictions](#)/quarantine for people coming from China were removed.

<sup>5</sup> As early as April 2, 2020, the National Coordination Committee (NCC) [decided to reopen the CPEC projects](#).

<sup>6</sup> Financial losses due to delays and closing of local businesses; destruction of businesses is not publicly reported yet.

Due to maldevelopments (different interests and demands regarding the types of projects, corruptions; calls for negotiations of project arrangements, etc.) within the implementation of several projects, the whole initiative was [already slowing down](#) before the outbreak of COVID-19. Being the BRI's (Belt and Road Initiative) flagship, it is apparent that Beijing wants to ensure the success of the CPEC so as to prove that it is able to implement its international development vision despite COVID-19. The signing of an agreement between China and Pakistan over a new [\\$1.5 billion hydropower project](#) and several other large-scale projects<sup>7</sup> is a clear indication of such will. However, one needs to point out that due to these new CPEC projects, the military is able to extend its business activities - leading to further economic distortions in the country (Wolf, 2019). For example, the revived Diamer-Bhasha dam project will be [implemented in the form of a joint venture](#) between a Chinese firm and the army-owned Frontier Works Organisation (FWO). Furthermore, [both countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding \(MOU\)](#) with regard to increasing collaboration in areas such as healthcare, education, technology and agriculture, all under the CPEC's framework. Pakistan's PM Khan confirms this mutual commitment by stating that the CPEC will be completed '[at any cost](#)'.

## COVID-19 and the Civil-Military Relations (CMR)

### Emerging rifts and shifting powers in the relation between the PM Khan and the military

There is a common understanding among observers that the army took the lead in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. There are actually two views regarding how and why the soldiers absorbed this predominant role: (a) PM [Khan has delegated \('outsourced'\) the 'fight against COVID-19' to the military](#) due to a lack of adequate civilian capabilities and competence; (b) the military unilaterally took the decision to launch measures without the PM's consent and approval. The army would [interpret its role](#) as the entity who leads and directs the national response rather than 'just' supporting civilian authorities. Decisions regarding a lockdown and deployment of troops gain significance in this context.

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, the [Kohala Hydropower Project](#) in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) under the CPEC framework, with a volume of USD 2,4 billion, is the largest power sector investment in Pakistan. Furthermore, there is the [Azad Pattan Hydropower Project](#) with a total investment of [USD 1.54 billion](#). Overall (considering other projects), the investment of the recently signed hydro power projects are USD 7,5 billion. Another remarkable project is the Diamer-Bhasha dam project (USD 540 million) on the Indus River, which will get finally implemented after a delay/interruption of 40 years. The fact that most these projects are realised on disputed territories makes them highly critical on legal grounds - besides the negative ramifications for the environment.

Due to concerns regarding socio-political and economic costs, [PM Khan initially refused](#) the imposition of a lockdown (especially a [Level 4](#) one)<sup>8</sup>. On March 22 PM Khan - after a intermezzo and ‘flip-flop approach’ between lockdown and no-lockdown<sup>9</sup> - affirmed that his administration [would not](#) order lockdown measures. In consequence, [emerging protests among](#) health care personal (calling for a lockdown) further intensified - which [were violently suppressed by the authorities](#). Additionally, clerics and other sections of society vehemently refused to follow the initial guidelines, especially those regarding social distancing. These, among other factors, completed the perception that PM Khan is not only [indecisive](#) but also unable to address the COVID-19 challenge. Consequently, within twenty-four hours after PM Khan’s official rejection of a strict lockdown, the army [announced](#) that it would oversee a shutdown so as to contain the spread of COVID-19. This was followed by a [notification issued](#) by Federal Minister for Interior Ijaz Ahmed Shah – known for his close links to the armed forces – which authorised a nationwide troop deployment (including in Gilgit-Baltistan, Azad Jammu and Kashmir) in aid of the civilian administration<sup>10</sup>. The Military Aid to Civil Power (MACP) has a long record<sup>11</sup> in Pakistan. However, such a far-reaching decision would usually be announced by the PM and not by a member of his cabinet. Furthermore, [it is reported](#) that the notification was endeavoured without sufficient knowledge or clear approval by the Khan.<sup>12</sup> Through the side-lining of the PM in the combat against COVID-19, the military has ‘[asserted greater authority](#)’ – leading to a further power shift from the civilian government towards the soldiers. Since the troop deployment was authorized under Article 245 of the Constitution (which had never before been invoked nationwide), the army was granted unchecked power in the areas of its operation. This is why the country’s judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, vehemently rejected the notion of a lockdown and prompted (*suo moto*) the [lifting of some restrictions](#) on businesses<sup>13</sup> - thus [providing a political bailout to a PM under stress](#).

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, PM Khan was convinced at the beginning of the outbreak of COVID-19 that it constituted a ‘[normal flu](#)’.

<sup>9</sup> In the second week of March, [PM Khan decided to take strict measures step-by-step](#) – ‘banning public gatherings and weddings, halting international flights and closing down educational institutions’ (partial lockdown). However, he [remained reluctant](#) to impose a countrywide lockdown.

<sup>10</sup> “The [decision has been made under](#) Section 245 (functions of armed forces) of the Constitution and Section 131(A) (power to use military force for public security and maintenance of law and order) of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC)”.

<sup>11</sup> Actually, since Pakistan came into existence, civilian authorities rely on the armed forces for crisis and disaster management.

<sup>12</sup> The fact that the PM - in a [speech](#) two days before the deployment of troops - neither mentioned nor indicated that such a measure could be taken reveals that Khan [was side-lined](#) in this decision. It is reported that the government ‘[summoned the military to enforce social and economic restrictions](#)’. However, this only happened after the army had already made the decision to deploy troops.

<sup>13</sup> The Supreme Court argued that COVID-19 is ‘[apparently not a pandemic in Pakistan](#)’.

However, not satisfied with PM Khan's administration's handling of the crisis, the military worked directly with provincial-level administrations. The federal government's authority was further undermined by the fact that [opposition leaders in provincial governments](#) moved ahead and took [autonomous decisions](#) so as to combat COVID-19.

### Further enhancement of the military's institutional role

Besides the autonomously acting army, another major feature of the combat against COVID-19 is the military's growing role in the political-administrative system. This is a well-known phenomenon in the country's history; however, it witnessed a revival since the launch of the CPEC - and today gained an additional push through the army's engagement in containing the pandemic. There are several examples of this fact:

The establishment of the *National Command and Operations Centre* (NCOC), a civil-military hybrid institution [set up to compile data on COVID-19 cases and take other measures in the country](#) - such as [issuing directions regarding lockdowns](#) in certain areas, ensuring the [strict implementation of the Standard Operation Procedures \(SOPs\)](#), and coordinating the services of volunteer forces (*Corona Tiger Relief Force/CTRF*). Formally, the NCOC is headed by the Minister for Planning Asad Omar and two army generals<sup>14</sup>. However, it is [reported](#) that decision-making power lies with military representatives within the NCOC. Headed by an army general, the *National Disaster Management Authority* (NDMA) is also under the army's direction<sup>15</sup>. The appointment of the Lieutenant General (Retired) Asim Saleem Bajwa<sup>16</sup>, who [heads the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor \(CPEC\) Authority](#), as a special assistant on information to the Prime Minister, is also indicative of a growing formal-institutionalised [influence](#) in political decision-making. It is crucial to point out that the current Federal Minister for Interior Ijaz Ahmed Shah served as a Director of the ISI in Punjab, as well as the DG of Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau (IB)<sup>17</sup>. This provides both the army and ISI with further leverage within the federal government – a fact revealed, again we stress, by the announcement of troop deployments without consent or approval by PM Khan.

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<sup>14</sup> Among them we find [General Mohammad Afzal, who also heads the National Disaster Management Authority](#).

<sup>15</sup> The current [head of the NDMA is Lt Gen Mohammed Afzal](#), who is also a leading member of the NCOC.

<sup>16</sup> Lieutenant General (Retired) [Asim Saleem Bajwa served before as](#) Commander of the Southern Command/XII Corps, also known as the Quetta Corps in Baluchistan; as well as DG of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR).

<sup>17</sup> The IB is a civilian agency. Its responsibilities include gathering intelligence within PAK and disseminating it through the Ministry of Interior to political leaderships (and police). The PAKMIL/ISI possess a strong leverage within the IB, which is [often headed by serving major generals](#) from the army (otherwise a serving police officer). Furthermore, the IB has a high number of both [serving and retired military personnel within its ranks](#).



### Potential change in the ‘civilian set-up’ and subsequent options/scenarios

There are reports that sections within the military leadership are unsatisfied with PM Khan’s performance. The issue seems to lie in Khan’s inability to address major policy issues, combined with a [highly inappropriate management of state](#) affairs (most noteworthy PM Khan’s parliamentary eulogy of Osama bin Laden). Both factors seem to be translated in increasingly negative reputational repercussions for the army. More concretely, elements within the armed forces now identify PM Khan as a threat to their own credibility. This is relevant since in Pakistan the [PM is chosen and backed by the soldiers](#) so as to represent and protect their interests in the political domain. Some now identify PM Khan as *a burden* rather *than a benefit* for the military. It is argued that the army could use the COVID-19 crisis so as to legitimize an intervention in the current ‘civilian set-up’. This would be accomplished not only as a political necessity to avert further damage to the country but also as an exercise in restoring the military’s overall legitimacy.

Here, the important questions are: (a) what happens when the spread of COVID-19 reaches an extraordinarily critical stage?<sup>18</sup> (b) how stable is the current federal government, and will the military allow PM Khan to finish his term in office? In addressing this puzzle, the following options and subsequent scenarios might be considered by the military (and collaborating civilian establishment):

#### Option 1 - Internal Political Coup Scenario:

At the core of this scenario lies a ‘[in-house change](#)’ featured by ousting PM Khan (‘[minus one](#)’ formula) and bringing back to power an oppositional mainstream political party, [most likely the Pakistan Muslim League \(Nawaz\)/PML-N](#) - albeit with a new leadership more conducive to military interests. Concretely, it is probable that instead of former PM Nawaz Sharif, his brother Mian Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif - former Chief Minister of Punjab and currently leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly - would be chosen. There are also hints that the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), the second major political party in opposition, seems willing to cooperate with the military. However, considering the historically tense relations between both entities and the deeply-[entrenched biased attitude of the army towards the PPP](#), it is unlikely that this party will be chosen. However, the ‘minus one’ narrative does not consider the fact that PM Khan and his ruling PTI [are inseparable](#).

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<sup>18</sup> [Featured by](#) large-scale social unrest, severe interruptions of food supply chains, the collapse of the health care sector, and a non-functional civilian administration (government), among others.

Consequently, a potential ousting of PM Khan would have also [far-reaching consequences for the PTI](#). According to observers, if Khan as the leader of PTI loses his post as PM before officially finishing his term, this could lead to the collapse of his party.

#### Option 2 - Reshuffling Scenario:

The reshuffling scenario involves keeping PM Khan in office. However, the military will step-up efforts to oversee decision-making [more actively](#), as well as intervene in the composition of the ‘civilian setup’. This would be translated in a restructuring of the federal cabinet by bringing in leading and competent oppositional stakeholders, especially from the PPP. In other words, the army would exercise its political influence so as to increase the inclusiveness of the national government. One of the major challenges in this scenario is the fact that PM Khan’s coalition government suffered from a separation of two allied political parties the Baluchistan National Party (BNP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, which are not willing to cooperate anymore. Furthermore, the [PPP as well PML-N showed clear signs](#) that they are hesitating to establish an *extra-parliamentary* working relationship.

#### Option 3 - Military coup scenario:

This scenario would witness a direct political take-over by the PAKMIL until the country overcomes COVID-19 - followed by the initiation of new general elections at some point. This scenario can likely be ruled out.

### Increasing authoritarianism and its implications

There is a growing scepticism regarding PM Khan’s ability to adequately address the country’s political and economic challenges, especially as regards his electoral promise of ‘Naya [New] Pakistan’. There are accusations that PM Imran Khan’s style of governance is becoming increasingly authoritarian. Some of the most critical points/accusations are:

#### Envisaged enactment of the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, the government of Pakistan is attempting to establish a [sweeping state-oversight over the social media sector](#). In order to do so, Islamabad envisaged a set of new regulations called the ‘Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, 2020’, which would have far-reaching impacts on the ways in which social media companies [can operate in the country](#). PM Khan’s cabinet ‘secretly’ approved the respective regulations without parliamentary debate or prior consultation with [other stakeholders outside the government](#), for example from the digital economy or civil society



groups. Furthermore, the new regulations<sup>19</sup> indicate not only a [clear attempt by the government](#) ‘to gain strict controls over digital and online narratives’ but also ‘to centralise power’, and as such constitutes a [further truncation of democratic and political progress in Pakistan](#). Due to criticisms, the government put the enactment on hold and launched a consultation process over the regulations. However, observers do not expect substantial revisions to the drafted bill.

### Formation of the Corona Tiger Relief Force

On March 27, PM Khan initiated the formation of the ‘Corona Tiger Relief Force’ (CTRF). The CTRF is a volunteer force tasked to ‘monitor hoarding, artificial inflation and violation of social distancing guidelines, as well as aid local administration in ration distribution, public announcements’, among other things. The force operates only in [Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Baluchistan](#). It is argued that the formation of this group is ‘[politically motivated](#)’ and would serve PM Khan as a ‘[personal army](#)’. The creation of the CTRF is perceived by the political opposition to PM Khan and his PTI as an attempt to disempower provincial governments and administrations (especially in Sindh) in the combat against COVID-19. Linked with the formation and detachment of the CTRF, [demands were raised](#) to put the Sindh province, where the ruling PTI lies in opposition, under the governor’s rule ([presidential rule](#)). Due to the refusal to integrate the CTRF within the provincial administrative system, the CTRF worked parallel to the provincial administration under the governor’s directive.

### Ongoing suppression of the political opposition

In May 2020, Pakistan's interior ministry [banned \(citing "reasonable grounds" that the organizations has ties to terrorism\) the Jeay Sindh Qaumi Mahaz-Arisar \(JSQM-A\)](#), a political party in Sindh. The JSQM-A is known for being critical of the CPEC. Here, one can state that Pakistan’s authorities are identifying any CPEC critics (individuals as well as organisations) as [enemies of the country](#). This also includes legitimate (non-violent and lawful) political oppositional forces such as political forces. In order to do so, they use either charges of corruption or terror legislation.

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<sup>19</sup> Concretely, the envisaged *regulations* make it mandatory for (international) social media firms to immediately remove any material deemed undesirable by the country’s authorities and provide data about the social media accounts of [Pakistani citizens to the authorities whenever asked](#). Companies will also be bound to establish permanent physical offices (within three months and regardless of the company’s size<sup>[2]</sup>) and data centres within [Pakistan, as well as open offices](#) along with focal persons in Islamabad. Furthermore, the *rules* would provide for ‘the establishment of the office of National Coordinator (NC)’ entrusted with ‘[unprecedented censorship powers](#)’. Companies and platforms [not complying with regulations](#) could be blocked online and fined with up to 500 million rupees/\$3.24 million.

The banning of the JSM-A shows that the government uses anti-terror law to suppress any opposition towards the CPEC in general and the role of the military in the CPEC in particular - leading to a further truncation of democratic processes. As such, the ban of the party is another, recent indicator for the declining quality of democracy in Pakistan.

### Weakening of the federal political-institutional structures

During COVID-19, the process of centralization of authority and resources (which gathered momentum before the outbreak with the establishment of the [CPEC Authority](#)) continued. In the focus of the current federal government is the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment,<sup>20</sup> [which grants the provinces](#) ‘more powers of health, education, curriculum, and more than one percent of GDP control in each province’. Since PM Khan came into power in 2018, he [supported a critical debate](#) on the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment aiming at a legislative revision intended to achieve a reduction of provincial autonomy. However, both the political opposition and the provinces were able [to prevent any revision](#) of this legislation. Provincial autonomy gained additional significance after the outbreak of COVID-19. Instead of supporting the ‘no-lockdown stand’ of PM Khan, provinces (foremost Sindh) went ahead with their [own lockdown strategy](#) – a fact which was perceived by Islamabad as undermining its authority. According to critical observers, PM Khan is [using the COVID-19 crisis](#) to intensify his politics of centralization and devolve powers at the local level - in brief, to undermine the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment. There are accusations that the federal government ‘[reallocates resources away from provincial governments to the central authority](#)’, a policy which is weakening federal structures. The federal government is also accused of having ‘double standards’ in combatting COVID-19. More concretely, the federal government is accused of [neglecting health care systems](#) in the peripheral and disputed areas of Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir. [According to critics](#), the phenomenon was apparently enforced during COVID-19 by [giving these areas less attention](#) in the distribution of medical supplies. Therefore, the undermining of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment, understood as the weakening of federal structures, is not only leading to a further centralisation of power. It also strengthens the military’s political power - due to its increasing leverage in the formal political-administrative system as well as its informal influence over PM Khan. This has severe ramifications for all crucial areas of decision-making, particularly foreign policy. As long as the army defines the parameters of foreign policy, Pakistan will never change its approach towards either Afghanistan or India.

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<sup>20</sup> The [18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was passed in 2010](#). With the abolishment of concurrent lists, provinces were awarded with more autonomy in numerous policy areas. The legislation aims to establish an effective local government system by devolving political, administrative and financial responsibility and authority. The major goal would be to strengthen democratic and federal structures in PAK.

Last but not least, there is PM Khan's contempt towards the Parliament. Besides being blamed of worsening centre-provinces relations, PM Khan is criticised for side-lining (even by not appearing, at least not regularly) the national parliament in crucial decision-making and for [disregarding the opposition](#). Instead, the '[legislative business](#)' by Imran Khan is predominantly done via the use of presidential ordinances - without consulting lawmakers.

## COVID-19 and Pakistan's economy

Pakistan's macroeconomic stabilization [face a double threat](#): the unexpected COVID-19 pandemic and one of the [worst locust plague in decades](#). The locust crisis overlaps with the COVID-19 pandemic and creates a '[crisis within a crisis](#)' - a catalyst for an agricultural and food security crisis. Large-scale [speculation and hoarding are affecting key commodities](#) such as wheat and sugar, leading to the destruction of crops, food shortages<sup>21</sup>, rising costs of food, and negative impacts on the [overall economy](#)<sup>22</sup>. Slow economic growth and job losses are also afflicting Pakistan - boosted by COVID-19, which brought the informal economy close to a halt. There is a general perception that PM Khan is not able to control the situation, leading to a further [destabilisation of his administration](#). On June 29, amid the COVID-19 crisis, the National Assembly approved the 2020-21 budget featured by a fiscal gap of 3.4 trillion rupees (US\$20.7 billion). It is reported that the government plans to bridge this deficit mainly by borrowing from banks. The government also speeded up the [program to privatize state-run enterprises](#) so as to steer them out of financial losses, and this of course contributed to the state's financial woes. It also [contributed an additional loss of jobs](#). A notable example is the Pakistan Still Mills. The government also 'allocated \$7.85bn for defence and merely \$151m for health in the budget for the financial year 2020-2021' - despite the COVID-19 pandemic. 'This represents a 12 percent rise in Pakistan's defence spending compared with the last financial year.' Furthermore, Islamabad refuses '[to be fully transparent about its military spending](#)' so as '[to avoid hard questions from the IMF](#)'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> COVID-19 '[has also contributed to significant losses for farmers due to non-availability of transport to dispatch agricultural produces from fields to markets during the recent lockdown. The situation caused the rotting of perishable items, including vegetables and fruits.](#)'

<sup>22</sup> The Agricultural sector plays a central role in PAK's economy. '[It is the second largest sector, accounting for over 21 percent of GDP, and remains by far the largest employer, absorbing 45 percent of the country's total labour force. Nearly 62 percent of the country's population resides in rural areas, and is either directly or indirectly linked with agriculture for their livelihoods.](#)'

<sup>23</sup> Critics argue that '[major acquisitions by the armed forces, spending on the public sector development programme \(PSDP\), expenditure on the nuclear programme and para-military forces, payments for military pensions, a newly set-up national security division and a few other military expenditures are not reflected in the budget. If these were to be added to it, Pakistan's defence spending would be even higher - at around \\$11bn.](#)'

Otherwise, in order to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Khan's administration conducted several measures which - besides an around [\\$7.5 billion economic relief and stimulus package](#) - included fiscal, monetary, and macro-financial policies, as well as measures linked to exchange rates and balance of payments . The IMF expects that [PAK's economy will gradually recover in the fiscal year 2021](#).

### Concluding remarks

COVID-19 pushed the transformation of social leverage into political power by the religious right, enhancing Islamisation in Pakistan. [In most Muslim countries](#), authorities - backed by the religious establishment - have shutdown mosques to the public and banned mass prayers. However, in Pakistan [Islamic clerics refused](#) to halt religious congregations. Instead, some of the [most prominent clerics have rallied](#) their devotees to ignore the 'anti-pandemic measures', and even [attacked police forces](#) willing to ensure the implementation of COVID-19 regulations. The religious right in the country - [an amalgam of Islamist political parties and religious clerics](#) - traditionally functions as a potent pressure force with an outsized influence on the government and which is able to effectively influence all branches of governance. However, during COVID-19, these activities reached an unprecedented peak. By instrumentalising their '[street \(social\) power](#)', hard-line clerics were able to override the envisaged nationwide lockdown in places of worship. PM Khan gave into the demands of the clerics - and mosques were allowed to (re-)open officially. Moreover, the [Khan's administration did not prevent](#) thousands of Sunni worshippers to go ahead with the *Tablighi Jamaat* (or *Tableeghi Jamaat/TJ*) congregation (*ijtema*) in the Punjab province<sup>24</sup>. According to critics, the [Supreme Court as well through its decision from May 18th](#) (which lifted the ban on religious mass gatherings and [made travelling possible](#)) gave into pressure by religious leaders. This has far-reaching consequences. It not only increased the influence by clerics within the country's judiciary (and other political institutions) but also [further eroded the remaining constitutional rule](#). Furthermore, it undermined civilian rule by empowering the clerics vis-à-vis PM Khan - who initially wanted to impose restrictions on [congregational mass prayers](#), especially during Ramadan and post-Ramadan Eid holidays. Against this backdrop, some observers describe the situation in Pakistan not only as '[appeasing the clerics](#)' but also as a wide [capitulation of the state before the religious right](#). In sum, the negative impact of the COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown measures, combined with insufficient social and economic support by the authorities, all increased vulnerabilities among large sections of the poor.

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<sup>24</sup> Hundreds of suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases have been linked to this congregation.

Moreover, the lack of government services created a vacuum for religious radicalized charity organisations to take over the state's welfare functions. This will further increase the religious right's social power, leading to the Islamisation of restive segments of the society.

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19 Avenue des Arts 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, 1210 Brussels, Belgium  
E 0833.606.320 RPM Bruxelles  
Email: [info@sadf.eu](mailto:info@sadf.eu) Web: [www.sadf.eu](http://www.sadf.eu)