

Pakistan in 2020

The Opposition Fights Back

ABSTRACT

Pakistan began the year with the military establishment having tightened its grip on political institutions, but as the year progressed, opposition parties sought to reassert themselves and challenged both the PTI government and military leaders. Political movements took center stage as religious extremists as well as regionalist movements drew strength from the challenges to the PTI government. Feminists demanded action after a series of sexual assaults, and religious minorities continued to be targeted by violence. The COVID pandemic upended the economy, which was already straining under low growth and high debt and deficit conditions. Foreign relations provided many challenges as the government sought to target India for its mistreatment of Kashmir, while the Pakistan–China relationship remained strong.

KEYWORDS: Pakistan, PTI, China, opposition, military

RELATIONS BETWEEN CIVILIAN INSTITUTIONS and the military establishment had reached a low point in 2019, with the military having inserted itself into many policy spheres and vigorously suppressing dissent by opposition forces. In Pakistan's hybrid regime, the military has been unable to completely dominate the political system, but at the beginning of 2020, it seemed it had managed to significantly swing the pendulum toward itself in a manner not seen since the periods of military rule. However, later in the year opposition forces attempted to reassert themselves, putting the Imran Khan government on the defensive. The COVID pandemic brought a unique challenge to the scene, creating tensions with China as well as providing opportunities for opposition leaders to challenge the government's performance.

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THE PTI ON THE DEFENSIVE

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Movement for Justice, PTI) government seemed well established at the end of 2019, and opposition parties seemed in disarray. Nawaz Sharif, the former prime minister and leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party, who had been in prison after being tried on corruption charges in 2018, was allowed to go into exile in the United Kingdom on the pretext of medical treatment, and it seemed he had limited options to mount a challenge to the PTI. The other major opposition party, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), was in slightly better shape since it controlled the Sindh provincial assembly, but it too was on shaky ground under the novice leadership of Bilawal Bhutto. Bhutto had managed to consolidate power within the party (away from his father, former President Asif Ali Zardari) and had held several well-attended rallies ahead of the 2018 election, but the rallies failed to turn into votes and seats. Although it had improved its performance from the 2013 election, the PPP was still only the third-largest seat holder in the National Assembly.

In late 2019, the push to begin anti-government agitation was from Maulana Fazlur Rehman's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (Assembly of Islamic Clerics, JUI), an Islamist party that was believed to have limited electoral support (International Crisis Group 2011). That agitation grew into a combined opposition effort, bringing together all of the major opposition parties in an alliance named the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM). The alliance was formalized in September 2020 with the explicit goal of ousting the PTI government, alleging that the 2018 election had been rigged (Khan 2020).¹ The PDM provided the biggest challenge to the PTI government since it had come into power, as it began to hold well-attended public rallies in cities around Pakistan. The new alliance also showcased the younger generation of dynastic leadership: Maryam Nawaz Sharif, Nawaz Sharif's daughter, who has taken control of the PML-N; and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, as well as his younger sister, Aseefa Bhutto Zardari, the children of Benazir Bhutto and Asif Ali Zardari, who appealed to the Bhutto legacy.

The protests also broke precedent by directly naming and attacking the military establishment. At one rally, Nawaz Sharif explicitly named General

1. Other demands included the holding of fresh elections and the upholding of the 18th Amendment, which decentralized power. The amendment is strongly favored by opposition parties and sharply criticized by the military establishment (Bremmer 2020).

Qamar Bajwa, the army chief, as responsible for his ouster from office in 2017 and for the rigging of the 2018 election (Constable 2020; Tomlinson, Sahi, and Janjua 2020). But the degree to which the PDM will challenge larger structural issues remains to be seen, as the alliance remained divided over (for example) whether to include the establishment-challenging Pashtun Tahaffuz [Protection] Movement (PTM) in its ranks. It is also likely that many of the component parties are seeking deals with the military establishment to foster their own power, rather than seeking a broader realignment of power that would make civilian institutions supreme.

MOVEMENT POLITICS

The PTM was one of the major political movements to challenge the PTI government as well as the military establishment in 2020. Led by activist Manzoor Pashteen, it is a two-year-old collection of activists who have been demanding rights for Pashtuns in the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas specifically, and in Pakistan generally. The PTM argues that the Pashtun people have been victims of military operations against the Taliban as part of the “War on Terror,” as well as related human rights abuses such as enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, harassment at checkpoints, and discrimination in public life (Afzal 2020a). The PTM’s demands bring them directly into confrontation with the military establishment, and the movement gained political strength when two of its leaders, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir, were elected to the parliament in 2018. But the tensions between movement and electoral politics were visible when questions arose over whether to include the PTM in the PDM alliance, and eventually the PDM leadership said no, on the grounds that the PTM was not a political party. However, the more likely reason is that the PTM poses an electoral threat to the Jamiat-e-Ulema and other PDM member parties (*Daily Pakistan* 2020).

With India effectively annexing Kashmir in 2019, the Pakistan government sought to resolve the status of Gilgit-Baltistan (in part at China’s urging). The territory is part of the region disputed with India, and the Pakistani government has resisted regularizing its status out of concern that it would represent a de facto abandonment of its claims to Kashmir. In 2009, Gilgit-Baltistan was granted limited autonomy, and there has been a movement in the territory to incorporate it as a fifth province of Pakistan. Local assembly

elections in November 2020 resulted in a PTI victory, but the assembly has few powers, and most decisions are made in Islamabad. Some observers predicted that the Gilgit-Baltistan autonomy movement might merge into the PDM, sharpening the challenge to the PTI (Hussain 2020).

ECONOMIC SHOCK

The Pakistani economy was already struggling at the beginning of 2020, but the COVID pandemic was a crippling blow. Although there were some positive signs at the beginning of the year, such as a reduction in the current account deficit, an increase in foreign direct investment, and higher foreign exchange reserves (Shahid 2020), life for ordinary people continued to be difficult. The structural weaknesses of the economy, plus the pandemic, had a contracting effect as GDP shrank by 0.4%, with inflation soaring to 9% (it hit a record 14.6% in January 2020). This was only the second time in Pakistan's history that the GDP had declined (Jawaid 2020; Zaidi 2020). Manufacturing continued to be weak, and Pakistan struggled again with energy generation and distribution, which is critical for industrialization (Memon 2020). Surprisingly, foreign remittances, a key source of revenue, increased despite the fact that overseas workers in the Gulf and elsewhere were also hit with unemployment as COVID slowed the global economy. At year-end, the State Bank of Pakistan forecast that the economy would grow 1.5–2% in 2021, but given that it needs to grow by roughly 7% per year just to maintain living standards for the growing population, this is not good news (Zaidi 2020).

A NATION OUTRAGED BY SEXUAL ASSAULTS

A number of high-profile assaults on women and girls during 2020 prompted mass outrage. The first was the horrific rape of a five-year-old girl who was then slammed in the head and finally burned to death. The second rape was that of a woman who was driving on the Lahore motorway at night; she was dragged out of her car and raped in front of her three children. The two cases took place within the same week, and their particularly brutal nature captured national attention and galvanized feminist activists, who have long fought the widespread harassment, abuse, and violence toward women in Pakistan (Ijaz 2020).

In the case of the woman motorist, it may have been that her middle-class status helped bring media attention. Regardless, it was an unusual moment as it put the government on the defensive on an issue that does not usually garner so much sympathy or political action. The top police official in Lahore blamed the victim for her assault, and furious feminist activists demanded that he be fired; he kept his job after offering a weak apology. The government introduced legislation that included chemical castration of convicted rapists and a host of other measures, although it has yet to be approved by parliament (Ellis-Petersen 2020; Masood and Ives 2020). (It should be noted that many feminist activists disagree with many of the measures the government is proposing, arguing that they do not provide an effective deterrent against sexual assault.)

MINORITIES UNDER SIEGE

In 2020, attacks on religious minorities, particularly Ahmadis, increased in both pace and scope (Amnesty International 2020).² Religious minorities in Pakistan have been beleaguered for decades, with blasphemy allegations increasingly being weaponized for both legal attacks and extrajudicial violence. The movement acquired a new dimension in 2020 when Sunni extremist organizations began to target Shias publicly, calling them infidels and accusing Shia individuals of blasphemy. These groups also held a series of protests in Karachi that drew 30,000 attendees (Baloch and Ellis-Petersen 2020). The Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (“I Am Present” Movement), an Islamist organization, is perhaps the most popular group associated with the Khatam-e-Nabuwat (Finality of Prophethood) movement. It garnered 2.2 million votes nationwide in 2018 (although it did not win any seats), and it launched a successful series of protests against the French government for allegedly blasphemous policies.³ Although the head of the organization died in late 2020, it

2. Ahmadis are a minority sect of Islam which was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, a religious leader, in the nineteenth century. The Pakistani government declared them non-Muslim in 1974, and since then the community has suffered under a variety of discriminatory laws.

3. These protests mobilized thousands of people and elevated the TLP’s cause to the diplomatic arena, as PM Imran Khan made public statements denouncing French PM Macron’s alleged Islamophobia. The Pakistani government also lodged an official complaint with the French ambassador in Islamabad and suggested that it was considering a boycott on French goods, as the TLP had been demanding (BBC 2020; Reuters 2020).

seems clear that the group and the movement are very much alive and will continue to make their presence felt in Pakistani politics and society.

Ahmadis continued to face the brunt of this extremist violence, which usually takes the form of vigilante attacks for allegedly blasphemous behavior, but Sunni extremist groups targeted other religious minorities as well. Some Pakistani Hindus converted to Islam in a series of high-profile conversion ceremonies in Sindh Province, which underscores the majoritarian social and political pressures on the community (Abi-Habib and ur-Rehman 2020b).

EXTERNAL RELATIONS: FIRMLY IN CHINA'S ARMS

Relations with China improved somewhat in 2020, with some progress on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which had been stalled since 2018 (Shakil 2020a). The CPEC is the largest component of China's Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure network designed to facilitate trade and China's geostrategic influence (Chatzky and McBride 2020). The agreement has been criticized in Pakistan for benefitting China while being exploitative of Pakistanis, especially marginalized groups such as those in Balochistan (Hameed 2018), and the PTI had sought to renegotiate some of its terms when it came into office in 2018 (Afzal 2020b). But the military establishment is firmly in favor of the CPEC, because it gives Pakistan a key external ally as well as providing benefits to the military, since it has a heavy financial stake and security role in CPEC projects and assets. As a result, there was some progress on projects in Gwadar, and China pressured Pakistan to institute governance reforms in Gilgit-Baltistan by giving it constitutional status as a fifth province, which the PTI government promised to do.⁴

In late 2020, China and Pakistan also signed a new defense agreement that is likely to strengthen the military's role in CPEC projects (Krishnan 2020). Finally, a bill designed to give legislative status to the CPEC Authority, headed by retired General Asim Bajwa, cleared a key parliamentary committee; the bill had been one of China's key priorities, because it wants the new agency to be regularized. Pakistan also continued to support China on human rights issues, most importantly in neighboring Xinjiang, where the Pakistani government has looked the other way on China's repression of the

4. Gilgit-Baltistan is the northern start of the CPEC, and it also borders Xinjiang Province, where China has been conducting massive repression of Uighur Muslims under the guise of anti-terrorism policies. As such, a stable Gilgit-Baltistan is critical for Chinese domestic interests too.

Uighur people, but also in Tibet and Taiwan. For its part, China supported Pakistan on the Kashmir issue in international forums, and it also helped keep Pakistan off the Financial Action Task Force blacklist (*Dawn* 2020).⁵

The Pakistan–India relationship remained difficult, especially in the wake of India’s effective annexation of Kashmir, as military tensions flared up along the Line of Control in Kashmir (*Economist* 2020). The Pakistani government sought to raise the issue in international forums, including the Organization of Islamic Countries and the United Nations, but had very limited success. Pakistan’s alliance with China is also an irritant for India, and the new China–Pakistan military agreement created further friction. The Pakistani government claimed that India was fomenting terrorism in Gilgit-Baltistan (Hussain 2020).

The United States shifted its stance toward Pakistan, since it needs Pakistan’s assistance for its goal of military withdrawal from Afghanistan. But the India–US alliance is a constraint on pushing the US relationship with Pakistan beyond the transactional dimension. The election of Joe Biden, and the return of an internationalist foreign policy establishment that had been sidelined during the Trump administration, implies some changes ahead for the US–Pakistan relationship, but it is too early to tell just how these would play out, especially as the Afghan peace process is far from complete (Shakil 2020b). In any event, it is unlikely that there will be any fundamental shifts in Pakistan’s external relations.

COVID IN PAKISTAN: AN ANOMALY?

Pakistan was initially an outlier in its experience with the COVID pandemic. While it was affected, the country’s apparent low fatality rates and the limited initial spread of the disease defied public health projections. The World Health Organization (2020) noted that Pakistan has been a relative COVID success story, praising the government for its early cooperation in limiting entry of people into the country starting in January 2020. Prime Minister Imran Khan was also praised for instituting a swift lockdown in April.

5. The Financial Action Task Force is an intergovernmental watchdog for money laundering and terrorist financing. It blacklists countries that fail to comply with its requirements; and it has a gray list, a sort of warning zone for countries in danger of being blacklisted. Pakistan was on the gray list from 2012 to 2015, and was placed on it again in 2018, largely for allegations that it serves as a hub for terrorist financing.

Observers puzzled over the apparent anomaly, speculating that Pakistan was less affected because its population skews so young (64% of Pakistanis are under 30), and the disease affects older populations more severely. Other explanations cited Pakistan's conservative culture, in which men and women tend to remain segregated in public spaces (Shah 2020).

But the lockdown measures were resisted, especially by clerics, who began defying the ban on communal prayers, and in May, as Ramadan approached, the PTI government eased the restrictions (Abi-Habib and Rehman 2020a). Then COVID infections began rising again and spiked in November, prompting the reintroduction of more narrowly targeted restrictions. These notably did not include mosques (they did target political rallies, perhaps in an attempt to slow the mobilization of the PDM; see Dilawar 2020). It is unclear how effective these new "smart lockdown" measures will be in slowing the spread of the pandemic. Looking ahead to 2021, it is also unclear how any potential COVID vaccine will be distributed within Pakistan. The government is cooperating with Chinese companies that are developing a vaccine, with the expectation that it will receive subsidized doses once final approval is given (Farmer 2020), but since the trials are still underway, its efficacy is unknown. If the only vaccines available are the ones developed in the West, it could impose a significant cost burden on a poor country like Pakistan to vaccinate its population. Existing suspicions about vaccines in general would likely be another complicating factor in combating the pandemic.

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