

FORECASTING A YEAR OF POLITICAL TURMOIL: NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTING CRISES OF ECONOMY, SECURITY, AND CONSTITUTION

By Syed Baqir Sajjad*

Pakistan has perpetually been in the crisis mode, but still 2022 would be remembered as the year of tumult.

And unfortunately, there are no signs of that instability and uncertainty letting up in 2023. The political outlook for 2023 is rather bleak and more uncertain because of intense societal polarization, toxicity in politics, impending elections and tanking economy.

The trajectory of politics in 2023 would to a large extent depend on how the civil – military balance of power resets itself under Army's new leadership in the election year particularly after Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf Chairman Imran Khan has broken the fear among the people of publicly questioning the military's outsized role in politics.

The crises witnessed in various domains during 2022 were entangled with each other and mutually reinforcing.

The economic crisis was not a making of the new government, rather it was inherited. The situation, however, sharply aggravated because of the political instability generated by the fall of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf government in the center through vote of no confidence and mishandling of the economy by the Shehbaz Sharif administration that was more interested bringing Ishaq Dar as the top manager.

The political turmoil was linked to the change in Army's command at the end of 2022 which created a confluence of interest between 13 party Pakistan Democratic Movement – the current ruling alliance in the federal government and the then opposition group – and some of the other stakeholders in the process on preventing then Prime Minister Imran Khan from appointing the next army chief because he had publicly expressed his preference for one of the candidates.

The political disputes meanwhile continued to land in the courts of law leading to increased judicialization of politics.

Running parallel to the political crisis were military and security troubles. Khan's relentless criticism of some of the generals put the military in an unfavourable light in the public and Gen Qamar Bajwa, on the completion of his extended tenure exited as a widely unpopular army chief. The Army's new façade – neutrality – was turned into a pejorative and their assertion that they were neutral in political matters was made to look like abdication of responsibility.

This widening of the gulf between the military and the public could not have come at a worse time than when terrorism was resurgent and military

needed strong public support for fighting the country's War on Terror 2.0.

Adding to these crises were the climate induced catastrophes. Mother nature wasn't kind to Pakistan this year. First some of the highest temperatures in the last 60 years were recorded between March and May and then came the apocalyptic floods that submerged one third of the country, killed nearly 1500 and washed away livestock, crops and infrastructure worth approximately \$30 billion. The floods that affected nearly 33 million people made the challenge of reviving the country's crisis-stricken economy even more difficult. The floods, according to the World Bank, caused economic losses to the tune of \$15.2 billion.

These interwoven and overlapping crises occurring in the same timeframe and at unprecedented scale caused the weakening of country's metaphorical immune system leaving it at a higher risk of experiencing frequent shocks and severe symptoms.

The Unfolding of the Crisis:

When 2021 screeched to end, the then opposition parties felt wind beneath their wings because of the deepening cracks in the relationship between then Prime Minister Imran Khan and the military establishment that had back in 2018 helped him reach the office. Sensing blood the component parties of PDM held their own long marches against PTI government's mis-governance and economic failures.

The events came to a head when PDM submitted a no-confidence motion in the National Assembly on March 8. This was followed by weeks of complicated intrigues and maneuvering which saw not only some of the coalition partners break up with the PTI government, but several of PTI legislators and even Khan's erstwhile close aides – Jehangir Khan Tareen and Aleem Khan – desert the party.

PTI government tried few last minutes gimmicks to avoid the no confidence motion, but couldn't avoid the fate. The motion was first turned down by the Deputy Speaker Qasim Suri after freshly appointed Law Minister Fawad Chaudhry invoked Article 5 of the Constitution, which states that "loyalty to the State is the basic duty of every citizen". In doing so PTI government virtually rendered loyalty of the legislators opposing it suspect because of a diplomatic cable from Washington, which conveyed that a mid-ranking American official had warned of "consequences" if PM Khan was to continue in office.

Mr Khan soon afterwards advised President Arif Alvi to dissolve the National Assembly, who immediately accepted that and ordered dissolution of the lower house of the parliament. The move was challenged in the Supreme Court, which restored the National Assembly on April 7 after setting aside Suri's ruling to dismiss the no confidence motion. In an unprecedented move the Supreme Court set the timeframe for convening of the NA session for the vote on the opposition's motion.

Khan was eventually deposed on April 9 becoming the first prime minister to have been ousted through vote of no confidence. However, at the same time the jinx of prime ministers not completing their mandated 5-year term continued.

Challenge from PTI – speaker’s ruling etc – was always expected, but despite hinderances the process culminated with relative normalcy. The actual challenge for PDM started after PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif became the new prime minister with the backing of an unwieldy coalition in which even his allies would taunt him in the National Assembly about the fragility of the government that was in office with a two-member majority.

PML-N had wanted to go for fresh elections, but its other allies particularly PPP and JUI-F were averse to the idea and wanted completion of term. Things subsequently started to go awry for the new government that had landed in the office without any solid plan for governance. Before assuming office, the coalition parties were just single mindedly focused on dislodging Khan for preventing him the next army chief. They feared that Khan appointing an army chief would mean diminished political prospects for them for at least next five years.

Adding to the woes of the new government were the competing interests of the coalition partners and Nawaz Sharif’s control from London. PDM at the same time bit more than it could chew as it almost simultaneously

started a power struggle in Punjab. PDM was initially able to secure Punjab’s chief ministership, but couldn’t hold on to it for more than three months, eventually leaving the province unsettled with an ensuing governance paralysis.

Though PM Sharif must be credited for keeping the coalition together, he did it at a very high cost.

Sharif’s dilemma was that he had to keep appeasing allies inside the parliament and the backers outside. For instance, the government had to turn a blind eye to the allegations of rigging in Sindh local bodies polls despite objections from even its own allies for the fear of not offending PPP. On the other hand Ali Wazir, the arrested PTM leader, could not be brought back to the National Assembly after getting his vote during vote of confidence for Sharif because doing so would not go well with his powerful backers outside.

Meanwhile the large ‘spontaneous countrywide protests’ following Khan’s removal from office came as a surprise for many. Looking back at events in March and April, one realizes that Khan and PTI knew their fate, even though they kept fighting till the last minute, and had started their contingency planning and narrative setting long before. Khan’s March 6 speech at Mailsi was originally seen as an act in desperation as he lashed out at his political opponents as well as the European Union and the US for pressuring Pakistan to side with the West on Ukraine issue. But he was actually having an eye on the narrative and electorate.

Through his public statements that aimed at tapping the deep rooted anti-US and anti-establishment sentiment, Khan very skillfully ensured that he and his party would survive politically despite the gravity of insurmountable challenges facing them. He, meanwhile, painted his political opponents as “sell-outs” who compromised with the West because of their alleged ill-gotten wealth stacked abroad. This enabled him in not only re-energizing his loyal base, but also attracted those who were upset with PDM government over growing economic woes and poor governance.

Khan, therefore, all along remained ahead of PDM government in controlling the public narrative. The government, on the other hand, despite launching multi-front attack on Khan and spending more time on criticizing him than governance failed to dent his popularity.

Khan’s campaign for early elections, which also saw a long march in May though it was called off without a sit-in, could not generate enough pressure to topple the government, but it created political instability in the country and importantly prevented the government from focusing on governance, which cumulatively aggravated the economic crisis.

The former prime minister who first built the narrative on his ouster around “a foreign conspiracy” plotted in the United States while vaguely pointing to local collaborators calling them Mir Jafar and Mir Sadiq, started directly criticizing the military and ISI for interfering in politics sometime in May. But, perplexingly

Khan simultaneously sought military’s help in securing early elections in the country while refusing to engage with his political rivals on the issue.

It was with this frame of mind that PTI opened its dialogue with the military, which continued for months afterwards. The talks continued to grow in profile and at one point Khan met face to face with Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa – a meeting that was facilitated by President Arif Alvi.

The PTI-mil/ISI negotiations remained focused on holding early polls and getting assurances that PTI and Imran Khan would not be prevented from returning to power if they were to win the elections. The Army, meanwhile, kept insisting that it would not indulge in these matters in deference of the decision on remaining apolitical. PTI was in these sessions repeatedly told that Army/ISI could facilitate its dialogue with the government. Khan’s party did not agree to dialogue with the government without getting a date for the elections.

Uncertainty Grows for PTI

The PTI-military dialogue did not achieve anything except for delaying Khan’s decisive move to force early elections and ultimately ended on a stalemate.

Initially there was somewhat tolerance for the former prime minister’s veiled attacks on generals, but three distinct trends emerged from the middle of year onwards as acrimony grew between PTI

and the military and PDM government realized that Khan's PTI was winning the battle narratives – something that was underscored by the results of by-elections for Punjab Assembly seats which PTI won hands down. The trend was later reaffirmed by the results of by-elections for the National Assembly seats that were declared vacated due to resignations of PTI legislators.

First – there was proverbial tightening of the noose around PTI leaders and those who helped propagate the opposition party's narrative to deter them from such actions. It started with the arrest of Dr Shireen Mazari, who had been questioning some of the actions taken by the military; then came the manhandling of Ayaz Amir after he spoke at a seminar hosted by lawyers in which he was overtly critical of the military; post-retirement benefits of retired military officers including few generals, who backed Khan, were withdrawn by the Army; action was taken against TV channels and journalists; and Khan's close aides – Shahbaz Gill and Senator Azam Swati were booked and tortured during interrogation. Assassination of renowned journalist and TV talk show host Arshad Sharif, who was a leading supporter of Khan's narrative, in Kenya under mysterious circumstances was seen by some with suspicion.

Second – there were audio leaks aimed at undercutting Khan's narrative about foreign conspiracy and corruption. Although the leaks failed to dent Khan's political stock, but one lesson that politicians – especially those in the government as they celebrated the

attempts to expose the PTI leader – missed was that no one was safe from surveillance no matter how high an office one holds.

Third – the legal route for eliminating Khan, if not PTI completely, from the political scene was taken forward at a great speed strengthening the impression that someone was engineering former prime minister's 'technical knock-out'.

As the state's wrath against Khan's aides grew, bitterness in the former PM's tone also increased. Though Khan's harsh tone didn't make the government and military establishment to relent in their actions against PTI leaders, it pushed him into legal crosshairs. His speech at a protest rally against the torture inflicted on Shehbaz Gill during detention attracted terrorism and contempt of court charges. The terrorism charge was quashed by a court, while Khan sought apology from a woman civil judge to avoid conviction in contempt of court case.

But, that was just the start. The Election Commission of Pakistan after a long running trial, which continued for nearly 8 years, ruled that PTI had "knowingly and willfully" received funds from prohibited sources in violation of rules governing political parties' finances. Meanwhile, the verdict noted that Khan had made "grossly inaccurate and wrong" certifications about the source of funding being legal. This has hung the proverbial threat of disqualification under Article 62 and 63 over his head. A case has been initiated against Khan and

other PTI leaders by FIA following the ECP decision.

On Oct 21 Khan was disqualified by ECP in Toshakhana Case for “intentionally and deliberately” violating the provisions contained in sections 137, 167 and 173 of the Elections Act, 2017, as he “made false statement (sic) and incorrect declaration before the Commission in the statement of assets and liabilities filed by him for the year 2020-21”. ECP ruled that he attracted disqualification under Article 63(1)(p) of the Constitution read with sections 137 and 173 of the Elections Act, 2017.

Criminal proceedings were later initiated against Khan in a sessions court, where a case regarding corrupt practices had been referred by ECP under Section 190(2) of the Elections Act 2010. ECP contends that Khan had deliberately concealed his assets relating to Toshakhana gifts retained by him, particularly in 2018 and 2019 and sought a conviction for the offences mentioned under Sections 167 (corrupt practice) and 173 (making or publishing a false statement or declaration) of the Elections Act 2017.

A case regarding Tyrian White – the so-called – Khan’s secret daughter was lodged in a court seeking his disqualification. Some of the PDM leaders also accused Imran Khan of blasphemy.

Meanwhile, Khan, who had become frustrated with protracted negotiations with the military, finally announced the second edition of his Azadi March to

push for early elections in the country. It was feared that with sentiments running high after mysterious assassination of journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya, Khan would be able to generate greater momentum, but, the crowds remained relatively small and the convoy progressed slowly as the former minister began his nearly 380 km long journey on GT Road.

The former prime minister was shot and injured on Nov 3 as he addressed a rally from an open top vehicle in Wazirabad. Khan levelled allegations against three government functionaries for allegedly planning the attack and said that he had forewarned about that in his speeches. The entire incident was made controversial by the government by first claiming that the arrested attacker was alone and motivated by religious reasons and then accusing Khan of faking injuries. Khan, meanwhile, insisted that there were multiple shooters and the arrested man was being used as a decoy.

It was expected that the shooting incident would spark major protests across the country given Khan’s popularity, but that did not happen except for small scale demonstrations in major cities. PTI, meanwhile, days later resumed the march towards Rawalpindi. Finally the protesters reached and camped in Rawalpindi on Nov 28 after Gen Asim Munir had been designated as the new chief.

Quite in contrast to the hype PTI had built all along, Khan concluded the march without marching on the federal capital citing fear of violence and clashes

between his supporters and law enforcement personnel. He, however, announced that his party would dissolve Punjab and KP provincial assemblies in yet another attempt to force early polls.

Khan spent next weeks' strategizing the execution of his plan to dissolve the assemblies. And when finally the process was set into motion, PDM made a last ditch effort to block it by getting Governor Punjab Balighur Rehman to ask Punjab Chief Minister Pervez Illahi to seek vote of confidence. With this the political battle once again returned to the court.

Looking Ahead:

Forecasting the trajectory of political events is always hard. It is even harder for a country like Pakistan, where the political landscape is heavily influenced by a variety of factors, including economic conditions, security issues, and internal political dynamics, and that too in an election year.

It is possible to assert with a reasonable level of confidence that the upcoming year will experience increased political instability, surpassing that of 2022. The dissolution of Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtoonkhwa provincial assemblies has already marked a dramatic start to the year 2023.

The elements that would contribute to the heightening of political instability are:

1) *Absence of political accommodation between Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf and other*

mainstream political parties that are part of current ruling alliance.

The history of political polarization and mistrust between PTI and most of other political parties will make it increasingly difficult for them to work together. Additionally, their divergent interests and priorities would also continue to hinder their ability to reach consensus.

One area where this understanding is crucial is on the conduct of the general elections in the country.

PTI failed to force early elections, but would continue to push for that and looks set to put everything at stake for that purpose. PTI realizes that its legal problems would grow with every passing day, thereby complicating the prospects of return to power. Alongside PTI is doing everything to make Election Commission more and more controversial.

PDM will, meanwhile, try every trick at its disposal to delay elections. Delaying the elections could be politically advantageous for the government since it is grappling with pressing economic crisis and underwhelming domestic performance. Given the substantial political capital lost in the outgoing year, as evidenced by the strong performance of Khan's party in the by-elections held in July and October, the government may try holding off the elections as long as it is legally possible for it. There is little likelihood of those efforts succeeding and beyond that prolonging the tenure of the assemblies would set a dangerous precedent.

Delaying provincial elections, regardless of the soundness of the political calculation behind it, is likely to create more complications and could even result in a constitutional crisis. Ultimately, it will be up to the courts to resolve the matter once again.

On a parallel track, the government will seek to aggressively take forward legal cases against Khan and his political party to keep them entangled in the legal web with the hope of technically knocking them out or at least undercutting their popularity. These tactics have been commonly employed against opposition figures and parties in the past – though with a limited impact.

This situation creates an environment that is not conducive to political accommodation. An immediate victim of this would be the credibility of any elections that are held. The elections, held under these conditions, would inevitably throw up controversies, which will add to instability.

Another issue is the role of the media in shaping public opinion. The Pakistani media landscape is highly polarized, with many outlets openly supporting one political party or another. This can make it difficult for those in opposition to get their message across, particularly if they are facing a media blackout or being subjected to negative coverage.

It will be important for the government, political parties, and civil society to work together to ensure that the upcoming elections are free and fair, and that all political parties have a level playing

field. But, that sounds improbable in the current scenario.

2) *The unsettled civil – military question.*

Gen Bajwa, days before retiring, candidly admitted that Army had been “unconstitutionally” interfering in politics for decades, but had recently decided to end that practice. He said the Army would stick to the decision of remaining apolitical and focused on its constitutionally mandated role.

Many took Gen Bajwa’s announcement as mere grandstanding by the retiring general. There were always doubts that the new commander would continue on the course set by his predecessor. There are no signs as yet, which could show that the military’s role in governance has ended. At best the involvement has been disguised in a manner that makes it appear less obvious. Gen Munir, the new army chief, may look to have taken a lower profile in day to day governance matters, but still concerns remain that the military continues to exert significant influence behind the scenes.

Whether or not PTI is afforded a level playing field in the upcoming elections would remain a key test for military’s proclaimed apolitical status.

One of the main concerns is the issue of witch hunt of opposition figures through uneven accountability, which has been a persistent problem in Pakistani politics. History also tells us about the manipulation of the electoral process through practices such as

gerrymandering, voter intimidation, and forcing change of loyalties of potential candidates. There are concerns that these practices could continue in the upcoming elections, particularly given the high stakes involved.

3) *Troubled Economy*

The economic crisis in the country looks like a 'perfect storm' unseen before in the country's history. And yet, there appears to be no end in sight to it. Foreign reserves are dwindling dangerously, the currency has been massively devaluated, inflation is growing at a record breaking rate, and more will follow in the months ahead. At the same time the country is passing through energy crisis with frequent electricity and gas load shedding despite soaring energy prices. The situation is hurting everyone across the board. The pain will grow as nearly \$10 billion have to be repaid in the first half of the year.

Talks with IMF remained stalled, but the government does not have any other option but to accept the lenders conditionalities and get lifeline financing to avoid an imminent default. The government will increase indirect taxes on people to meet IMF conditions, which will in turn fuel stagflation.

Friendly countries that have historically helped are expected to chip in, but that too would come with newer strings.

The gloomy economic outlook is heightening political uncertainty in a number of ways. The economic crisis will result in a big jump in unemployment

levels and rise in the number of poor especially after closure of large number of businesses, lay-offs, and cut in production output announced by various industrial units. As more people lose their jobs, there may be increased social unrest and dissatisfaction with the government's ability to address the economic issues. This can lead to protests and other forms of civil unrest.

The economic crisis will furthermore exacerbate existing inequalities in society, as those who are already wealthy would tend to weather the storm better than those who are not. This can lead to resentment and anger among the less fortunate, who may feel that the government is not doing enough to address the problem.

The government revenue would, meanwhile, also take a hit due to lower tax receipts and other factors. This would make it difficult for the government to fund public services and other programs that are essential for maintaining social stability. The government debt would at the same time grow adding to the doubts about its ability to manage its finances and pay back its debts. On the whole the economic crisis would contribute to political instability.

4) *Resurgent Terrorism*

Terrorism returned in a big way in 2022 and the bad news is that the trend is likely to continue in the year ahead. The aggravating security situation always portends difficulties for people going ahead and in an election year with all its accompanying political activities it

means a gigantic challenge for the government and the political parties.

The impact of terrorism will vary depending on the severity and frequency of the attacks, as well as the political climate and the responses of political actors.

Although there have been multiple reasons for this resurgence of terrorism, the primary factor behind this phenomenon has been the return of a large number of TTP fighters from Afghanistan and the breakdown of the militant group's peace talks with the government.

The government and the military had been cautioned against talking to TTP, which had been firmly holding on to its position with regards to the country's Constitution and use of violence for attainment of its goals. But, no one paid heed to that. Regrettably at the same time no contingency planning had been done for the eventuality of failure of talks especially when a large number of militants had been allowed to move back while the talks were continuing and the ceasefire was in place. Everyone in the military establishment that was in the driving seat in the process seemed to be under the delusion that a peaceful settlement with TTP was already a done

deal. It came as a shock for them as things did not work out as planned.

Now that the country is in the grip of terrorist violence, one thing that is quite obvious is that there is no comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy in the hand. With all the experience of fighting terrorism for over a decade that the military and counter-terrorism has acquired thus far, putting together a strategy should not have been a big issue, but other factors – particularly political divisiveness and impending elections – are making its formulation difficult.

A large scale kinetic operation at the moment looks improbable because of lack of political ownership of such an undertaking and its financial costs in the midst of economic crisis.

The scale of violence can have an important bearing on the election as it could hinder the participation of some actors, who have traditionally maintained an anti-TTP stance. Meanwhile, some marginalized or extremist party may benefit from it and gain support.

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