



Ambassador Sharat Sabharwal
Distinguished Visiting Fellow, Ananta Centre
Former High Commissioner of India to Pakistan
JUNE 2023 | VOL 07 ISSUE 05 | MONTHLY

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Overview**
- **Developments in Pakistan**
- **Developments in Afghanistan**

I Overview

Pakistan:

- Political Crisis
- Economy
- Terrorism
- Controversy on Census
- Pakistan-China
- Pakistan-India
- Pakistan-Iran
- Pakistan-EU
- Pakistan-UAE

Afghanistan:

- Human Rights Situation
- Taliban Interim Government
- Afghanistan-Pakistan
- Afghanistan-Iran
- Afghanistan-Qatar

II Developments in Pakistan

Political Crisis

Following Imran Khan's release by the Supreme Court from the detention of the National Accountability Bureau, who had arrested him on May 9 in a corruption case, triggering widespread violence by PTI supporters against army establishments and installations, he continued with his strident anti-army rhetoric. He blamed the army chief for his arrest. The violence also invited a strong reaction from the army and a backlash. Army Chief Asim Munir, who visited various garrisons to address the army rank and file, said that the armed forces would not tolerate any further attempt at violating the sanctity and security of their installations and "all the planners, abettors, instigators and executors of vandalism" on May 9 would be brought to justice. A statement issued by a special conference of Corps Commanders backed the above resolve of the army chief and added that those responsible for the violence would be tried under the relevant laws of Pakistan, including the Pakistan Army Act. It showed concern at "externally sponsored and internally facilitated" propaganda against the Pakistan armed forces and vowed to defeat it. The statement was significant in the backdrop of continued reports of fissures within the top echelons of the army concerning the ongoing political crisis. Even if such fissures existed, they have not translated into anything significant on the ground. Instead the army rank and file, who draw immense benefits from the supremacy of their institution in the Pakistani polity, have closed ranks behind the army chief.

The planned trials by military courts under the Pakistan Army Act are meant to circumvent the judiciary that has continued to give relief to Imran Khan by granting him bail in several cases filed by the authorities against him. The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Umar Ata Bandial (who retires in September 2023), remains a spoke in the wheel of the army-Shehbaz Sharif government's scheme to exclude Imran Khan from the political equation. However, his authority has been seriously compromised by the bitter divisions within his court.

The situation is still evolving, but Imran Khan is likely to lose the unequal battle with the army. He is likely to be tried by a military court for his alleged role in planning and instigating the violence following his arrest on May 9. A number of his party leaders were arrested, some repeatedly under different charges, to coerce them into abandoning Imran Khan. Even journalists and social media activists favourable to him were not spared. A large number of PTI leaders have deserted the party and are looking for alternatives to sustain their political career. Some have joined the older parties, particularly PPP that stood marginalised in Punjab in the last two elections and would like to recover some lost ground, especially in Southern Punjab. Others have been busy crafting separate political groupings of their own. Over a hundred PTI deserters have joined hands with the sugar baron turned politician, Jahangir Khan Tareen in forming the Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP). Tareen, who had bankrolled Imran Khan's successful election campaign in 2018, had fallen out with him subsequently. He is known to be close to the army circles, though he is no match for Imran Khan in charisma. Some more political groupings may also come up. Though forced by circumstances to work with PPP and PML-N, the army does not trust

them fully as they have been at the receiving end of its political engineering in the past. Therefore, the army would be keen to see a party minus Imran Khan emerge out of the ruins of PTI. This would improve the chances of a fragmented mandate in the National Assembly after the next election, thereby giving the army a chance to craft a majority of its choice.

The Shehbaz Sharif government has successfully defied the Supreme Court order, given by a bench headed by the Chief Justice, to hold early election in Punjab. The federal and provincial elections are due in the normal course in October this year. However, there is some uncertainty on whether the above deadline would be adhered to. The elections may be postponed beyond October if the powers that be need some more time to ensure the intended outcome. In view of the ongoing political engineering by the army, the elections will be a managed affair as many other in the past and will only kick the issue of political legitimacy down the road, paving the way for more trouble later on.

With the army under General Asim Munir meddling actively in political affairs through its time-tested methods of coercion and intimidation, things seem to have come full circle in Pakistan. In the meanwhile, Pakistan's other problems, notably the economic crisis and rising TTP terror, continue to fester and it is nowhere close to the end of its hydra headed crisis.

Economy

Pakistan's economic situation continued to worsen with growth plummeting to 0.3% and inflation rate touching 40%. According to a report of Pakistan's economic affairs ministry, the multilateral, bilateral and commercial inflows of foreign exchange fell to \$8.1 billion in the first ten months of the current fiscal year compared to over \$13 billion during the same period in the last fiscal year. This was far less than the budget target of \$22.8 billion of foreign financing. Foreign currency reserves had dwindled to a little over \$4 billion, enough to finance one month's controlled imports. In spite of repeated assurances by the government to the public, there was no sign of the much needed deal with the IMF because of Pakistan's inability to fulfil their conditions. The ongoing political uncertainty also seems to be weighing on the IMF's mind. A recent statement by the IMF Resident Representative in Pakistan, expressing the hope that a peaceful way forward would be found in line the constitution and the rule of law, invited a sharp retort from the government that interference in the country's internal affairs was not the mandate of the Fund. Even if an IMF deal is concluded, that will not be the end of Pakistan's economic problems. According to IMF estimates, Pakistan will need to make debt repayments or seek debt rollover of nearly \$75 billion in the next three years.

Terrorism

A report compiled by the Pak Institute for Peace Studies states that the number of terror attacks has seen a surge of over 70% and the number of people killed in these attacks of 138% since the advent of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in August 2021. The brunt of these attacks has been borne mainly by Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Pakistan continued to experience a steady wave of TTP terror

during May, including blowing up of two girls' schools in North Waziristan. Jamaat-e-Islami chief Sirajul Haq escaped unhurt in a suicide attack on his convoy in Balochistan.

Controversy on Census

The seventh national census in Pakistan has shown a population growth rate of around 2.8% compared to 2.4% under the sixth census conducted in 2017. Like the previous such exercises, the seventh census has run into controversies. The Sindh Chief Minister, Murad Ali Shah, has accused the federal government of undercounting the population of his province. Balochistan too has had similar grievances. While revealing the findings of the census, the federal Minister of Planning and Development, Ahsan Iqbal, stated that controversies over census figures would continue until the existing formula for division of revenues between the federation and provinces that gives 80% weightage to population and incentivises rapid population growth , is revised.

Pakistan-China

During his two-day official visit to Pakistan in May, when he also attended the China, Pakistan, Afghanistan trilateral dialogue, the Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang, in a sign of unease in his country at Pakistan's ongoing political turmoil, expressed the hope that the political forces in Pakistan would build consensus, uphold stability and more effectively address domestic and external challenges to focus on growing the economy, improving people's lives and bring the country into a fast track for development and rejuvenation. The two countries pledged to continue to stand by each other to ensure peace and stability in the region. In a joint statement, China commended Pakistan in its fight against terrorism and Pakistan appreciated China's "principled and just stance" on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir as well as its firm support to Pakistan's territorial integrity, sovereignty and national development. In a press conference with the Chinese Minister, Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto expressed Pakistan's profound gratitude to China for its generous and timely assistance as Pakistan's continues to grapple with global headwinds. Qin Gang said that Beijing will take a close look at possible solutions and will do its best to help Pakistan in its current financial and foreign exchange crisis. He added that financial cooperation between China and Pakistan was for betterment of people's lives in Pakistan. He called upon those who accuse China of placing Pakistan in a debt trap to say what they had done for the well-being of the Pakistani people.

Qin Gang also called on the Pakistani army chief, General Asim Munir, who pledged full support for the CPEC. The two also agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation in defence and security. In a separate meeting in Beijing with the visiting Pakistani Navy Chief, the Chinese Defence Minister said that the armed forces of the two countries should expand into new fields of cooperation.

Pakistan-India

Pakistan opposed holding of the meeting of the G20 Tourism Working Group in Srinagar and said that it would lobby with the invited countries not to attend it. The Pakistan Foreign Office subsequently issued a statement, thanking China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and Oman for not attending the meeting, adding that these countries had "stood for international law and for the primacy of UN Charter". However, Indian media reports stated that even though Turkey and Saudi Arabia did not send official representatives for the meeting, their travel industry representatives attended it.

Pakistan-Iran

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi inaugurated the first border market and an electricity transmission line between the two countries. Located in Balochistan on the Pakistan-Iran border, the market is first of the six planned to be constructed under a 2012 agreement between the two countries. The two leaders also inaugurated the Gabd-Polan power transmission line through which Iran will supply 100 megawatts of electricity daily to Gwadar. According to Pakistan media reports, Shehbaz Sharif assured Raisi that Pakistan would do its best to improve security along the Pakistan-Iran border. He also extended an invitation to Raisi to visit Pakistan, which was accepted.

Separately, Pakistani media reports stated that Pakistan had requested the US to allow it to build a pipeline for buying gas from Iran, failing which it would have to pay a stiff penalty under a bilateral agreement with Iran, if it did not complete the project by March 2024. The request was reported to have been made by the Petroleum Minister Musadik Malik during his visit to the US. The same reports maintained that Washington was reviewing the request.

Pakistan-EU

Pakistan's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs participated in the 2nd European Union Indo-Pacific Forum at Stockholm. Speaking at the meeting, she called for enhanced cooperation between Europe and Asia-Pacific, particularly in trade, investment and sustainable development. She underscored Pakistan's role as a trade, investment and connectivity hub in the heart of Asia. She appreciated the European sustainability and connectivity initiatives like the EU Global Gateway Strategy and the Green Deal. She called for avoiding distortions, economic de-coupling, new forms of protectionism and selective application of norms, which could undermine free trade, win-win economic cooperation and interconnectedness. She also underlined cooperation to deal with emerging global challenges such as climate, pandemics, water, energy and food security.

Pakistan-UAE

The UAE news agency WAM reported a telephone conversation between the UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and the Pakistan army chief, Asim Munir, during which the President

assured Munir of his country's commitment to support all that achieves unity and stability in Pakistan. The report added that the two sides also discussed enhancement of cooperation in defence and military affairs. There was no word from Pakistan on this call, which came as Pakistan is passing through multiple crises, including a political logjam. UAE, along with China and Saudi Arabia has been trying to help Pakistan in tiding over its foreign exchange crisis by extending and rolling over deposits.

III Developments in Afghanistan

Human Rights Situation

The Taliban regime continued to drag its feet on the issue of women's and girls' education. The Taliban Education Minister stated that the conditions for reopening of schools for girls above grade six were still not suitable, adding that a final decision on the issue will be made by religious clerics. A UNAMA report stated that in the past six months alone, 274 men, 58 women and two boys were publicly flogged in Afghanistan. The report criticised the Taliban for carrying out public executions, lashings and stonings and called upon them to halt such practices. In their response, the Taliban said that Afghanistan's laws were determined in accordance with Islamic rules and guidelines and an overwhelming majority of Afghans followed those rules, adding that in the event of a conflict between international human rights law and Islamic law, the government is obliged to follow the latter. The UN special rapporteurs on human rights issues also criticised such practices. In a report on the human rights situation in Afghanistan, the UN said that some Afghan women employed by them had been detained, harassed and restrictions placed on their movements.

Taliban Interim Government

Speaking on the 10th anniversary of the death of the Taliban founder, Mullah Mohammad Omar, the Taliban Interior Minister Sirajuddin Haqqani said that the government should not be a monopoly of only individuals from religious seminaries, but should involve everyone. This appeared to be a veiled reference to the increasing hold of the religious faction of the Taliban, based in Kandahar, on the Taliban government and indicated a degree of discord within the Taliban.

Maulvi Abdul Kabir, who played a key role in the 2020 Doha agreement between the US and the Taliban, was appointed the Prime Minister in the Taliban government. He replaces Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, who is reported to be ill, and was his political deputy till his elevation. A Taliban spokesperson said that Kabir would be Prime Minister till Akhund recovers. Kabir has played an important role in the negotiations with the US since the return of the Taliban to power in 2021.

Afghanistan-Pakistan

In spite of Pakistan's repeated calls upon the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to prevent activities of TTP from the Afghan soil and Pakistan having discontinued talks with TTP, initiated by the Imran Khan

government, due to rising TTP terror, the Taliban Foreign Minister, Amir Khan Muttaqi, urged his annoyed hosts during his visit to Islamabad in May to revive the talks. He denied that TTP was using the Afghan soil for attacks in Pakistan and described the group as an internal issue of Pakistan.

Afghanistan-Iran

Serious differences cropped up between Iran and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan over water rights of Iran in respect of the Helmand River. The Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said that his government was determined to defend these rights and asked the Taliban to take his words seriously. He also called upon the Taliban to allow Iranian hydrologists to check the water level of the river. Iran has been insisting on implementation of the 1973 Helmand River treaty between the two countries. The issue has become serious due to widespread drought conditions in Iran. A Taliban spokesperson said that the Iranian President's remarks on the issue would affect political relations between the two countries. He added that Afghanistan was committed to the water treaty of 1973, but water availability had dropped in Helmand River. He also stated that Afghanistan was willing to discuss the matter further, but threats would not benefit either side. Foreign Minister Muttaqi asked Iranian officials to align their demands with the provisions of the above treaty and pleaded shortfall of water in the river. The Iranians, however, continued to insist on a field visit by their hydrologists. Towards the end of May, the Taliban and Iran exchanged heavy gunfire on their border, killing and wounding troops. Both sides accused each other of starting the firing. The Iranian Foreign Minister said at the beginning of June that Iran was pursuing the water issue legally and politically and that Iran's Special Representative for Afghanistan had discussed the issue with the Taliban.

Afghanistan-Qatar

It was reported that Qatar's Prime Minister met the Taliban supreme leader in Kandahar on May 12. The Al Jazeera news network said that the meeting was aimed at finding ways to end the Taliban's international isolation. Reuters, which initially reported the secret meeting, said that the US administration was briefed on the talks. According to Reuters, the Qatari Prime Minister took up, inter alia, the issue of girls' education and women's employment.

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

.....
(The views expressed are personal)
.....

[COMMENTS](#)

