

# **Dismantling of Imran Khan's Party and the Future of Pakistan**

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## **Summary**

*More than two dozen members of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have resigned following the protest on 9 May 2023. These resignations signal an attempt to dismantle and splinter the PTI as Pakistan moves towards elections. They also provide indications about Pakistan's political future.*

Many prominent members of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) have resigned from the party and parted ways with the former prime minister over the past week. The fact that figures like Shireen Mazari and Fawad Chaudhary, both of whom occupied key positions in the PTI hierarchy, are amongst these, is a major blow to Khan's ambitions to win the next elections. Apart from pointing towards the potential collapse of the PTI, these developments also provide indications about the political future of Pakistan.

To be sure, the spate of resignations is the result of severe pressure from the security establishment. Since being ousted from power in April 2022 through a no-confidence motion, Khan and the PTI have mobilised their supporters to protest the current government and security establishment. Khan has accused sections of the military's leadership of conspiring with foreign powers, namely, the United States, to overthrow him and even of masterminding an attempt to assassinate him. Things came to a head on 9 May 2023 when Khan's arrest on charges of corruption led to violent protests as his supporters took to the streets across the country. The protestors attacked government buildings and security installations, including the army's headquarters in Rawalpindi and the Corps Commander House.

The response from the establishment was swift and harsh. Thousands of PTI supporters, members and leaders were detained. Mazari herself has been detained five times since the protests. Like Mazari, many PTI leaders have held press conferences after their release and not only decried the protests but also distanced themselves from Khan.

Apart from drawing a red line regarding attacks – rhetorical and physical – on the military, the security establishment is also seeking to dismantle the PTI and engineer a split within the party through the detention of its leaders. Here, it is important to note that the resignations are taking place at a time when Pakistan's Supreme Court is hearing a petition over the date of the next state and federal elections. The Supreme Court had earlier ordered those elections to be held in the politically crucial province of Punjab on 14 May 2023. However, the government and the Election Commission did not abide by this order. The latter has submitted a petition to delay the election. There is a possibility that the Supreme Court, which has repeatedly demonstrated a desire to assert its independence vis-à-vis the government and the security establishment, may hold the government in contempt

and even disqualify the incumbent prime minister, Shehbaz Sharif, thus, triggering elections. Indeed, on 25 May 2023, Chief Justice Umar Bandial stated during a hearing of the petition that a delay in elections will allow “negative forces” to “play tricks”.

Khan and the PTI’s ability to galvanise its support base since being ousted from power led to concerns that they would likely emerge as the dominant party in provincial and national elections. Khan’s argument that all of Pakistan’s problems are due to corrupt politicians and military leaders, coupled with his ability to interlace populism, religion and social conservatism, continues to win him support amongst swathes of the urban middle class. This is the very class which has traditionally shown high levels of support towards the security establishment.

Developments over the past week indicate that the security establishment is focusing on weakening and splintering the PTI. This is not the first time that such a strategy has been deployed. In 2000, for instance, the security establishment splintered the dominant party of the time, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). The PML-N had been removed from power in a military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf in 1999. Yet, the party managed to retain its support base and continued to pose a challenge. In the lead up to the elections of 2002, Musharraf engineered a split in the party and a group of leaders left it to form the Pakistan Muslim League-Quad (PML-Q). The PML-Q would subsequently support Musharraf and came to be widely known as the “kings party”. Tellingly, Fayyaz Chohan who was a provincial minister in the PTI government in Punjab, announced in his resignation speech that he will continue the struggle through “a new platform”.

Looking ahead, the PTI will be a weakened force in the lead up to the next election. While Khan will no doubt continue to command tremendous support, he may not have the necessary party infrastructure to turn support into votes. Moreover, Khan, who faces more than 100 charges could well be arrested again soon. In the coming days, we are also likely to see several “electables” leave the PTI. “Electables” is a category used to refer to feudal leaders and landlords who have long dominated the political landscape in Punjab. They are crucial to any party’s political prospects in rural areas. In Punjab, they are most likely to gravitate to the PML-N; a party that they have long been associated with.

Developments over the past week also provide clues to the political trajectories that Pakistan will chart in the coming years. The new Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, seems to be signalling that the military will remain an important arbiter in political tussles but will prefer to retain the appearance of democratic governance. In other words, it does not plan to impose military rule and would like a civilian government to be in place. However, it will facilitate the rise of specific political parties and the emergence of specific political alignments. The next stage in Pakistan’s political development will be shaped by the Supreme Court’s ruling on the date of the next elections and which parties and figures the security establishment chooses to provide its patronage to.

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