

COMMENT 230 - Pakistan's new government challenges

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After weeks of political turmoil, the opposition overthrew the government in Pakistan. In a [no-vote of confidence](#), Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan – who used every available means, mostly [unconstitutional and illegal](#), to stay in power - was forced out of office. Opposition leader [Mian Mohammad Shahbaz Sharif](#), President of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz/PML-N¹, member of an influential [industrial-political dynasty](#) and staunch critic of Khan, was elected as new PM.

In his first address to the National Assembly (NA), Sharif announced far reaching political changes. Besides some populist measures², the PM promised to put the country's [economy back on track](#) and to correct (Khan's) foreign policy failures [to rebuild broken ties with partners and allies](#). Obviously, he referred to Pakistan-US relations, which are historically low due to Islamabad's support for the Taliban against US/NATO troops in Afghanistan. Khan's '[eulogy of Osama Bin Laden](#),' or the description of the takeover of Kabul by the ultra-conservative, religious-fanatic forces as breaking the '[shackles of slavery](#)' created additional setbacks in Washington's relations with Islamabad. His latest accusation that Washington was staging a conspiracy against him was just another peak in Khan's anti-

¹ Shahbaz is the younger brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif. He received 174 out of 342 votes in Monday's vote in the parliament (National Assembly) and is set to serve as the country's 23rd prime minister.

² These measures would [include a new minimum](#) wage of 25,000 rupees (some €124 or \$135). He also [promised](#) pay and pensions rises for civil servants, development projects for rural areas, and reduced prices for wheat flour, among others.

Americanism.³ By contrast, the new PM stressed that his government will ‘[constructively and positively](#)’ engage with the US so as to deepen these bilateral ties, which he considers ‘[important](#)’.

Sharif also accused the former government of [attempting to weaken ties between Islamabad and Beijing](#). He used the occasion to assure Chinese leadership that the friendship between both countries ‘[is forever](#)’ and that he will continue to push the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Regarding Islamabad’s relation with Brussels, Sharif stressed ‘[the need to get \[ensure\] the European Union \[EU\] GSP Plus Status](#)’. Khan’s [increasingly strident criticism of the EU](#) and his pro-Islamist policies - which were leading to a severe deterioration of human rights and living conditions among minorities in Pakistan - not only raised eyebrows in Brussels but also created serious [concerns among Pakistani economic elites](#). In his first India-related comments, PM Sharif used an ‘amicable rhetoric’ (unlike his predecessor) highlighted that ‘[Pakistan desires peaceful & cooperative ties with India](#)’.

According to [Dawn](#), ‘the new government is inheriting some daunting challenges from the get go’; living up to the promises outlined above will certainly not be easy. From a “pure” parliamentary perspective, there is optimism among observers regarding Pakistan’s political future. Despite the latest development marking another ‘[unceremonious end](#)’ of an prime ministerial term⁴ (no office holder in the history of Pakistan was yet able to finish his tenure), Khan’s ousting was widely assessed as an important step to strengthen parliamentarism as well as the rule of law and constitution.⁵ Imran Khan is the [first prime minister in Pakistan's history](#) to have been voted out through a no-confidence motion.⁶ This brought an constitutional imbroglio to an end; however, it did not solve the overall political crisis. Whereas Sharif announced that he ‘[would not indulge in politics of revenge](#)’, one must expect the opposite behaviour by Khan. Imran Khan, who never showed respect for the parliament and its procedures,⁷ decided, along with former NA

³ The [US Department of State denied accusations](#) of interference in Pakistan's internal affairs.

⁴ [Imran Khan was elected on August 18, 2018, and his term ended officially on April 10, 2022. He remained in the PM's office for 3 years ,7 months, and 23 days.](#)

⁵ Most important was the Supreme Court’s decision, that Khan’s ‘[maneuver to dissolve parliament — so as to avoid a vote of no-confidence in his leadership — and call early elections was illegal](#)’.

⁶ Before Khan, also the [Shaukat Aziz in 2006 and Benazir Bhutto in 1989](#) as PM’s had to face no-confidence votes. However, both survived the moves and remained in power.

⁷ Khan’s policy of ruling via presidential orders and his systematic use of abusive and insulting language against NAMs can be seen as proof of that fact.

members from his political party (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf/PTI), to move the political dialogue from the parliament into the street. This usually means in strikes, sit-ins, or roadblocks aimed at disturbing daily economic and other activities. Such protest measures often lead to the paralysation of whole urban areas and business nodes in Pakistan. Considering the negative economic consequences, this could seriously harm the new government's efforts to improve the overall social and economic conditions and to (re)gain the trust of foreign investors and international donors. Khan's dubious tactical manoeuvring and political U-turns resulted in losses among his initial supporters and cost him the "goodwill" of the military; however, his anti-US narrative is '[a tried-and-tested formula in Pakistan](#)'. By positioning himself as a "victimised anti-West leader" and depicting the new rulers in Islamabad as '[stooges of foreign powers](#)', Khan will still be able to mobilise the masses by winning over the sympathies of the religious extremists, ultra-conservatives, and other right-wingers.

PTI NA members resigned, which forces the new government to conduct over [100 by-elections](#) so as to fill the vacant seats in the national parliament within the next two months⁸. This not only provides occasions for Khan to promote anti-Western propaganda and further stir Islamisation, but also allows him to keep the new administration busy (and [distracted](#)) with nitty-gritty local electoral campaigning instead of pushing a national agenda. By all means, Khan will continue to polarise Pakistan's society and undermine Sharif's domestic [reconciliation](#) as well as international diplomatic efforts aimed at reducing the impacts of earlier policies.

However, Sharif will also face challenges from within his own political camp. His coalition (Pakistan Democratic Movement/PDM) and other allies were bound together by a single issue – to remove Khan from power. Since this goal was achieved, it remains highly questionable whether these diverse forces will possess enough cohesion to work together and govern constructively. Deteriorating economic conditions will force Sharif and his political partners to make tough and unpopular decisions, each time creating almost an existential challenge to the ruling administration. Therefore, before the chief executive can realise his vision of a

⁸ After the speaker of the NA [accepted](#) the resignation of the (former) PTI parliamentarians.

national reconciliation, he needs to unite his fractured allies. Forming the new cabinet will serve as a litmus test for managing internal dissent.

Sharif's adaptation to his new role remains to be seen. Recognised as an efficient administrator "who is getting things done" ('[Punjab speed](#)'), he is not used to long processes of consensus building and is heavily adverse to red-tape. This hampers his economic and political visions, particularly his favourite topic – large-scale developments projects. The personalized, '[can-do](#)' attitude towards politics worked out in his stronghold, the Punjab province (where he was the longest-serving Chief-Minister). However, it remains to be seen whether he can successfully apply this style of governance at the federal level in Islamabad. Otherwise, being known for preferring cordial relations with the army (unlike his brother Nawaz), one should expect him to enjoy the support of the army's top brass. However, this could chance sooner than later, as he must make a decision on the appointment of the new Chief-of-Army-Staff/COAS and as the PM's expected choice fails to reflect the views held by the top echelon.

In sum, it appears that for the time being, Pakistan's institutions were able to '[restore a modicum of political stability](#)'. However, if political leaders such as Imran Khan continue to truncate democratic processes and hamper constructive developments for partisan gains, the future of Pakistan remains uncertain.

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