

Pakistan: Comprador Nation

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Last week in Islamabad, a series of violent confrontations erupted between supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the party of the jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and state security forces. Hundreds were injured as police and paramilitary rangers used bullets and tear gas to disperse the crowds. PTI's chair, Gohar Khan, claimed that at least a dozen were killed. The brutal crackdown was facilitated by internet stoppages, roadblocks and mass arrests of PTI staffers and activists. These heavy-handed tactics have succeeded in clearing the streets, but they have also highlighted the growing instability of Pakistan's hybrid regime, characterized by an amalgam of civilian administrators and military rulers. What are the causes and consequences of this legitimacy crisis? Is it a matter of conjunctural politics, or of long-term structural trends?

Since Pakistan's first military coup in 1958, US backing for the army – seen as an essential counterweight to Soviet influence – has made the country's political sphere hostile for democratic forces. By signing up to the infamous SEATO and CENTO agreements, the military brought Pakistan into America's Cold War camp, making it a crucial subordinate power in South Asia. Since then, it has directly ruled the country on-and-off for more than thirty years. When the generals have been forced to give up their political positions, often because of public pressure or changing geostrategic imperatives, they have always managed to maintain their dominance via proxy forces. Parliament and civilian governments have continued to operate within the contours set by the military establishment, with the latter waging endless wars in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, disappearing its political opponents and protecting its multi-billion-dollar business empire: real estate, agriculture, industries, banks. To ensure compliance, the military regularly engages in election rigging and elevates politicians who will do its bidding.

By 2008, however, the military's alleged involvement in the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto had made it impossible for the then dictator, General Pervez Musharraf, to continue in office. A transition to a strong civilian-led administration seemed to be underway. Khan, the country's most popular cricket captain, had already been in politics for more than a decade without achieving any notable breakthroughs. But through his consistent opposition to the two dominant political parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League (PLM N), he had begun to win growing support among the country's disenfranchised youth. Nervous about its diminishing role, the military decided to carve out a path for Khan to emerge as a serious contender for political power. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Taliban – widely believed to be proxies for the military establishment – wiped out the ruling Awami National Party's cadres in a series of suicide bombings, paving the way for Khan's first electoral victory in the provincial elections in 2013.

The military also continually undermined the PLM (N) government of Nawaz Sharif, which came to power the same year. In 2014, Khan organized an extended sit-in against alleged election fraud with the hope of overthrowing the administration. The move was widely believed to have military backing, particularly from the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which had become suspicious of Sharif's peace overtures towards India. Though the sit-in failed to achieve its aims, it was soon followed by

corruption cases against Sharif which eventually led to his dismissal in 2017. A witch-hunt against his party ensued, with many of its prominent figures arrested and others jumping ship to Khan's PTI to insulate themselves from prosecution. Khan went on to win the 2018 elections, with his opponents calling him a 'selected prime minister' and his party a 'laundry machine' for turncoat politicians who had left the Sharif and Bhutto clans.

Khan's stint in power was marred by an economic crisis and constant tensions with civil society organizations and popular movements. Rising inflation, plus the government's excessive reliance on the military to deal with political problems, began to erode his popular support, with electoral defeats in a number of significant by-elections. A public spat with the then Chief of Army Staff, General Qamar Bajwa, made his political career seem doomed. When opposition forces ousted Khan in a vote of no confidence in April 2022, the move had all the hallmarks of military interference. Khan later claimed that the US had orchestrated his ouster, but many local commentators believed it was entirely a domestic affair.

The government that took power after Khan was immediately delegitimized by its collusion with the army - its claim to be 'defending democracy' eliciting widespread mockery. In response to the takeover, Khan announced a series of demonstrations across the country, each one bigger than the last. His fierce criticisms of the ruling parties and the military re-energized his base, including his supporters across the diaspora, and his popularity reached new heights. He was helped by the disastrous economic record of the new regime, which included tough IMF-administered austerity measures, 40% inflation and further concessions to the military's financial interests. Using an unparalleled social media network to broadcast his message, Khan outdid the state on the ideological battlefield.

In the July 2022 byelections, PTI swept 16 out of 20 seats. A spate of subsequent victories prompted the state to mount a more aggressive response. Khan faced an assassination attempt that November, coming away with four bullet holes in his leg and strengthening his image as a fearless opponent of the establishment. When he was detained by the authorities the following spring, riots erupted and his supporters were accused of attacking the military headquarters in the country's major cities, leading to the large-scale arrest of PTI workers and their trial in military courts. Many of Khan's supporters were forced to give televised denunciations of their leader, while the military engineered a number of breakaways from his party. On 5 August 2023, Khan himself was arrested and placed in Adiala jail in Islamabad, where he remains today.

But this wave of repression did not ease the establishment's anxiety about PTI's popularity. In the run-up to the 2024 general elections, the party was effectively prevented from fielding candidates, so it decided instead to support a list of independents, many of them political neophytes. The results, announced on the evening of 8 February, shocked the mainstream commentariat. Even though the state had prevented the PTI-backed independents from canvassing during the campaign, they had dominated across the country, buoyed by an almost unprecedented outburst of anger at the system. But as people watched the results come in, the jubilation soon turned into shock and sorrow when the military intervened. Uniformed men took over the counting booths and changed the outcome, in one of the most brazen and clumsy acts of election rigging in the country's history. PTI's majority was suddenly reduced to a minority - a reversal so implausible that it embarrassed even the most vocal anti-Khan pundits. It was clear that the general will would remain subservient to the Generals' will. The legitimacy crisis gathered pace.

Since coming to power, the new government - a coalition led by the PML (N), with Shehbaz Sharif as premier - has increasingly relied on the military, which has passed draconian laws to curb civil liberties and escalated conflicts in the provinces. PTI, meanwhile, has refused to recognize the new government, attempting to dislodge it through a combination of legal battles and street protests. At

Khan's behest, the party staged a major sit-in at the end of November, calling for the release of political prisoners and an end to the hybrid regime. The protests, led by his wife Bushra Bibi, fizzled out amid heavy state violence and organizational weaknesses. Yet Khan's popularity remains intact, and his opponents, hiding behind the Generals for their survival, appear even more diminished than they did on the evening of 8 February.

The accumulated contradictions of the Pakistani state have thus mutated into a full-blown crisis. But there are also deeper trends at work here, relating to Pakistan's role in the world-system. The rise of the military as the country's dominant political player – a direct result of America's Cold War policies – led to the banning of the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1954, as well as the suppression of labour activists, student groups and trade unionists. Comprador elites clamped down on progressive currents inside Pakistan while aiding America's endless wars abroad. In the 1980s, Pakistan joined the US-financed 'Jihad' against the Afghan government, turning the region into a base camp for Islamist militants. When the latter targeted the hegemon itself on 9/11, Pakistan's military once again put the country at the disposal of the US as it launched its War on Terror: a conflict that cost Pakistan over seventy thousand lives and \$126 billion, while turning it into one of the primary theatres for deadly drone warfare.

For the political theorist Ali Kadri, imperialist powers and comprador classes use war to gain strategic advantage over their rivals – destroying political challenges to their rule and reaping profits via the defence industry. The reduction of people's lifespans through a combination of war and austerity also reduces the state's social responsibilities, as well as popular expectations for the division of the social surplus, allowing elites to appropriate more resources. It is precisely this combination of violence and profiteering, mediated by Washington's geostrategic interests, that defines the relationship between Pakistan's rulers and its general population. In the mid-twentieth century, Pakistani elites, led by the military, discarded industrialization and other development strategies for cheap dollars linked to imperial wars. This, along with Western aid packages, enabled import-driven consumption that placed a serious strain on the country's balance of payments. IMF loans kept its defunct economy afloat as part of what can only be described as a scandalous ponzi scheme, while perpetual conflict, resource plunder by the military and rolling austerity turned the public into sacrificial lambs, with 25 million children now out of school and 40% of the country malnourished.

The problem with this model, though, is that since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 the Pakistani state has found it increasingly difficult to sustain itself – even through these practices of upward redistribution. With Pakistan becoming a lower geopolitical priority for the US, aid has dried up and IMF conditionalities have tightened, leading to negative growth rates coupled with high unemployment and inflation. The China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – an outgrowth of the Belt and Road Initiative – is perhaps one of the last opportunities for the country to industrialize and provide a livable environment for its citizens. Yet the penchant of elites for quick profits is already beginning to derail it, with development projects stymied by kickbacks, corruption and conflicts over the spoils. To make matters worse, the incessant killing of Chinese by Baloch separatists has raised concerns in Beijing that sections of the Pakistani elite are trying to sabotage CPEC in order to maintain their alignment with the US.

Pakistan's current instability can therefore be understood as a set of withdrawal symptoms in a state that is addicted to proxy wars and the associated dollar payouts. A UNDP report in 2019 suggested that Pakistan's elites consume \$17.4 billion annually in subsidies: five times more than the poorest sections of society, in a country where food insecurity haunts 40% of households. With half the state budget geared towards servicing foreign debt, there is precious little left for human life, which means that military violence is the only way of ensuring that workers generate enough wealth to meet repayment plans and sustain ruling-class consumption.

The struggle against militarization – now a focus of grassroots campaigns led by young militants from ethnic-minority communities, such as Mahrang Baloch and Manzoor Pashteen – is therefore the top priority for the Pakistani left. Such movements signal a popular desire, sustained even in the face of ruthless repression, to transform Pakistan from a national security state into a developmentalist and welfare one. Many Pakistani liberals, driven by their opposition to Khan's right-wing populism, have drifted towards the current regime – failing to realize that it lacks either the moral legitimacy or the financial resources to survive over the long term. But as it falters, Pakistan will have to confront a series of stark choices: perpetual wars or regional integration, militarized repression or democratic representation, imperialist rents or economic development. Its decisions will have consequences far beyond its borders.

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