

DOMESTIC POLITICS: INSTABILITY IS PERMANENT

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The year 2020 started on an optimistic note for the PTI-led government as it straddled the multiple challenges faced by Pakistan. A major threat in the shape of Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman's sit-in at the end of 2019 had subsided and was 'managed', ostensibly with the intervention of the military establishment. The economy was finally in the hands of an experienced team led by former officials of international financial institutions, and signs of a mild recovery were becoming visible. The opposition was disunited and directionless, while the military was clearly backing the Imran Khan administration¹. However, things changed quickly – not just for Pakistan, but across the globe due to the outbreak of the novel and lethal coronavirus, COVID-19. The digital age compounded the fear of the virus as real-time updates overwhelmed public consciousness and media spaces. Within a few months, it was clear that COVID-19 was going to change the workings of the global economy, international trade and the way the role of state had been envisioned by the

dominant neo-liberal world order. Pakistan was no exception.

Response to COVID-19 exposed the fault lines of governance

The on-set of COVID-19 and its spread in the first quarter of 2020 exposed the dysfunctional public health systems in Pakistan (like it did in many other countries).² It also laid bare the limits of central decision-making processes, especially in the post-18th Amendment context of Pakistan. The immediate challenge was to arrive at a unified national response to arrest the spread of the virus and mitigate its potential repercussions to lives and livelihoods. The Sindh government, led by the opposition party at the center, Pakistan People's Party (PPP), took immediate steps such as imposing partial lockdowns, preparing for emergencies especially in the populous city of Karachi, and urged the federal government to devise a central policy so that a nation-wide response could be garnered. The PTI administration in

¹ "Army Supports Govt Policies," *The News International*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/709568-army-supports-govt-policies>.

² "Pakistan's Drive to Restore Essential Health Services during COVID-19," *World Health Organization* (WHO), August 28, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/pakistan-s-drive-to-restore-essential-health-services-during-covid-19>.

Islamabad was hesitant to impose a national lockdown, fearing consequences to the economy and public unrest.³ The Prime Minister made several statements to this effect. But his ministers and advisors politicized this important debate in an attempt to undermine the Sindh Government which had been receiving praise on media for its proactive policies.⁴

Interestingly, this was perhaps the first time in recent years when the PPP in Sindh Government received positive media coverage since the overall reporting on Sindh and the PPP in the mainstream media almost always remains negative. Ultimately, the military intervened to tackle the increasing number of COVID-19 infections in the country and the administrative deadlock. Major General Babar Iftikhar, Director General of the Inter-Services Public Relations – the media wing of the armed forces – announced the decision of a lockdown on March 23, 2020, even though the Prime Minister had previously asserted with force that there wouldn't be one. This was a clear signal regarding the power

distribution in Islamabad,⁵ as well as the wavering attitude of the ruling party towards a public health crisis that had the potential to choke hospital facilities and cause massive chaos.

Later, however, the Prime Minister changed his policy, and the government followed a 'smart lockdown' strategy wherein total lockdowns were avoided. After the public display of conflicting views on dealing with COVID-19, the government, encouraged by the military, formed the National Command and Operations Centre (NCOC) in April to help articulate a unified national effort and implement the decisions of the National Core Committee (NCC).⁶ Representatives of provincial governments and other key stakeholders were also included in the process, thereby filling the void at the center and making up for the government's inability to engage with the opposition parties. Whilst the NCOC has served a useful purpose since

³ Mansoor Malik, "Imran Again Opposes Complete Lockdown," *DAWN*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1563381>.

⁴ "PTI Slams Sindh Govt for Reducing Market Hours as Eight More Die from Covid-19," *The News International*, November 26, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/749167-pti-slams-sindh-govt-for-reducing-market-hours-as-eight-more-die-from-covid-19>.

⁵ Stephanie Findlay and Farhan Bokhari, "Pakistan's Imran Khan Sidelined by Military during Coronavirus Outbreak," *Financial Times*, April 25, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/686714d7-ae05-431d-a13d-1966153be151>.

⁶ "Coronavirus Pakistan Cases: Pakistan Army to Oversee Coordination between Federal, Provincial Govts, Cases Cross 2,200 - The Economic Times," *The Economic Times*, April 2, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pakistan-army-to-oversee-coordination-between-federal-provincial-govts-cases-cross-2200/articleshow/74948030.cms?from=mdr>.

its creation, it has also raised a larger question on the existing state of constitutionalism in Pakistan. There were numerous constitutional bodies that already exist, however, they have been kept inactive or dysfunctional by design. One such forum is the Council of Common Interests (CCI) which is a constitutional mechanism to create a consensus between the provinces and the federal government on key policy issues. Bypassing the CCI is simply not a problem for the current government. Even the previous government (PML-N) failed to make effective use of this forum. The newly formed NCOC is clearly led by the military and its various branches, notwithstanding the fact that its spokesperson is a trusted minister of the federal cabinet. It is a clear and concrete manifestation of the hybrid model of governance at the center, which has increasingly come under discussion over the previous year. The jury is still out on whether the NCOC is delivering any good to the large, restive population.

Luckily, Pakistan survived the first wave of the novel coronavirus and, unlike other countries in the neighborhood, experienced a relatively lower death rate. It is still unclear why such mass immunity was experienced. However, the excessive media coverage of the virus and the debate on lockdowns from February to May sensitized the public about it,

while some of the steps taken by the federal and provincial governments also proved to be effective in keeping a widespread outbreak of the lethal virus in check. Schools, universities, and colleges were shut down and public gatherings, especially theatres etc. were closed. A major problem that emerged during this time had to do with the continuous appeasement of religious lobbies by the government as attempts to limit Friday congregations and such religious gatherings were not accepted by the clerics across the spectrum of the Islamic faith. Yet, people took precautions, and just like the rest of the globe, online communications increased manifold. There were complaints against sections of the media for underreporting the extent of COVID-19's outbreak. The BBC reported how the number of deaths and data from cemeteries in Karachi were at variance. But these were minor glitches. Overall, the world praised Pakistan's efforts,⁷ and this reversed the fortunes of the federal government in Islamabad which was quick to take credit for the low impact of COVID-19. This was a major boon for the otherwise fledgling government that received unprecedented flak from the national media as

⁷ "WHO Chief Lauds Pakistan for Suppressing Covid-19 While Keeping Economy Afloat," *DAWN*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1582311>.

well as the opposition in the earlier months of the year.

To give due credit to PTI government, it expanded⁸ the cash support to poor families under the Ehsaas program (a repackaging of Benazir Income Support Program instituted in 2009). During the summer, the scaling up of cash transfers enabled the inclusion of 7.5 million additional vulnerable families. The annual budget allocated for cash transfers was increased by about 85 percent during the crisis and this partially mitigated the economic effects of the pandemic.

Economic decline continued through the year

However, accidental success on one front was offset by the state of the economy. The economy had already nosedived in 2019, but COVID-19 debilitated it still further, with growth estimates falling way beneath earlier projections.⁹ To make matters worse, the mismanagement in procurement and distribution of key food items, such as wheat and sugar, created an embarrassing situation

for the PTI government.¹⁰ The latter had come into power promising transparency and anticorruption, but these claims fell flat as the sugar cartel – well represented in the federal and the provincial governments – not only received massive subsidies but manipulated prices to earn windfall profits. The prices of sugar were at their historic high in the first quarter and an inquiry report by a multi-agency investigation confirmed how cartels had played the system. Its damning report issued in April named political and corporate groups across the spectrum. The government did not take any major steps against those who had indulged in hoarding and its political consequences were certainly most unsavory for the government.

The second major scandal pertained to the excessively high price of wheat, which was felt across different regions of Pakistan. Once again, wheat imports were first sanctioned, leading to shortages and then wheat was imported at much higher rates to meet the domestic demand. The net result of these two developments was an all-time high food inflation, visible in the government's own statistics. According to the official records, food inflation during January was recorded at

⁸ Bakhtawar Mian, "Ehsaas Bringing Positive Change to Pakistan: Report," *DAWN*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1595098>.

⁹ Aasim Saleem, "How the COVID-19 Crisis Is Affecting Pakistan's Economy," *DW*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-the-covid-19-crisis-is-affecting-pakistans-economy/a-54292705>.

¹⁰ Mohiuddin Aazim, "Beneath Wheat and Sugar Crises," *DAWN*, November 9, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1589273>.

23.7%. Food Inflation in Pakistan averaged 6.33 percent from 2011 until 2020, and a record low of -1.06 percent in September of 2015. This alarming trend, with some variations, continued throughout the year.

The flawed accountability drive

Perhaps the greatest promise of PTI to punish the corrupt and end corruption in the country foundered on the rocks of Pakistan's creaky justice system and the embedded corporate interests. A major blow was delivered to the ruling party's narrative by the Supreme Court.

In July a two-member Supreme Court bench in its verdict stated that the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) was an instrument of political engineering and its bias was all too evident thus raising questions on its credibility. In their judgement concerning an opposition politician and his brother the court noted: "The bureau seems reluctant in proceeding against people on one side of the political divide even in respect of financial scams of massive proportion while those on the other side are being arrested and incarcerated for months and years without providing any sufficient cause even when the law mandates investigations to be concluded expeditiously and trial to be concluded within 30 days."

The court reminded the executive, which continued to use NAB prosecutions against the opposition politicians during the year, that the "concept of the presumption of innocence is imperative, not only to protect an accused on trial, but to secure and maintain public confidence in the fairness, impartiality, integrity and security of the criminal justice system."

But these reminders had little effect. The leader of the opposition Shehbaz Sharif was once again arrested by NAB at the end of September¹¹ and was kept in custody for the rest of the year. Later, the provincial anti-corruption departments were also employed against members of the provincial assembly in Punjab.

In October, the Pakistan Information Commission refused to release the asset details of the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) Chairman Justice (r) Javed Iqbal and its directors, stating that it might violate their privacy. This attitude was in stark contradiction to the policy on politicians. The NAB chairman did not appear before a Senate

¹¹ "NAB Arrests Shahbaz Sharif from LHC," *The News International*, September 28, 2020, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/721545-nab-arrests-shahbaz-sharif-from-lhc>.

committee¹² when he was summoned to explain the workings of the body. n

Little or no progress was made with respect to the corruption inquiries against members of the ruling party. For instance, the case of BRT Peshawar was not investigated, and the government approached the Supreme Court to stop the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) from probing into the misspending of public funds. Perhaps the most glaring example of selective accountability relates to the ‘foreign funding case’ against the ruling party that has been pending with the Election Commission of Pakistan. The allegations against PTI are serious; the sources of its funds have still not been duly accounted for.

The most damning part of the Supreme Court verdict announced in July, authored by Justice Baqar, was its observance that pygmies were selected, nurtured, promoted and brought to prominence and power, adding that people with notorious backgrounds and criminal credentials were thrust to “rule us in various capacities with predictable results. Similarly, those who caused death, destruction and mayhem in our society, were trained, financed, protected, promoted and eulogized, thus, turning them into Frankensteins”.

¹² Amjad Mahmood, “NAB Chief Warned of Action If He Skips Senate Panel Hearing,” *DAWN*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1596976>.

These words made temporary headlines but were largely ignored by the hybrid regime in Islamabad.

Democracy deficits widened during the year

The evolution of democracy has faced multiple setbacks over the past few years and in 2020 this trend continued. The government mostly used Ordinances to run the business of the state. The notable exceptions were two bills on extending the tenure of the current Chief of the Army Staff, Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa, and improving the legal and institutional requirements to comply with the conditions set by the Financial Action Task Force to prevent money laundering and financing of terrorism. In all other areas, the parliament remained dysfunctional. The prime minister and the leader of the opposition did not meet even once to discuss national affairs. Critics of the PTI government termed such developments as the intent of the government to make the country a one-party, authoritarian state. The ruling party has a different view of the situation as it considers most opposition figures corrupt and, until the end of the year, the PM insisted that he would not grant an NRO (pardon or concessions in prosecuting corruption cases). This deadlock contributed

to the emergence of a multi-party alliance detailed in the section below.

Media freedoms by all independent accounts also shrunk during the year and arbitrary rules to ‘control’ social media were enacted. The chief editor and publisher of the country’s largest private media outlet – Jang Group – remained imprisoned for months. Another prominent journalist Matiullah Jan¹³ was picked up by the law enforcement agencies. Crackdown on international NGOs continued, though some relaxations were made to allow assistive work against COVID-19.

A positive development was the conclusion of elections in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) that were peaceful and were keenly contested by all parties. The ruling PTI was able to form the government amid the usual charges of meddling by the opposition parties. Historically, the party in power at the centre wins the elections in federally administered territories such as the GB.

Through the year, the case of a sitting judge of the Supreme Court, Justice Qazi Faez Isa, made headlines. While the Supreme Court

threw out the reference against the judge,¹⁴ his family continues to be scrutinized for their financial dealings. The weakening of the parliament, judiciary, the media and civil society further dwindled checks on the executive.

The Opposition Unites

Economic downturn, high inflation and a government under immense pressure from public opinion provided an ideal opportunity for the opposition parties to re-organize and mount pressure on the government and the military establishment. The formation of Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM)¹⁵ in September was a major development of the year that is likely to result in a changed political scenario during 2021. The PDM is a motley alliance of 13 parties – comprising national to regional parties, and from left-of-center to right-wing Islamist parties – and is led by Maulana Fazl-ur-Rehman¹⁶ of Jamiat e

¹³ M Ilyas Khan, “Matiullah Jan: Pakistan Anger as Video Shows Reporter’s Abduction,” *BBC News*, July 22, 2020, sec. Asia, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53495426>.

¹⁴ Haseeb Bhatti, “SC Throws out Presidential Reference against Justice Qazi Faez Isa, Terms It ‘Invalid,’” *DAWN*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1564513>.

¹⁵ “Explained Ideas: What Is the Pakistan Democratic Movement, and What Is It Trying to Achieve?,” *The Indian Express* (blog), October 29, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/pakistan-democratic-movement-imran-khan-nawaz-sharif-maryam-army-6894820/>.

¹⁶ “Fazlur Rehman Named Head Of Pakistan Democratic Movement,” *Naya Daur* (blog), October 3, 2020, <https://nayadaur.tv/amp/2020/10/fazlur-rehman-named-head-of-pakistan-democratic-movement/>.

Ulema Islam (JUI). Although the JUI is a party with considerable street force, its regional base needs the support of the two national parties, the PPP and the PML-N, that are not only well-versed in the power game but also have the necessary credentials to act as a political alternative to the ruling PTI.

Between October and December, the PDM held successful rallies in different parts of the country, rallying its supporters and attacking PM Khan and his government. But a major difference this time was that the military leadership has been the alliance's target. This attack has been led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif who, in his hard-hitting speeches broadcast from London, accused the current military leadership of meddling in 2018 elections, 'selecting' the current PM and ushering in an era of mis-governance and instability.¹⁷ Sharif's strategy is obviously a gamble as it presupposes that the establishment under pressure would relent some concessions or take a backseat.

The major problem with the PDM is its internal disunity. Its constituents have different objectives and therefore, by the end of 2020 and despite rising political pressures,

it is unclear if they can follow a uniform strategy that can lead to meaningful political change. While Maulana Fazal-ur-Rehman wants Imran Khan's government to fall, the PPP wants assurances that it would not be on the receiving end of an 'accountability' process, and the PML-N wants a systemic rearrangement of the power-sharing formula between the elected and the unelected institutions.

The change that may occur in the months to come can vary between accommodating the opposition's concerns and an outright regime change. The early months of 2021 will determine the outcome of the current political mobilization. During the last week of December, political parleys between the establishment and the PML-N were reported as one of the politicians considered close to the military met the former PM's brother in jail and discussed options for 'dialogue'. Former PM Sharif and his daughter rejected the dialogue option, although that might just be a public posture as the Sharifs have always opted for negotiated settlements in the past. The PDM intends to undertake a long march towards the capital at the end of January and has announced resignations from the current assemblies to effect a regime change.

¹⁷ Mubasher Bukhari, "Nawaz Sharif Accuses Pakistan's Army Chief of Toppling His Government," *Reuters*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/pakistan-politics-protests-speech-idUSKBN272030>.

The rise of Maryam Nawaz

During the second half of the year 2020, Maryam Nawaz Sharif, former PM Sharif's daughter, entered the political arena with full force.¹⁸ After the unsuccessful efforts of Shehbaz Sharif to negotiate with the establishment, the father-daughter duo took full charge of the party and its policy to deal with the government. For political mobilization as well as to keep his full control over the party, former PM's daughter emerged as a central force within the party and later of the opposition alliance PDM. While there are many critics of dynastic politics, especially in the urban areas of Pakistan, Maryam Nawaz has proved to be a popular figure for the support base of the party, especially in the Punjab. However, her political path will not be that smooth or clear-cut, since the party's organizational structures are not fully in her control; also, since being a firebrand speaker or a social media star is altogether different from politics in the field.

Maryam's mettle will be tested in 2021 when the PDM enters into a full-scale collision with the government and/or enter into parleys with the government and the establishment.

¹⁸ "Who Is Maryam Nawaz, the Face of Pakistan's Anti-Government Movement?," DW, October 25, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-maryam-nawaz-the-face-of-pakistans-anti-government-movement/a-55387342>.

Scenarios for 2021

Given the political turbulence, inflation, and the slow recovery of economic activity and jobs, the year 2021 will be a challenging one for the current government. There are three major scenarios for the coming year.

First, the PDM cracks due to internal discord and meddling by external powers-that-be, and fails to exert public pressure. This may save the current government, but it would be weakened enough to cede more space to the establishment with serious implications for policy process in key areas. This situation will not be all too different from the post-2014 Sharif government that survived Imran Khan's agitational politics but was seriously weakened in the process. At present, this seems to be the most likely scenario. The only difference this time is that the military establishment will come under attack too and it would either assuage the situation or respond to the attacks by Sharif and the PDM. This is what leads to the second option which, according to informed sources, is already being debated in public view as well as in the power circles.

The second scenario assumes that there is a willingness in Rawalpindi to allay the tensions by steering the country towards a 'national government' which can then lead the country

into the next general elections scheduled for early to mid-2023. The groundwork for this option may already be in the offing. A number of columnists have argued for a grand national dialogue between the institutions of the state to achieve some kind of reconciliation. Two think tanks – one private and the other in the public sector – organized debates on the contours and objects of this dialogue. The supporters say this would address the polarization and perhaps lead to course correction. The realist school says that dialogue takes place between equals but, in this case, the unelected are far more powerful than the elected. The naysayers argue that dialogue may just be a ruse to create a Bangladesh-type situation, whereby another proxy government may be installed to bypass the fundamental issue, i.e. the civil-military imbalance in the governance arrangement. But a national government will address some of the key issues which the country has faced during 2020 – consensus on economic policy, critical foreign affairs-related problems, the anti-corruption drive, and above all, how the next election will be held.

The third and most unlikely scenario is that the PDM succeeds in building pressure with street force, blocking the capital for days and leading to a change in government through the resignation of the prime minister and the

announcement of fresh elections. For this to happen, the establishment will have to withdraw its support and perhaps intervene at some level. Nawaz Sharif and sections within the PDM have targeted the military leaders mainly to achieve this outcome. But there are no signs that this will happen. And even if, for the sake of argument, this were to happen, the ensuing changes will only happen with the explicit involvement of the establishment, thereby defeating the radical demands laid down in the PDM charter.

The Senate elections are scheduled to take place in March 2021 and the PDM is attempting to change the political course before that. It is difficult to predict what might actually happen given the fluid circumstances. If Imran Khan survives the spring putsch by the opposition, then the PTI government is likely to complete its term with the support of the powers-that-be. Regardless of who rules Islamabad, the governance crisis will only deepen if constitutionalism continues to be undermined by transgressions of the executive arm of the state. Pakistan's democratic development has received serious setbacks and, just like the economy, it would take years to address and fix the democratic deficits.

Five areas of reform await consensus among the political elites: i) reforming public owned enterprises, ii) restoring parliamentary oversight over the executive, iii) legal and judicial reform, iv) strengthening federalism, and v) transferring powers and resources to local governments. Lack of adequate and meaningful action in these areas is making the country ungovernable and damaging the citizen-state relationship. During 2021, these trends are likely to intensify, unless a political settlement is reached between the opposition, the government, and the establishment.

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