

Imran Khan and the Sharif Government: Cycle of Provocation and Confrontation

Kunthavi Kalachelvam and Imran Ahmed

Summary

A significant, unpredictable factor that continues to shape Pakistan's domestic politics is former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his campaign to return to power. This brief covers the cycle of provocation and confrontation between Khan and the Shehbaz Sharif government, which continues to suspend the country in political uncertainty. It details recent developments, including the twists and turns of Khan's disqualification, the country's mounting economic woes and how economic uncertainties impede the political and democratic process, prolonging confusion and instability. While Khan continues his call for early elections, Sharif maintains that the country cannot afford them. However, whether elections can bring politics back into the fold of formal channels is yet another matter. Election results are often honoured in the breach than in their observance in Pakistan.

In April 2022, Pakistan witnessed its [first successful no-confidence vote](#) ousting Prime Minister Imran Khan. Khan, however, went down swinging and vowed to [return to power this year](#). While his close relationship with the establishment once led his opponents to characterise him as the 'prime minister selected', Khan now postures a distinctly anti-establishment message. Amidst an economic crisis and growing political uncertainty, Khan continues to influence Pakistan's domestic politics and dominate news cycles.

The Election Commission of Pakistan disqualified Khan in October 2022 from holding political office for five years. Its unanimous decision found Khan guilty of ["corrupt practices"](#) upon revelations that he had acquired [gifts from foreign dignitaries](#) but did not declare them [as the law required](#). Khan had violated provisions in Sections 137, 167, and 173 of the [Elections Act, 2017](#), for submitting a ["false statement" and "incorrect declaration"](#) to the Election Commission detailing his assets and liabilities for the year 2020-21. [Article 63\(1\)\(p\)](#) of the Act mandated a five-year ban. However, Khan and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) rejected the ruling, calling the ban an act of political engineering. Khan called on his supporters to take to the streets and he filed an appeal in the Islamabad High Court. But his appeal requests before the courts were denied, leaving a pending indictment.

Despite maintaining [favourable poll results](#), Khan and his party face mounting legal hurdles, risks to personal safety and targeted state repression. In November 2022, an assassination attempt left him with gunshots to his leg. There are over a hundred legal cases against him, and [thousands of supporters of Khan and the PTI](#) clashed with police over the past week in Islamabad. Authorities have [charged Khan and several party members](#) with terrorism offences, rioting, assault on police and criminal intimidation. On 24 March 2023, [Azhar Mashwani, PTI's social media head](#), was arrested for his campaign against Chief of Army Staff, General Syed Asim Munir. The notorious Federal Investigation Agency, in collaboration with intelligence agencies and the police, [now lead this investigation](#), with more arrests

expected in the coming days. This has, however, failed to silence Khan, and a counter social media campaign now proceeds to document and condemn law enforcement for its deliberate and targetted campaign against the PTI. Khan maintains that [his life is threatened](#) and that the Shehbaz Sharif government [is plotting his death](#).

While the state is set to see elections later this year, Pakistan's parliament met recently in a joint session to discuss a raft of key issues plaguing the country, including political instability, economic meltdown and the provincial elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) provinces. The [economy](#) faces slow growth, high inflation, depleting foreign reserves and significant financing needs. Whether the Sharif government will acquire US\$1.1 billion (S\$1.46 billion) from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has been a going concern. Pakistan needs the loan to afford [essential imports and cover its foreign debt obligations](#). The IMF has [set strict conditions for Pakistan](#), and the government has worked to assure the lender that it is in the [process of implementing reforms](#). However, the money needed as a lifeblood for the economy remains at a distance. This now appears to place significant impediments to the country's political process in settling the conflict between the government and the PTI.

For months, Khan has used numerous strategies, including mass demonstrations and long marches, and he has been criticising the armed forces for destabilising the government, resuming relations with the establishment and returning to power. The dissolution of the [Punjab and KPK assemblies](#) on 14 and 18 January 2023 respectively was a tactical strategy for Khan, whose party ruled both provinces, to force the government into [holding early national elections](#). However, this too appears to have come to naught. Although the federal government is legally bound to hold elections within 90 days of the dissolution, this deadline has since passed. The government has justified delays on the grounds that it faces significant [financial constraints](#) to hold the elections. With Khan's growing popularity, delays serve in the interest of the coalition. Khan's supporters and the Sharif government appear locked in a cycle of provocation and confrontation. Both sides blame the other for [pushing the country towards default](#). But whether elections can bring politics back into the fold of formal channels is yet another matter. Election results are often honoured in the breach than in their observance.

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Ms Kunthavi Kalachelvam is a Research Analyst at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute in the National University of Singapore (NUS). She can be contacted at kk.isas@nus.edu.sg. Dr Imran Ahmed is a Research Fellow at the same institute. He can be contacted at iahmed@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.