

## COMMENT 229 - **The end for Khan?**

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1 April 2022– [DOI: 10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C229](https://doi.org/10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C229)



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Pakistan is witnessing a most severe political crisis, as the government is strongly challenged by both state and society. It is not the first time that Imran Khan, as Pakistan's Prime Minister (PM), is facing severe criticisms; it is not the first time that a wide array of oppositional forces gather to demand his resignation. Short-lived and unstable governments, the army's and secret service's dominant role in the country's decision-making, and a growing leverage by Islamist forces within the institutional-administrative structure are most noteworthy characteristics of Pakistan's political arena. In fact, the ousting of successive ruling administrations 'is as old as Pakistan itself'. According to observers, almost all political and religious parties were involved in the toppling of governments in the past. PM Khan, too, faces frequent pressure from the opposition, Islamist clerics, and other domestic socio-political actors.

For example, in October 2019 Maulana Fazlana-ur-Rehman (of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl/JUI-F), pushed by religious ultra-conservative elements, organized an 'Azadi march', a major protest movement demanding Khan's resignation and calling for new elections. The following year, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), an alliance of several oppositional political parties,<sup>1</sup> was created in September 2020; it too staged several agitations to oust Khan from power. More

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<sup>1</sup> The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) under the leadership of vice-president Maryam Nawaz Sharif and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) headed by its chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari are the two strongest oppositional parties. Another crucial player in the current alliance against the PM Khan is the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) with its leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman. Currently, the JUI-F has no seat in the National Assembly, but it plays a significant role in the country's politics due to its ability to mobilise masses, especially to conduct street agitations.

recently, the '[Gwadar protest](#)' was a remarkable expression of distrust and disappointment over Khan's policies and handling of the country's affairs.

The current crisis must perhaps be seen as the peak of a consistent challenge to Khan's [declining political grip](#). The process started roughly a year ago when the PM and his political allies lost majority in the Senate. One cause for Khan's defeat in the 2021 Senate polls was the growing erosion of its credibility and standing within its own political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).<sup>2</sup> That erosion much contributes to the present turmoil. [On March 8](#), a delegation of senior opposition lawmakers from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Peoples' Party (PPP) submitted a no-trust motion against the PM to the National Assembly (NA) Secretariat. The motion was [tabled](#) on March 28<sup>3</sup> in the NA and [approved](#) for debate the very same day. It is expected [during the time of writing] by federal Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed that the no-trust resolution against the PM is to be decided by [April 3](#). Khan has so far survived all attempts to remove him from office. Indeed, he has managed to sit out all crises, and keep his opposition at bay by adopting a rapidly evolving autocratic style of governance – much characterised by the censorship and even suppression of critical voices.<sup>4</sup> Experts agree that the PM's "political resilience" solely derives from the fact that he is supported by the military top brass. It is also generally assumed that Khan enjoyed, at least at the beginning of his tenure, much goodwill by many of Pakistan's religious conservatives.

Considering the numerous failures, since 2018, to change the government in Islamabad, one must wonder what makes the current opposition so optimistic about its ability to oust Khan from office this time around.

There are no doubts that recession and other maldevelopments (general mismanagement of government affairs, both domestic and foreign policy related; unfulfilled promises of reforms; endemic corruption; worsening security situation; increasing dependence on China; complains of Khan's personalized and autocratic style of governance, among others) are worsening.

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<sup>2</sup> Here, it is interesting to note that PM Khan was then [initiating a no-confidence vote in the National Assembly](#) against himself in order to restore his shaken political power within his own party as well as among his coalition partners. Khan was able to win the no-thrust vote. However, most oppositional lawmakers boycotted the proceedings.

<sup>3</sup> By the Leader of the Opposition in the National Assembly, Shehbaz Sharif.

<sup>4</sup> An extraordinary, bizarre example of how PM Khan is intimidating his political adversaries is his threatens to the lawmakers that '[No one will marry your \[their\] children](#)' when they don't express their thrust in him in the upcoming no-confidence vote.

It also becomes clear that the “numbers”<sup>5</sup> - at least at this very moment - do not favour the incumbent PM. According to the latest reports, it seems that the opposition has an upper hand, being in command of [177 votes](#), 5 more than those needed to remove Khan from office.<sup>6</sup> What changed so dramatically that the ousting of Khan seems suddenly so likely?

Several arguments can be made. The opposition pushed the motion for the no-confidence vote forward to prevent Khan from dissolving the parliament and calling for new elections.<sup>7</sup> This was done for two reasons. First, Khan seems to realise that his support base is dwindling, making his re-election seem harder each passing day. The frequency and intensity of protests against Khan during the last months, for instance the Gwadar protests, seem to reinforce this view. Secondly, it appears that the opposition wants to use the ‘favour of the hour’ and gain political capital both out of the tensions among the ruling coalition and out of the factionalism within the PTI, both of which make “horse trading” (understood as the winning over members from the ruling coalition camp) easier. The allegations that the PM lost the support of the military<sup>8</sup> is boosting the opposition’s morale and supports the idea that Khan is losing his political strength.

The greatest challenge to Khan’s immediate political survival (winning the no-trust vote) is the bridging of the PTI’s internal rifts. Powerful PTI members turned against Khan and expressed their willingness to support the opposition in the upcoming vote. Most noteworthy are [two business men](#), Jahangir Khan Tareen<sup>9</sup> (the Tareen faction has approximately [8 members](#) in the NA) and Aleem Khan. Imran Khan alienated his greatest supporters within the PTI when he appointed Usman Ahmad Buzdar as Chief Minister (CM) of Punjab, for Buzdar was perceived by many as not suitable for this post.

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<sup>5</sup> The PTI has 155 members in the 342-member National Assembly and needs at least 172 lawmakers to retain power.

<sup>6</sup> Besides potential PTI defectors, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P), ‘[previously a key ally of the PTI-led coalition government, formally announced that he was joining opposition ranks](#)’.

<sup>7</sup> After filing of No Confidence motion by the opposition parties, the Prime Minister ‘[has instantly lost the power to dissolve the National Assembly at his will](#)’.

<sup>8</sup> In October last year, Khan and the Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Qamar Bajwa were [engaged in an public standoff](#) over the replacement of the then-Director General of the Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI) Gen Faiz Hameed, who the PM wanted to continue as spy chief. The ‘[political reverberations](#)’ from that incident might have been intense for the PM.

<sup>9</sup> [According to](#) expert Sajjad Ashraf, ‘Jahangir Khan Tareen was arguably the most important person in the party after Khan, providing finance, resources and a certain charisma in cobbling together the PTI led coalitions at the federal and Punjab level’.

To calm the tensions and restore party cohesiveness the PM took two steps. First, he dismissed CM Buzdar. This pleased not only disgruntled PTI members but also several coalition partners. Secondly, Khan also stated that there is a '[foreign conspiracy](#)' to topple his government. His strategy is obvious, for by portraying himself as a victim of a foreign threat, Khan appeals to PTI defectors and coalition partners to change their mind and overcome partisan politics in the name of national interests.

To sum up, nothing is decided yet. However, even if Khan can win the upcoming no-confidence vote, it remains to be seen whether he will be able to end his tenure.

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DOI: 10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C2250158

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DOI: 10.48251/SADF.ISSN.2406-5617.C208