

PAKISTAN'S ESTABLISHMENT HAS AN IMRAN KHAN PROBLEM

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'Imran Khan has been on an offensive against the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ever since he was removed in April 2022' | Photo Credit: AP

There was [chaos in Pakistan after the arrest of ousted Prime Minister and chief of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf \(PTI\) party Imran Khan](#) on May 9, 2023. With the [Pakistan Supreme Court declaring his arrest unlawful](#), and the [Islamabad High Court granting him bail for two weeks](#) on the crucial Al Qadri Trust Case, Imran Khan and PTI should be relieved. However, there is unlikely to be a thaw in the political climate, with the government, the PTI, the establishment and the judiciary taking strong positions. Mr. Khan's arrest while on court premises, a scathing press brief by the establishment's Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) earlier, the violence on the streets, and the extraordinary relief granted to Mr. Khan by the judiciary should highlight the following four trends — of a bad situation becoming worse for Pakistan.

First, the PTI's response to its leader's arrest. The extent of violence across the country and the number of PTI supporters taking to the streets should underline Mr. Khan's popularity. The violence and rage was widespread (from Peshawar to Karachi) and was not random and indiscriminate. The primary target was the establishment, its infrastructure and some senior military. The Corps Commander's residence in Lahore, the Frontier Corps Headquarters in Lahore, and the General Headquarters (GHQ) were targets. Anti-Army slogans and stone pelting of Army vehicles were witnessed. There are numerous videos on these attacks.

The violence and the rage have rattled the establishment more than the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)-led government. The PTI's anger seems more against the military. The establishment has never faced such fury before, with statements, slogans and violence against its property and personnel. If the PTI's followers are making their presence felt in the streets, the leaders of the PTI are targeting the government and the establishment on social media and with public statements. The government has decided to try the rioters under the Pakistan Army Act and Official Secrets Act; the Army chief has confirmed that the process has begun.

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Second, the establishment's response and the larger meaning behind it. Just the day before Mr.

Khan's arrest, an ISPR statement of May 8, 2023 (in response to Mr. Khan's accusation against a serving military officer being a part of an attempt to assassinate him) said: "These fabricated and malicious allegations are extremely unfortunate, deplorable and unacceptable." The statement also referred to a "consistent pattern" during the last year "wherein military and intelligence agencies officials are targeted". Similar statements from the ISPR in the previous year condemned Mr. Khan's comments.

Mr. Khan has been on an offensive against the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) ever since [he was removed in April 2022](#). After the [assassination attempt on his life in Wazirabad](#) last year, he has become shrill, openly challenging the ISI's role with sharp questions. The Imran Khan-establishment equation that existed earlier has faded away. The establishment is no more a holy cow in Pakistan for political leaders, an image the establishment carefully cultivated since Pakistan's independence. It is now hostile. No other political leader in Pakistan could accuse serving officers of the military and the ISI. But now, the people are not only questioning it but also attacking it. The mob attack on the GHQ and the residence of the Lahore Corps Commander should underline how the public image of the military has taken a beating.

Does this now mean the establishment will go back to the Sharifs? Of the two Sharifs, Shehbaz Sharif has always been the preferred one. Shehbaz Sharif has been making all the right statements vis-à-vis the khakis. Or, will the establishment try out a new arrangement with Bilawal Bhutto? Asif Ali Zardari has been extra careful and been looking at the Islamabad pie, while working with the PML-N as a part of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). There is also an effort to break the PTI; some have started leaving the PTI; it may turn into an exodus.

Third, the next steps for the government, PDM alliance and the PML-N. The government should be elated with what had happened between the establishment and Imran Khan. The May 9 violence is being used to target other PTI leaders as well. Legally, the government feels it has a strong case under which it arrested Imran Khan, i.e., the Al Qadri Trust case. The PML-N would very much want to get Imran Khan disqualified, perhaps through the National Accountability Bureau.

For the PML-N, the larger issue is about winning back Punjab. The PTI has made substantial inroads in the last elections and also during the by-elections. Given the growth in the pro-Imran base in Punjab, and the spontaneous anger following his arrest, the biggest challenge is in arresting Imran Khan's popularity. So, what is next for the government? It would be looking at charging Mr. Khan with a few more legal cases, or even try arresting him again later.

There is also the fourth issue facing Pakistan — the judiciary and Imran Khan. There is a belief that the judiciary is lenient towards Mr. Khan, and is siding with his position on major political issues. For example, the Supreme Court's position towards holding the elections is more in tune with the PTI's. The PML-N is unhappy with the judiciary's role in the latest arrest episode. The Prime Minister made a scathing attack, following the Supreme Court's declaration of Imran Khan's arrest as unlawful.

The four institutions, i.e. the government, the opposition, the establishment and the judiciary, seem to be pulling in opposite directions with different endgames. A bad situation is likely to become worse for Pakistan.

D. Suba Chandran is Professor and Dean, School of Conflict and Security Studies, National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore

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