

Farewell to Pakistan's hybrid regime: Now what?

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Though the Pakistani politics was always dominated by the security establishment, a new consensus, however, emerged after the ouster of General Pervaiz Musharraf in 2008.

This consensus allowed for a hybrid democracy and return of the exiled political leadership. The hybrid democracy meant the military establishment will continue to call shots from behind and manage political affairs without directly coming into the power. This consensus was reached because General Musharraf's eight yearlong regime significantly dented the popular image of military. Towards the tail-end of his rule a powerful civil society movement erupted demanding his resignation and restoration of country's chief justice that Musharraf deposed.

The movement also gave significant impetus to judicial activism in the country. The political chessboard in Pakistan now had a new asserting player in the form of judiciary that played crucial role in the years to come.

After winning a thin majority to form a coalition government in 2008, the Pakistan People's party led by Asif Ali Zardari—spouse of former PM Benazir Bhutto—faced various challenges.

The country's judiciary asserted itself in 2013 and removed the then Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani making him the first prime minister in Pakistan's history to be removed from office by the superior courts. The PPP-led government from 2008-13 saw tumultuous events but managed the first ever democratic transition in 2013.

The Nawaz Sharif led PML-N won majority in 2013 elections but the country saw a parallel emergence of a third political force in the country. Soon after assuming the government, the PML-N regime was destabilized by a series of protests and sit-ins led by Imran Khan. The Panama-papers scandal, a series of revelations exposing corruption worldwide made headlines when Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's name came up. Imran Khan capitalized on the opportunity and upped the ante of corruption against two mainstream parties. The country's superior judiciary struck once again and disqualified PM Nawaz Sharif, making him the second PM in history.

The hybrid democracy in Pakistan took a real shape after the elections of 2018 when PTI-led government was formed after a razor thin majority in the parliament. The opponents of Imran Khan alleged massive rigging in the elections and conferred him the title of being "selected" by the military establishment.

Ministers and supporters of Imran Khan continued celebrating the "one-page" with military and publicly declaring that Imran Khan enjoys full backing of the Pakistan's establishment. Many analysts believed that with the support of country's military establishment Imran Khan wanted an Erdogan type model by reversing provincial autonomy & rolling back of parliamentary system, effectively making him a powerful president.

His ministers and supporters continuously demanded the rolling back of 18th amendment in the constitution; an act passed in 2010 that granted provincial autonomy to the federating units and weakened the federal government's role in the affairs of the provinces.

However, Imran Khan soon realized the limits to the hybrid system. Apart from spectacularly failing in matters of governance and economy, his differences began to appear with the country's military over the appointment of country's top spy chief. Imran Khan wanted one of his favored generals to hold this post, one who saw him to be the next chief of the military and helping him to secure another term of rule. With a thin majority in the parliament Imran Khan could not hold onto power.

The opposition parties formed a collective front known as "Pakistan Democratic Movement" (PDM) and successfully ousted him from power. This time, Khan became the first Prime Minister in the history of country to be ousted by a parliamentary vote of no confidence.

The hybrid regime consensus that Pakistan experimented in 2018 now lies in shambles. Imran Khan—the ousted Prime Minister—is now on the streets blaming the military establishment for ousting him through a foreign conspiracy. However, there was nothing significant in his four years rule that he could claim as an achievement.

Khan's four-year rule was economically destructive and rabidly anti-people. On the economic front Imran Khan's rule was catastrophic leading to unprecedented inflation and devaluation of currency. In the four years of his government victims of enforced disappearances were mocked through dirty propaganda campaigns, attacks on journalists became common and free speech was curtailed. Women faced increasing blasphemy charges for holding Marches demanding rights while critical voices in academia and media were purged. In the matters of governance Khan's government was neither predictable nor stable.

Khan relied solely on populist tactics in four years. His campaign against the political opposition has divided the country more than ever. Contrary to what many believe in western world, Khan's campaign against the powerful military establishment is not to curtail its role in politics. Rather, he seeks to have a friendly and pliable army chief who could help him install in the PM office again. Although, his popularity has risen up because of anti-establishment rhetoric but those who have suffered four years of his authoritarian rule know that it will not be different once he is back in the office.

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