

Assassination Attempt on Imran Khan: Volatile Street, Negotiations and Elections

Iqbal Singh Sevea

Summary

The assassination attempt on Imran Khan has ignited a political contest in Pakistan. We need to examine the complex political context and assess if the volatile street may determine the political future.

The assassination attempt on Imran Khan has ignited the already volatile political environment in Pakistan. On 3 November 2022, [Khan, the country's former prime minister, was shot in the leg](#) while leading thousands of protestors in a 'Long March' against the Shehbaz Sharif-led government and its backers in the security establishment. Supporters of Khan and his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), have responded by protesting in various cities. These protests were further stoked when Khan issued a statement from the hospital that [Sharif, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah and a senior military figure](#) were behind the assassination plot. Khan further called on his supporters to resume the Long March from Wazirabad, the very district where he was shot. He announced that he will join the march when it reaches Rawalpindi. With angry protestors on the streets, accusations of an assassination plot hatched at the highest levels of government and a looming election, the political stakes for Khan, Sharif and the military establishment are extremely high. To understand how things might play out in the coming weeks, we need to examine the complex political context in which Khan was shot.

Khan's innings as prime minister ended in April 2022 when his government lost a no-confidence motion. Sharif was swiftly elected to replace Khan with the support of a coalition of parties bound together only by their opposition to Khan. To be sure, Khan and the PTI's inability to deal with soaring inflation and rising foreign debt had led to disillusionment. However, the PTI government's fall was precipitated by the military withdrawing its support. It is widely believed that Khan's rise to power was due to the patronage he received from the military. Such was the influence of the Chief of the Army Staff, General Qamar Bajwa, over government decisions that Khan's government was described as a 'hybrid-regime'. Over time, however, sections within the [military came to be concerned](#) that such close association with Khan and the PTI could result in it being associated with the economic problems facing Pakistan.

Since losing power, Khan and the PTI have been mobilising their supporters through *jalsas* (rallies) and the use of social media. Significantly, he has openly attacked the current government and sections of the military for being part of an American conspiracy to topple his government. Yet, there is ambiguity over what Khan seeks to attain through his protests. It has generally been stated that he is trying to force the government to call for early elections. It is, however, important to note that Khan and the PTI are already in a position to trigger early elections. The PTI is currently in power in the politically important province of Punjab as

well as Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. As such, the PTI could force early elections by dissolving the provincial governments.

Two other issues are at stake for Khan – his ability to stand for elections and the appointment of the next military chief. On 20 October 2022, Pakistan’s Election Commission adjudged that Khan had misappropriated state gifts and forced him to give up his parliamentary seat. This opened up a wider legal question over whether Khan would be disqualified from taking part in future elections. In Pakistan, disqualification has regularly been used to manage political competition. The PTI will contest Khan’s disqualification at various levels of the judiciary in the coming months. It is likely to have calculated that keeping their supporters on the streets will hasten the legal process and benefit Khan.

The protests and accusations levelled against the military are also a means by which Khan is trying to delay or influence the appointment of the next military chief. The first public rift between Khan and the military occurred when the former delayed the ‘recommendation’ by the military chief to appoint a new head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) spy agency in October 2021. Rather than a dispute over the limits of the military’s authority, this rift could well have been because [Khan wanted to retain the incumbent, Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed](#), who is said to have played an important part in ensuring Khan’s rise to power through the use of the security apparatus. Khan was also reportedly keen on ensuring that Hameed becomes the next military chief after Bajwa retires this month. Khan is undoubtedly aware that Bajwa has had his critiques within the military itself for openly associating the institution with the government. The protests are likely a means of forcing divisions within the military to play out and for it to take an open stance on its political position.

It is clear that the assassination attempt has galvanised support for Khan and there will be more large-scale protests in the coming weeks. When Khan launched a similar protest in May 2022, the government easily stamped it out with the military’s support. Both the government and military are, however, presented with a very different situation now. The government will resist calls for early elections. On its part, the military has been put into an uncomfortable situation of having to publicly comment on political developments; even if only to deny involvement in conspiracies. It may also have to negotiate its position keeping the increasingly volatile street in mind. [Backchannel discussions](#) between Khan and sections within the military had reportedly been taking place. However, the tone adopted by Khan following the assassination attempt may complicate the chances of such a rapprochement. The key question now is whether the PTI will push for early elections by dissolving its provincial assemblies. It remains to be seen if the sentiment on the streets pushes Khan and his party to play their hand earlier than they would have liked to.

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Associate Professor Iqbal Singh Sevea is Director at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasiss@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.