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I Overview

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II Developments in Pakistan

Political Chaos

With no end in sight to the political impasse between PTI and the government, Pakistan descended into a no holds barred political battle, which saw all major institutions of the state play a partisan role. With the provincial assemblies of Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa having been dissolved in mid-January, elections there were required to be held within ninety days as per the constitution. Riding a popularity wave, Imran Khan has been pushing for these elections, while the government has been keen to postpone them to the last quarter of 2023, when national election is due. Seeing no movement on the issue from the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), who favours PM (N), President Arif Alvi, who belonged to PTI and was elected to his office with its support, asked the former to announce the election dates. Since the CEC questioned President's role in the matter, Alvi went ahead to announce April 9 as the date of election in both provinces – an act that was described as unconstitutional by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. (In a subsequent letter to the President, Shehbaz has accused him of being 'blatantly partisan' and peddling 'anti-government' narrative). The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan, Umar Ata Bandial, who tends to lean in favour of PTI, took suo motu notice of the delay in holding the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa elections. In view of divisions within the Court and objection of some judges to the suo motu powers of the Chief Justice, he had to reconstitute the originally constituted bench to proceed with the case. In a split 3-2 verdict, the reconstituted bench ruled that elections should be held within ninety days as per the constitution and if this could not be done for some reason, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) must propose dates that deviated to the barest minimum from the above deadline. This verdict resulted in April 30 and May 28 being fixed as the dates for elections in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa respectively. However, citing security and other considerations, the ECP subsequently expressed its inability to hold the Punjab election on April 30 and postponed it to October 8 (the national election is also due around that time). According to media reports, ISI was among the security agencies that advised postponement of the election. Taking a cue from the above ECP decision, the Governor of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa called upon the Commission to hold election in his province too on October 8. PTI has moved the Supreme Court, demanding setting aside of the ECP decision. However, the hearing was interrupted when in a sign of continued divisions within the Court, two judges of the five member bench constituted by the Chief Justice recused themselves in opposition to his suo motu powers.

Not having an effective political counter to Imran Khan's popularity, the Shehbaz Sharif government has been trying to embroil him in multiple court cases to secure his conviction by a court and disqualify him from holding public office. This strategy has not been very successful so far because of Imran Khan's defiance, the government's half-heartedness due to uncertainty regarding its political fallout and their inability to pin him down on something serious. March saw clashes between police and Khan's supporters in Lahore, when an attempt was made to arrest him. He has been able to obtain pre-arrest bail in a number of cases from High Courts. He also addressed a well-attended rally in Lahore recently in spite of the hurdles created by the authorities. The Parliament has passed a law to curb the suo motu powers of

the Chief Justice of Pakistan. The government has also got a resolution adopted by the National Assembly calling upon the Supreme Court to “refrain from interfering in political and administrative affairs.”

In a sign of desperation, the government is reported to be considering, inter alia, proscribing PTI. Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah said during a TV interview that Pakistan’s politics has been brought by Imran Khan to a level where either PTI or PML(N) can exist and hinted that the ruling party could go to any length against its political rival. The government has the tacit support of army chief Asim Munir, who does not trust Imran Khan, because as Prime Minister, he had ousted him from the post of DG-ISI within months of his taking over that position. In case, encouraged by this congruence of interest with the army chief, the government resorts to any unconstitutional steps, including postponement of elections to the Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa assemblies, which will necessarily have to be justified on the basis of Pakistan’s infamous ‘doctrine of necessity’, it would be a repetition of the mistakes of the past and pave the way for a bigger crisis at a later date. The continuing political instability also adversely impacts the government’s ability to deal with Pakistan’s serious economic crisis and the rising wave of terror.

Economy

Pakistan continued to stare at a default on its external obligations even though the government finally bit the bullet to impose additional taxes amounting to Pak Rupees 170 billion to fulfil a condition imposed by the IMF for resumption of its Extended Fund Facility (EFF). However, the two sides could not reach an agreement on the subject in spite of frequent announcements of Finance Minister Ishaq Dar that it was around the corner. A representative of IMF made it conditional upon assurances of timely financial assistance from Pakistan’s external partners. Pakistan continued its efforts to get such assurances from its partners in the Arab world and China. Finance Minister Ishaq Dar stated in end February that China Development Bank had approved a facility of \$700 million for Pakistan. He claimed subsequently that the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China Ltd. had approved roll over of \$1.3 billion loans that Pakistan had repaid in recent months and \$500 million had already been received. The government also informed IMF that it had requested China to roll over for another year \$2 billion worth of SAFE (State Administration of Foreign Exchange) deposits that it had with Pakistan’s central bank. Inflation remained very high with weekly inflation crossing 40% at one stage in February. Army chief Asim Munir, accompanied by Finance Minister Ishaq Dar, told a group of ten top businessmen in the beginning of March that the worst was behind Pakistan and there would be no default. However, realities on the ground do not justify this hope. The above state of affairs does not augur well for Pakistan even if it is able to revive EFF.

Even as Pakistan continued with its hand to mouth existence as elaborated above, the government seemed more focused on politics than the economic situation. It denied the reports that some influential countries might be holding the IMF deal hostage to Pakistan compromising on its nuclear and missile capability. With an eye on its dwindling popularity, it also announced subsidies worth billions of rupees on petrol for owners of small vehicles and motorcyclists as well as on wheat flour. A representative of IMF said that the government had not consulted the Fund regarding the fuel subsidy.

In the meanwhile, the government continued to borrow heavily. Domestic and foreign debt grew by 25% and 38% respectively compared to the figures a year ago.

Terrorism

According to the statistics released by the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies, there were 58 terror attacks in Pakistan in February, in which 62 persons, including 27 civilians, were killed and over a hundred injured. Attacks continued in March, including one in which a Brigadier of ISI was killed.

Pakistan-India

Speaking to the PoK legislature on February 5, observed every year in Pakistan as 'Kashmir Solidarity Day', Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif alleged that a plot had been hatched in the past to defer plebiscite in Kashmir for a period of twenty years. He did not elaborate, but was reported to be hinting at some backchannel discussions during the tenure of the former army chief Qamar Javed Bajwa. Referring to India's August 5, 2019 move, he said that "India's oppression will not last long. The great sacrifices rendered by the Kashmiris with dauntless bravery...are bound to bear fruit." A joint sitting of Pakistan Parliament adopted a unanimous resolution reiterating, inter alia, Pakistan's 'unstinting moral, diplomatic and political support to the Kashmir cause.'

Speaking virtually to a high level UN panel, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Hina Rabbani Khar alleged, without naming India, that the largest country in the South Asian region continued to be a beneficiary of exceptionalism, in violation of the established non-proliferation norms and principles and remained a net recipient of generous supplies of advanced conventional and non-conventional weapons, technologies and platforms. She added that this was severely straining South Asia's strategic stability.

Pakistan participated virtually in the meetings of Chief Justices and national security heads of SCO countries, held in India under India's presidency. However, it sent a delegation comprising officers of the three armed forces to attend a working group meeting of SCO in Delhi. Pakistan's delegation could not participate in the seminar 'SCO Armed Forces Contribution in Military Medicine, Healthcare and Pandemics' as India objected to use of a map wrongly depicting its external boundaries. Pakistan's Defence and Foreign Ministers have been invited to attend SCO meetings due in April and May.

Speaking at the Lahore Chamber of Commerce in March, India's Acting High Commissioner in Pakistan said that India had not halted trade with Pakistan; it was Pakistan that had done so. He was further quoted as saying that India wanted to move towards normalising business ties as the focus of today's diplomacy was on tourism, trade and technology. He added that India had always wanted better relations with Pakistan because the two countries could not change their geography. He further stated that 30,000 visas were being issued to Pakistanis every year. He also referred to the importance of transit trade as Central Asia was a big market and India needed access to it.

Pakistan-US

The second round of US-Pakistan mid-level defence dialogue took place in Washington DC in February; the first round had taken place in Islamabad in 2021. The Pakistani delegation was headed by the Chief of General Staff. Subsequently, in March, the two countries held a dialogue on counterterrorism in Islamabad. A statement issued by the US Embassy in Pakistan at the end of the talks said that discussion was held on the counterterrorism landscape in Pakistan and the broader region, with a focus on collaboration to counter regional and global threats, violent extremism and combat terror financing. The statement further said that the two sides would continue paths to restart or introduce counterterrorism programmes to assist Pakistan's effort to better counter all forms of violent extremism.

A US delegation headed by the Counsellor of the State Department Derek Chollet and including the Counsellor of the US Agency for International Development visited Pakistan on February 16-17. According to a statement issued by the US mission in Islamabad, the two sides discussed a wide range of issues including strengthening economic ties, cooperation to address impacts of climate crisis, expanding people to people connections and conveying US solidarity with the Pakistani people as they recover from devastating floods. The statement quoted Chollet as saying that the US looked forward to strengthening bilateral relationship in trade, investment, climate, clean energy, health, security, education and other shared priorities. Chollet also met Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto and army chief Asim Munir.

Speaking before the Armed Services Committee of the US Senate, the US CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla said that he was confident of Pakistan's nuclear security procedures.

Pakistan skipped the second Summit for Democracy co-hosted by the US and some other countries on March 29-30 due to Chinese pressure. It had skipped the first summit held in December 2021 also.

Pakistan-China

The third round of Pakistan-China bilateral political consultations took place in Beijing in March. The two sides agreed to reinforce political and security cooperation, bilateral trade, economic and financial cooperation, cultural exchanges, tourism and people to people ties. Noting the completion of a decade of CPEC, they reaffirmed their commitment to it and to remain engaged in its expansion, including participation of third parties to enhance regional connectivity and cooperation.

Developments in Afghanistan

Security Situation

In a sign of continuing security concerns in the Taliban ruled Afghanistan, the Saudi Arabian diplomats based in Kabul were reported to have left to relocate to Pakistan in early February due to warnings of heightened risk of attacks in the Afghan capital. In a separate development, the Chief of the Joint Staff

of the Russia led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) said that the number of IS fighters in Afghanistan had gone up to 6500, with around 4000 of them concentrated along Tajikistan's southern border in the provinces of Badakhshan, Kunduz and Takhar. However, the Taliban Foreign Minister rejected the above claim. The US CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla told the US Senate Armed Services Committee that IS in Afghanistan would be able to attack America or western interests in less than six months "with little or no warning." A meeting of the Special Envoys and representatives for Afghanistan of the US, EU, some major European countries, Australia and Canada, that took place in Paris in February, expressed grave concern over the increasing threat of terrorist groups, including ISKP, al Qaeda, TTP and others in Afghanistan.

Six civilians were killed by a suicide attack at a check point near the Taliban Foreign Ministry in Kabul at the end of March. IS claimed responsibility for it. The Taliban governor of the Balkh province was killed in yet another suicide attack claimed by IS. Eight persons were killed in another attack in the Balkh province at an event of journalists.

Human Rights and Humanitarian Situation

Omar Abdi, Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF has warned that two thirds of Afghans are facing severe hunger and are in urgent need of aid, with six million facing the risk of famine.

The Taliban made no move on appeals of the international community to provide education facilities for girls and women. In a statement of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, more than 70 countries and EU representative said in March that the Taliban ban on female education has put Afghan women and girls at increased risk of gender based violence and undermines Afghanistan's stability. They also expressed concern at the order barring female employees of national and international NGOs from the workplace as it means that millions of Afghans would be unable to access life-saving humanitarian assistance.

UNSC Resolutions on Afghanistan

UNSC adopted two resolutions on Afghanistan in March. The first resolution renews the mandate of UNAMA for a further period of twelve months. The second one calls upon the UN Secretary General to conduct an independent assessment that provides recommendations for an integrated and coherent approach to the Afghan situation among different actors of the international community. Reacting to the second resolution, the Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said that the Taliban government would cooperate with Secretary General's independent assessment if it is aimed at fostering cooperation. He expressed the hope that the assessment would not be for producing propaganda against the Afghan system based on false information.

Afghanistan-Pakistan

Pakistani forces and Taliban traded fire at the Torkham border crossing, a key trade route between the two countries, in February, leaving a Pakistani border guard injured. A day earlier, the Taliban had shut down the crossing over Pakistan's refusal to allow Afghan patients and their attendants to enter Pakistan for medical care without travel documents. The closure resulted in a large number of trucks involved in trade between the two countries getting stuck at the border. The crossing was opened six days later after discussions between officials of the two sides.

A delegation led by the Pak Defence Minister, Khwaja Muhammad Asif and comprising civil and military officials paid a day long visit to Kabul in February. The Pak Foreign Office said that matters relating to the growing threat of terrorism in the region, particularly by TTP and ISKP, were discussed. It further stated that the two sides agreed to collaborate to effectively address the threat of terrorism. The delegation met Deputy Prime Minister Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar as well as the Taliban Defence, Interior and Foreign Ministers. Pakistani media reports quoted official sources to say that Pakistan presented proof of TTP attacks from the Afghan soil. In a separate statement, the office of the Taliban Deputy PM said that the two sides discussed economic cooperation, regional connectivity, trade and bilateral relations. The statement quoted Mullah Baradar as telling the Pakistanis that security and political concerns should not affect business or economic activity. He called upon Pakistan to release Afghans kept at its detention facilities and facilitate crossing by Afghans at the Torkham and Spin Boldak borders. The subjects of discussion mentioned in the two statements were thus quite different. This made Pakistani official sources tell their media that contrary to the statement issued by the Afghan side, the one point agenda of the visit was counterterrorism and presence of TTP on the Afghan soil. The same sources claimed that the Afghan side gave a detailed briefing and conceded that terrorism was originating from the Afghan soil and suggested various options to deal with the problem, which the Pakistanis did not find satisfactory. They further claimed that it was conveyed to the Taliban in clear terms that Pakistan's goodwill should not be misconstrued as weakness and robust steps should be taken against the TTP. Subsequent Pak media reports stated that the Taliban had expressed their willingness to disarm TTP and relocate its cadres away from the Pak-Afghan border provided Pakistan agreed to bear the cost of the proposed plan. Even if it is assumed that it was a serious proposal, this is not an easy option for cash strapped Pakistan. The problem remains unresolved.

Afghanistan-US

The US imposed new visa restrictions on certain current and former Taliban members, non-state security group members and others believed to be involved in repressing the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. The US administration also called upon the Taliban to adhere to their counterterrorism commitments. It called for a strong international response to the restrictions placed by the Taliban on women and girls. On the third anniversary of signing of the Doha deal between the US and the Taliban, the two sides accused each other for its violations.

Afghanistan-India

Speaking at the 5th multilateral meeting of Secretaries of Security Councils/National Security Advisers on Afghanistan in Moscow in early February, Ajit Doval, India's National Security Adviser said that India would never abandon Afghans in their time of need. He added that Afghanistan was passing through a difficult phase. India had a historical and special relationship with Afghanistan and the well-being as well as humanitarian needs of the Afghan people were India's foremost priorities. He also mentioned the aid sent by India to Afghanistan in terms of wheat, medicines and disaster relief material. Describing an inclusive and representative dispensation as being in the larger interest of the Afghan society, he called for intensified intelligence and security cooperation to deal with IS and terror outfits like JeM and LeT.

The previous issues of Af-Pak Digest are available here: [LINK](#)

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(The views expressed are personal)
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