

## COMMENT 208 - Is Pakistan's PM Khan losing his political grip?

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Islamabad's political circles experienced a [tumultuous week](#), even for Pakistani standards. On Saturday, March 6, 2021, Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan asked lawmakers from the lower house of the country's parliament for a vote of confidence. The PM [secured 178 votes](#) out of the 171 currently required<sup>1</sup> to win the *open* ballot. Khan obviously felt that this move was necessary after a '[surprise](#)' electoral defeat in the Senate polls three days earlier<sup>2</sup>. Opposition parties – foremost the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N) of former PM Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former president Asif Ali Zardari – were [able to achieve majority](#) (53 seats vis-à-vis 47 for the ruling alliance) in the upper house. Put simply and somewhat downplaying the whole complexity of electoral regulations<sup>3</sup>, [Senate elections seek](#) legislators in the provincial assemblies<sup>4</sup> to elect senators to represent their provinces – the National Assembly/NA also elects a Senator to represent the

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<sup>1</sup> Generally, PM Khan '[must have the support of a simple majority of 172 lawmakers](#)' in the lower house (National Assembly), according to Article 91(7) of Pakistan's Constitution. '[However, since the NA-75 seat lies vacant after its by-election results were nullified by the Election Commission of Pakistan, he will need the support of 171.](#)'

<sup>2</sup> On March 3, 2021, elections were held for [37 Senate seats](#).

<sup>3</sup> According to the constitution, the Senate of Pakistan has basically 100 seats ([currently only 96](#)), of whom half are elected for staggered six-year terms. A certain number of seats are reserved for special groups, including Ulema, women and non-Muslims. The term for members is six years; however, roughly one-half of said members retire every three years. For more information see: [Senate of Pakistan](#).

<sup>4</sup> Actually only in Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Baluchistan and Islamabad. The Punjabi province constitutes this time a special case, where holding elections was not necessary. Here, '[all 11 vacant seats were won by candidates who stood uncontested, following negotiations between Khan's PTI and opposition parties](#)'.

capital, Islamabad. It goes without saying that such elections, especially for the capital's Senate seat, are extraordinarily contested.

The '[Senate debacle](#)' represents a major political setback for Khan, and this for several reasons. First is the [defeat](#) of Khan's ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) candidate Finance Minister Abdul Hafeez Sheikh against Yousuf Raza Gillani, a former PM and nominee of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), over the prestigious general Senate seat for Islamabad (particularly since the vote for this seat is held in the NA). The fact that [ruling parties in Pakistan](#) usually secure a majority in the Senate also creates a symbolic [embarrassment regarding the latest results](#). Moreover, in the run-up for Senate polls, a renewed attempt<sup>5</sup> was undertaken by the government to reform the electoral procedure involved – namely [to transform secret ballots into open ballots](#); this move was rejected by the Supreme Court in the same first week of March. The court's verdict was interpreted as a [blow to PM Khan's government](#), setting the stage for Sheikh's loss. Here it is important to stress that there are serious allegations that previous senate polls 'were marred by 'horse-trading', with legislators' votes often violating their party's orders' in '[exchange for bribes](#)'. This is relevant because the PTI linked its political legitimacy with the fight against endemic corruption in the country. That numerous PTI parliamentarians appear corrupted by the opposition – as claimed by Imran Khan<sup>6</sup> - undermines the ruling party's political credibility regarding the fulfilment of its electoral promises.<sup>7</sup>

The implications of the latest acts in Pakistan's parliamentary theatre as still somewhat unclear. It can be argued that the alleged 'horse trading' constituted one reason for Sheikh's defeat. But blaming corruption alone for the PTI and allied parliamentarians' defection might be far too narrow an explanation. Worse, one could hereby blur the line between causes and consequences. Rather one can wonder about the underlying problems and motivations of NA members. Rifts and factionalism within the PTI are not a novel phenomenon; current fissures could relate to disagreements - or at least concerns - over both government policies and

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<sup>5</sup> PM Khan tried to push through a reform of the Senate polls, '[first through a failed constitutional amendment and then through a presidential ordinance this year](#)'.

<sup>6</sup> PM [Khan accused](#) 15 to 16 of his party's 178 MPs of taking bribes from the opposition so as to vote for Gilani.

<sup>7</sup> The reputational damage is even higher when one considers that already in the context of the [2018 Senate polls](#), PTI members were accused of trading and selling their votes.

Khan's autocratic style (especially as regards the side-lining of legislative organs). The rapidly growing leverage by China in all spheres of the state constitutes an additional concern not only among the opposition but also among members of the ruling coalition. Such worries are enhanced by the deteriorating political and human rights situation, censorship of the press (and other observers), increasing Islamisation, and the subsequent damage to the country's image. For example, the acquittance of Daniel Pearl's murder and the Islamist pressure to expel the French envoy were identified by some observers of the last session (February 2021) of the international financial watchdog FATF (Financial Action Task Force) as additional proofs that Pakistan must remain on their 'grey list' – resulting in a host of negative impacts for the country's financial sector and overall economy.<sup>8</sup> The military's increasing role in the country, particularly the intensified process of absorbing key positions in the administrative-institutional system, is of particular concern. It does not come by surprise that the new [civil-military cordiality](#) is seen with great suspicion since it hampers the civilian government's ability to formulate its own policies (especially in foreign affairs) or reduce the army's political influence. The view that the apparently close relationship between the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Qamar Javed Bajwa and PM Khan provides only the semblance of healthy civil-military relations while in practice leading to a further disempowerment of civilians is widely shared – and not only among oppositional politicians.<sup>9</sup> That PM Khan called on the COAS and the Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the aftermath of the Senate poll can be interpreted not only as a clear [message](#) by PM Khan and its supporters from the security establishment to bring the '[turncoats](#)' back into the PTI party line but also as a confirmation of their concerns regarding the repercussions of the '[Khan-Bajwa](#)

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<sup>8</sup> On February 25, the FATF decided to keep Pakistan on its 'grey list'. The next review of the Pakistan's status is announced for '[an extraordinary plenary session in June 2021](#)'. In order to justify its decision, the FATF argued that 'while Islamabad had made '[significant progress](#)', there remained some '[serious deficiencies](#)' in mechanisms to plug terrorism financing'. Furthermore, it is reported that two incidents made the position of [Islamabad weaker: the acquittance of Daniel Pearl's murder](#) and the diplomatic spat between PAK and France over a controversial bill passed in Paris (which [allegedly discriminates Muslims](#)) and the subsequent demands by Islamist hardliners to [expel the French envoy](#) to Pakistan. Despite the fact that experts presume Pakistan to remain in the grey list for the moment, there was still some [optimism](#) among authorities and businesses that the country would be removed from the list.

<sup>9</sup> Pakistan's politicians are expressing their concerns over the military's increasing leverage within the country's political-administrative institutions. It is highlighted that since Imran Khan came to power, soldiers are '[increasingly encroaching on the civilian sphere, with many generals now heading both administrative and executive institutions](#)'.

duo’ for the state of democracy in Pakistan. According to experts, the meeting of the COAS, DG ISI and the PM constitutes both a reminder and a warning to the political opposition regarding “who is calling the shots” in the country. Further, it once more underlines that whoever comes into power next needs the backing of the army – while the current opposition does not enjoy the confidence of the soldiers. In response to this more or less overt intimidation, it was reported that the opposition considered boycotting Khan’s initiated vote of confidence in the NA.

In sum, Khan’s vision for his PTI ‘to emerge as the largest single party in the upper house’ so far remains an illusion, at least for his current tenure. But the successful vote of confidence to the PM in the lower house was a ‘show of strength’ and a crucial move to keep his critics at bay – at least for the moment. Nevertheless, the victory of the oppositional candidate Gillani in the Senate will provide the PDM with a new impetus for its struggle against the still military-backed PM Khan. Pakistan is likely to witness greater public mobilisation – for example through long marches, street protests and heated agitations – instead of constructive parliamentary discourses. Yet it remains to be seen how far can the opposition gain political capital out of the transformed power equation in the upper house of the parliament. If Khan refuses to appear as a political ‘lame duck’ and want to continue with his ambitions regarding larger reform plans -without the necessary majority in the Senate- he needs to collaborate with the opposition. As long as the PDM remains governed by the single-issue policy of demanding the resignation of the PM and therefore underrates the theoretical exercise of figuring out what to do were Khan to be toppled, there is no room for manoeuvre in either side. In such a scenario, Khan will likely continue to run most state affairs through presidential orders and (mis)treating the parliament as a “rubber stamp” institution – despite the PM’s ‘waning popularity’.

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