

A Scenario Analysis: What's Next for Pakistan?

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(Sabir Mazhar - Anadolu Agency)

Political turmoil in Pakistan over the past few weeks has left many citizens and country observers perplexed. Prime Minister Imran Khan was ousted from office through a controversial vote of no confidence and was replaced by Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif in April 2022. Fast forward a month later, the country's politics seems to have come to a standstill with an economic crisis looming. This policy outlook analyses the proceedings of the vote of no confidence, the backlash against political parties and national institutions involved, historical precedents and provides an examination of potential scenarios for the country moving forward including early elections, delayed elections and martial law.

Proceedings of the No-Confidence Vote

“There are decades where nothing happens; and there are weeks where decades happen”

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

Recent events in Pakistan can be encapsulated by the famous quote by a former Premier of the Soviet Union, and it is quite a coincidence that these events seem to have unfolded around a trip made by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan to Russia itself to meet the current Russian President Vladimir Putin just as Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. A no-confidence motion, a Parliamentary government tool available to register an elected Parliament's lack of confidence in one or more members of the government that, in Pakistan, requires those members to resign, was initiated on March 8, 2022, against PM Khan, with the final vote taking place on April 9, 2022. As per the opposition, united under the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) alliance, the decision to file a no-confidence motion on March 8, 2022, against PM Khan was taken because of the government's poor economic performance and political victimisation of members of PDM during PM Khan's three and a half years long alleged “hybrid regime”¹.

PM Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-led government responded by accusing the PDM of being part of a United States (US)-backed conspiracy, citing a diplomatic cable dated March 7, 2022, in which US diplomat Donald Lu warned the Pakistani envoy to the US, Asad Majeed, of “implications if the Pakistan PM survived the no-trust vote” in Pakistan's Parliament. The diplomatic cable also allegedly claimed that “Pakistan would be “forgiven” if the motion against him succeeded”. This was made public on March 27, 2022, during a large government political rally held in Islamabad. In his address, PM Khan stated that a conspiracy had been hatched to change his government with money coming from abroad and that some Pakistanis are unknowingly being used.

He further alleged that “We have known for months that there is a [conspiracy against the government](#)”. On June 6, 2021, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Chief William Burns visited Pakistan and not only was he refused military bases in the country from which to monitor the situation in Afghanistan post US withdrawal, PM Khan refused to meet him². On June 9, 2021, PM Khan said “absolutely not” when asked by journalist Jonathan Swan whether

he would consider providing bases to the US³. After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, and the Pakistani Intelligence Chief DG ISI Faiz Hameed being in Kabul on September 5 2021 (that was not taken lightly by the US, particularly with PM Khan [being critical of US failure in Afghanistan](#) at the time), major transfers took place within the Pakistan Army on September 7, 2021. PM Khan was against the transfer of DG ISI Hameed, until he finally agreed to it on October 6, 2021. Shortly after, on October 15, 2021, the American Charge d'Affaires in Pakistan met with both Shehbaz Sharif and Maryam Nawaz in a single day (leaders of the Pakistan Muslim League-N (PMLN), one of the opposition parties, with the former going on to replace Khan after the no-confidence vote), and [met several other Pakistani lawmakers](#) over the next few days and months. By October 23, 2021, CNN reported that the “[US was nearing a formal agreement with Pakistan](#) over military bases” in “exchange for [assistance with its own counterterrorism efforts](#) and help in managing the relationship with India”. The Pakistani Foreign Ministry, however, responded the same day that [no such agreement](#) had been reached - it seems there was some resistance on the part of PM Khan. The US was allegedly unsupportive of Pakistan pursuing an independent foreign policy, specifically by, as per PM Khan, his refusal to grant the US military bases within the country, and later on, his refusal to cancel his visit to Russia and Pakistan not condemning Russian actions in Ukraine at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). The visit took place as planned in advance as per Pakistani officials. The fact that it fell a day after Russia invaded Ukraine was only a coincidence. However, US officials had asked Pakistan to cancel or postpone the visit as per the then Pakistani Foreign Minister (FM). According to former PM Khan, this “adherence to independent foreign policy [irked the Americans](#)” who wanted a more “[pliable](#)” government in Islamabad. Soon after, former PM Khan announced that Pakistan would be importing wheat and natural gas from Russia [at preferential rates](#) that he considered vitally important for the Pakistani economy.

The US has categorically rejected any involvement in the no-confidence motion against PM Khan, [terming the allegations baseless](#), whereas the Pakistan Army, that has been very much the architect of Pakistani foreign policy since the creation of the State itself in 1947, stated that it was “neutral” during the no-confidence motion. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff (COAS) Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa condemned Russia's war in Ukraine in no uncertain terms at an event in Islamabad, describing it as an “invasion” and “aggression against a smaller country that cannot be condoned”. On April 6, 2022, Russia supported PM Khan's claims and slammed the US for alleged interference in Pakistan's internal affairs for its “[own selfish purposes](#)”.

¹ Since 2008 after the end of the military government of General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan “has been classified as a hybrid regime with elements of [electoral democracy coexisting with continuing military influence](#)”.

² This was done due to official protocol not allowing an intelligence official to meet with a head of state, against the background of US President Biden having not yet called PM Khan, despite Pakistan's engagement during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

³ PM Khan responded in the negative and asked whether his government would allow the US government to “have CIA here in Pakistan to conduct cross-border counter-terrorism missions against al-Qaeda, Daesh or the Taliban”, to which the interviewer responded with a very surprised “Seriously?”



Pakistani opposition leaders Shahbaz Sharif (L), leader of the opposition in the National Assembly, speaks during a press conference next to Asif Ali Zardari (C), former President and leader of Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and Fazlur Rehman (R), head of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, after submitting the no-trust motion against Prime Minister Imran Khan on March 8, 2022 in Islamabad, Pakistan. (Muhammad Reza - Anadolu Agency)

Besides the positions of the Pakistani Army and the US as outlined above, the following will be a delineation of the no-confidence motion as it progressed, along with the roles played specifically by the Pakistani opposition, US officials in Pakistan, and the Supreme Court of Pakistan (SCP). Under Article 58 of the Pakistani Constitution, a sitting Prime Minister (PM) no longer holds office if the majority of members of the National Assembly (NA), equating to 172 members (out of 342), vote in favour of no-confidence. As stated above, in Pakistan that can mean the PM can be removed and their cabinet is dissolved, while the NA elects a new PM for which both the ruling party and opposition submit chosen candidates' nomination papers.

The Pakistani opposition at the time (current government now) alleged that PM Khan's PTI had destroyed the Pakistani economy and did not provide any relief to the common man. ["backtracking on every promise"](#), breaking ["the back of Pakistan's economy"](#) and destroying the country's reputation internationally. The opposition, as represented by the PMLN supremo Nawaz Sharif and PPP leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari in a joint meeting in London, stated that "the biggest conspiracy against Pakistan was the imposition of Imran Khan on Pakistan and, as a result, the economy of Pakistan as well as the civility of Pakistan was ruined completely". This made ousting PM Khan not a US-hatched conspiracy but a need to "work together...to [repair the damage](#) done to the economy". Additionally, the Pakistani opposition stressed that former PM Khan "promoted a [culture of hooliganism and immorality](#)", causing civil strife in the country where media freedoms were curtailed. As per Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Chairman of one of the major opposition parties Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and son of former slain PM Benazir Bhutto, there was ["no conspiracy against Imran Khan at the White House"](#) and that the "conspiracy against Imran Khan [was hatched at the Bilawal House](#) to throw out an illegal, selected and

cruel government through the power of vote" in a democratic manner. Notably though, while the start of the PTI government rule evidenced sharp currency devaluation and severe [economic pain for many Pakistanis](#), followed by a global pandemic that threatened to hinder economic growth⁴, Pakistan's provisional GDP growth rate for the year 2021-22 has been estimated to be 5.97 percent and that this ["broad-based growth was witnessed in all the sectors of the economy"](#) with the size of the economy jumping to 383 billion USD.

At the time of the motion of no confidence, PM Khan's PTI had a centrist coalition government with 176 members, while the combined number of opposition seats stood at 162, with the total number of votes needed to conduct a vote of no confidence successfully being 172. PM Khan's government made allegations of horse-trading and government coalition members as well as dissident members of the PTI [being lured by money](#) to vote against the ruling party in the no-confidence motion. Ahead of the vote, the PTI government then filed a presidential reference for the interpretation of Article 63-A of the Pakistani Constitution, asking the SCP about the ["legal status of the vote"](#) of party members when they are clearly involved in horse-trading and change their loyalties in exchange for money". It must be noted that [many of these dissidents](#) were part of the group of lawmakers met by the American Charge d'Affaires in Pakistan as described above. The SC was presented with [two interpretations of Article 63-A](#): either the dissident party members would be de-seated with no further restrictions seeking election or they would be disqualified from competing in elections for life. At the time of writing, the SC was still deliberating on this interpretation. The PTI also approached the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) seeking the disqualification of dissident PTI MNAs from the NA for life and requested that if any member wants to leave any party they must resign as MNAs first "in-

⁴ As per a KPMG report, Pakistan "managed to [attain growth](#) in several economic performance metrics" during the global Covid-19 pandemic.

stead of committing defection as provided in Article 63-A of the Constitution by [changing his loyalty in favour of another political party](#) actuated by hidden motive". As per the law, once a no-confidence motion is submitted, that was announced publicly by the PDM on February 11, 2022, and submitted on March 8, 2022, the Speaker of NA is to call the house to order within two weeks, and voting must take place on the motion within one week after the house is called in order. On April 3, 2022, the motion of no confidence was unilaterally dismissed by the deputy speaker, Qasim Khan Suri, without putting the motion to a vote on grounds of "foreign interference" that was highlighted by PM Khan as stated above, with fresh general elections to be called after dissolving the NA.

However, the opposition approached the SCP that took suo moto notice of the dismissal of the no-confidence motion. The SCP ruled that the deputy speaker's ruling to dismiss the motion and the subsequent dissolution of the NA were unconstitutional, thus allowing the no-confidence vote to proceed. On April 10, 2022, the no-confidence motion was passed after a delay of 13 hours, the resignations of the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the NA and all PTI MNAs walking out of the NA before the vote, resulting in PM Khan losing the vote by three votes⁵. Shortly before the vote, BBC Urdu reported that PM Khan had allegedly decided to remove COAS Bajwa, which was denied by PM Khan. However, the SCP took sharp notice and opened its doors before midnight on a Saturday to take up the petition that claimed that PM Khan may remove the COAS to further "[his own political interests](#)". This highly unusual proceeding followed an incident a week earlier when the SCP was called upon to hold court on a Sunday (a holiday in the country and the courts are closed) to deliberate on whether the dismissal of the no-confidence motion was constitutional or not, while the ruling party's earlier petition related to dissident party members' vote legality, as highlighted above, is still being deliberated.

The Backlash

Former PM Khan called for a mass rally on April 10, 2022, after which many larger demonstrations were seen across the country in all provinces and major cities of Pakistan as well as overseas where a large Pakistani diaspora can be found such as in the UAE, UK, and Australia. In the weeks that followed, political rallies in major cities of Pakistan were announced and attended by significant numbers of the former PM's supporters.

The most recent one was held in Lahore on April 21, 2022, with attendance reported to be in the millions, despite [road blockages](#), [Internet service disruptions](#) and allegedly "[severe](#)" security threats to former PM Khan's life⁶. Key elements of the former [PM Khan's speech at this rally](#) may be useful when it comes to highlighting his political strategy and direction of politics in the country in general in the near future. With that said, Khan focused on:

- Importance of Pakistani civil society to protest the "[imported government](#)" through organized peaceful protests
- The civil movement against the current government will gain momentum and the "[actual party has just begun](#)" - the PTI is only demanding early elections
- The "[conspiracy](#)" against his government succeeded only due to the involvement of some local "traitors" who did not support his goal of an independent foreign policy for Pakistan as "[an independent foreign policy](#) means that all the decisions will be made in the interest of the people [and not for a] foreign power"
- The need for Pakistan to have a strong army because "had our army personnel not [sacrificed their lives](#) the way they did, our situation would have been similar to the one in Syria and Iraq"
- The PTI government was removed from power at a time when the country was progressing in the areas of remittances, tax collection and development at "[historic levels](#)" without any cases of corruption
- Importance of raising the issue of Islamophobia at every international forum
- The reason to continue with the trip to Russia as planned was that Moscow was ready to provide Pakistan with petroleum products at a 30 per cent cheaper rate as compared to international prices and that was in Pakistan's interest⁷. Increased trade with China was also not acceptable to "[foreign powers](#)"
- The current government is known for their corruption - he tried to punish them during his tenure "but those who had power in their hands [did not consider corruption to be bad](#)"
- Early elections are the only remedy for those "[who have made a mistake](#)"

It must be noted that media coverage of this political rally was banned for most private and government channels and that it was televised by only one mainstream media channel (ARY News). However, social media was set alight with the hashtag #Imported_Government_Rejected (Urdu: [#امپورٹڈ_حکومت_نامنظور](#)) being tweeted millions of times

⁵ Absconder in the [Nazim Jochio murder case](#), opposition MNA Jam Abdul Karim was granted protective bail by the Sindh High Court (The Sindh government comprises of one of the opposition parties, namely the PPP) that enabled him to take part in the voting on a no-confidence motion against PM Khan. This happened a day after Jochio's wife recorded a video statement saying she had decided to forgive the killers. Another detained lawmaker, MNA Ali Wazir, charged previously for sedition, was also [released from prison](#) to cast his vote and moved to the Sindh House in Islamabad before the no-confidence motion.² This was done due to official protocol not allowing an intelligence official to meet with a head of state, against the background of US President Biden having not yet called PM Khan, despite Pakistan's engagement during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan.

⁶ As per city officials, the threat to former PM Khan's life was so severe that they had suggested he address the political rally via [video conference](#). He refused.

⁷ Former PM Khan noted that even though the US asked India not to import oil from Russia but had to accept when New Delhi told Washington that it was in their nation's interest to purchase the commodity from Moscow. "It means that India's foreign policy is for their countrymen's interests, but our foreign policy is to achieve another country's goals," the PTI chairman alleged.



Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Imran Khan greets his supporters during Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) protest rally in Lahore, Pakistan on April 21, 2022. (Rana Irfan Ali - Anadolu Agency)

and trending over several weeks in Pakistan and in several countries abroad. Additionally, the hashtag #Surrender-Bajwa also trended with hundreds of thousands of tweets. The Pakistan Army faced a “smear campaign” as noted during the 79th Formation Commanders Conference, which was held at GHQ Rawalpindi on April 12, 2022, under the leadership of COAS Bajwa, with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) arresting six people allegedly involved in a well-organised campaign on social media against the Pakistan Army. According to the PTI, former PM Khan’s head of digital media’s [house was raided overnight](#), and his family’s phones and laptops were confiscated. Eight PTI workers were held for allegedly [conducting a campaign](#) against COAS General Bajwa on social media. The Pakistan Army along with COAS General Bajwa, as highlighted above, insisted that the institution had chosen to remain “neutral” and did not wish to be “dragged into politics”. The PTI was accused of [increasing political instability](#) in the country while attacking public institutions and inciting division. However, as one analyst put it, the ground reality is that the “military as a powerful institution is [unavoidable for political actors](#) and it is impossible not to engage with it” in a significant manner. Moreover, “popular support and competence to govern is good, but the [consent of the establishment is required to rule](#) [in Pakistan]”.

Historical View

US-Pakistani engagement began shortly after Pakistan gained its independence in 1947. At the time, “the [Americans needed a country on the periphery of the Soviet Union](#) to contain Communism while the Pakistan Army needed US military support to check Indian regional military hegemonism in South Asia”, which led to a formation of an alliance between the US and the Pakistan Army, to the significant disadvantage of “[democratic political institutions of Pakistan](#)”. By 1956 and continuing until today, US military personnel have served as [military advisers to the Pakistan Army](#) while Pakistani military cadets have consistently attended US military academies and war colleges. The Pakistan Army was very well supported by US military and economic support and began to dominate domestic politics. This led “not only to [weakened civilian governments](#)[...] but in 1958 to the military seizure of political control of the country itself”. Throughout the Cold War, Pakistan was positioned by the US as the “key point of an [anti-Communist bulwark](#) of regional countries”. In exchange, the US offered support on the territorial issue of Kashmir⁸ and provided military and economic assistance to Pakistan [well into the 1980s](#).

⁸ The Kashmir dispute has been one of the most protracted conflicts in modern history. The origin of the conflict dates from before the births of India and Pakistan. With both countries having divergent positions pertaining to a path towards resolution, the decades-old Kashmir conflict has been difficult to resolve. Historically, both India and Pakistan have relied on the assistance of foreign support for their respective position (and territorial claims) on Kashmir.

In what is now being remembered as an eerily similar incident in April 1977 to the one currently unfolding in Pakistan, then democratically elected Pakistani PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto accused the US of financing a [“vast, colossal, huge international conspiracy”](#) with his political opponents to force his government out. The reason for the alleged conspiracy even then as per PM Bhutto himself was also that the [US would not allow Pakistan to have an independent foreign policy](#), specifically for not supporting the US in Vietnam and for supporting Palestine against Israel. At the time, an opposition official also stated that “he [PM Bhutto] has accused us of being Western agents and receiving huge amounts of foreign money” while PM Bhutto accused the US of financing the opposition to oust him from power, calling it an [“international conspiracy”](#). The US at the time also [denied any involvement](#), desire or reason to remove the elected PM or interfere in Pakistani internal affairs. PM Bhutto was not only ousted from office in July 1977, but he was also hanged in April 1979 by the then COAS General Zia-ul-Haq who became Pakistan’s sixth President after declaring martial law in 1977. Both supporters and critics of PM Bhutto have called his hanging a [“judicial murder”](#), with President Zia choosing not to [“interfere in the matter”](#), as it is in former PM Khan’s case. Ironically, PM Bhutto had himself selected General Zia to be the COAS, [superceding six generals](#) who were next in line before him. The US staunchly backed General Zia, despite his “increasingly [rigid and fundamentalist dictatorship](#)”, as he opposed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, “which came like a [godsend to his \[General Zia’s\] regime](#)”, lending it international support and consequently credibility.

However, once the Soviet Union was defeated, the [US had more room](#) to focus on economic development and investments in overseas markets. This led the US to downgrade its focus on Pakistan, which also meant that Islamabad lost its support regarding the Kashmir conflict. Further deterioration in relations took place when the US banned the sale of military hardware and halted economic aid to Pakistan by 1990, creating a significant trust deficit between the two. Nevertheless, following the September 11 attacks, the [US once again sought Pakistan’s help](#) in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda and in its broader so-called ‘War on Terror’. Essentially, Pakistan had to choose between joining the US-led war and not joining and facing [‘America’s wrath’](#). As a spill-over effect from the war in Afghanistan, Pakistan struggled with a Taliban insurgency on its soil from the mid-2000s onwards that has cost the country [more than 75,000 civilian lives and suffered a loss of \\$123 billion](#). However, the US contended that Pakistan provides a safe haven to terrorists, leading to a [considerable deterioration in relations](#).

Pakistan’s location makes it continually relevant for the US in the latter’s attempts to stabilize Afghanistan including efforts to monitor Al Qaeda and Daesh activities as well as [“nation building”](#) by keeping an eye on guaranteeing of human rights as well as women’s rights in the country.

It remains a mainstay for US operations in Afghanistan on account of its ports and air and land routes used for transporting supplies. Its importance on this account can be gauged from the situation that arose after the NATO attack on the Salala check post on November 26, 2011, after which vital supply routes for NATO trucks crossing Pakistan’s border into Afghanistan were closed for a prolonged period and were only opened after an apology from the US. Pakistan’s relevance came to the fore once again as President Trump wrote to Prime Minister Imran Khan in December 2018 seeking Pakistan’s help to bring about a peace settlement in Afghanistan. Dependence on Pakistan was expected to lessen after the eventual exit of US troops, however, it now appears that the Biden administration is [looking to re-engage](#).

Scenario Analysis

This section will focus on conducting a scenario analysis for the near future. The scenario analysis is informed both by past precedent and current events. While careful consideration has gone into the multiple ways the current political crisis may pan out in Pakistan, it must be noted that the situation is constantly evolving.

Early Elections

The first possible scenario is the dismissal of the current government led by PM Sharif through the disqualification of the dissident MNAs that voted against former PM Khan in the no-confidence motion in the NA, which would lead to no political party having the required 172 MNAs for forming a government. However, on May 10, 2022, the ECP dismissed the PTI petition requesting the disqualification of dissident MNAs that had allegedly changed loyalties in favour of the opposition due to [“hidden motives”](#) on the grounds that the dissident MNAs had not resigned from the PTI and had not joined any other political party. As per the dissident MNAs, they had not violated party discipline by voting against PM Khan and that by seeking their disqualification, the PTI was turning into [“an authoritarian group”](#) led by a dictatorial mindset by one individual”.

As for the Presidential reference for the interpretation of Article 63-A of the Pakistani Constitution, asking the SCP about the “legal status of the vote of party members when they are clearly involved in horse-trading and change their loyalties in exchange for money” and whether dissident party members should be de-seated with no further restrictions seeking election or they would be disqualified from competing in elections for life, the SCP resumed hearings of the case on May 9, 2022.

Given that Article 63A of the Constitution of Pakistan states that a member of a political party can be deemed to have [“defected”](#) if they vote [“contrary to any direction”](#) issued by the Parliamentary Party to which he belongs”, the SCP de-

clarifying the dissident MNAs' votes illegal always remained a possibility as Article 63A did seem to have been violated, particularly after [14 dissident MNAs declared themselves](#) before the vote of no confidence. Additionally, there has been significant public pressure as demonstrated by huge rallies in support of former PM Khan and his government, during which former PM Khan and his party officials have been referring to the Pakistani military while speaking, mostly indirectly and while maintaining deference when it comes to reversing their "[mistake](#)". By May 13, 2022, their tone had become more aggressive with the former PM stating that he had warned the "[neutrals](#)" that the "fragile economic recovery [would go into a tailspin](#)" if the conspiracy against his government succeeded, while his former Human Rights Minister Ms. Shireen Mazari said that "[everyone knows 'neutrals' were not actually neutral](#)" during the regime change conspiracy". The term "[neutral](#)" is in reference to the Pakistan Army that has, as noted above, "[consistently claimed it is neutral](#)" as the country goes through political upheaval since the filing of the no-confidence motion". The former PM also warned of a "[sea of people in Islamabad](#)" that would "[sweep everyone away](#)" if early elections are not called.

Consequently, by May 17, 2022, the SCP declared the state of the votes of the dissident MNAs illegal⁹. As per PTI Senior Vice President Mr. Fawad Chaudhry, "when this matter of Article 63A is decided in the apex court, the PM will have to take a [new] vote of confidence, and [he no longer enjoys support of 172 members](#)" as 3 PTI MNAs have also "declined to support [PM] Sharif and hence he has now the support of [168-169 members](#)" as opposed to the required 172. As the dissident MNAs' votes were declared illegal, the vote of no confidence against PM Khan could essentially be declared void and the NA would then, [as per the Constitution](#), have to immediately vote to elect a new leader, and if, as stated by Mr. Chaudhry, the current PM does not have the required support, [there is no leader of the NA](#). In that case, the President (the current President is from the PTI) may [dissolve the assembly and call an early election](#).

It remains to be seen whether PM Shehbaz would choose to hold a new vote of confidence or delay it, especially if there is a chance that he may not win. While the ante has been upped significantly, whether that will translate into influence or pressure on relevant parties remains to be seen. Two factors would be important here: firstly, the economic situation in Pakistan and secondly, the US response. The Pakistani economy has not been performing well since the political crisis hit, resulting in a currency devaluation and discontinuation of further aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) until [government subsidies on petroleum products are revoked](#), leading to fears of increased inflation. The current government led by PM Sharif has

not been able to make difficult decisions such as whether to remove government subsidies on petroleum products due to their likely political cost. There was growing talk of the government quitting "instead of taking unpopular decisions that may hurt the coalition parties' chances" in general elections. In what was being termed as a change of tune, senior officials from the current government believe that they should not have to bear the burden of the economic blunders made by the PTI. PMLN Vice President Maryam Nawaz, the daughter of the Supreme Leader of the PMLN Nawaz Sharif, said "it was better to [step down than to burden](#) the people with inflation" at a public rally on May 20, 2022. Former PM Shahid Khaqan Abbasi from the PMLN, in a media appearance, also said that "if no one is ready to take ownership of the tough decisions, then it [is better to leave](#)". Most importantly perhaps was that "the top [military] brass also believes that the current [political and economic] situation is [unsustainable](#)", impacting national security negatively. It seemed that the PM Sharif-led government, though they had undertaken the no confidence motion because they believed the PTI government had not managed the economy well and that their coalition government could "[repair the damage](#)", may not have wanted to continue governance given the current state of the economy as dealing with it in a meaningful manner may prove to be politically very unpopular. On May 25, 2022, the IMF reiterated its condition of removing the government subsidies on petroleum for their program to continue. This will put additional pressure on the current government that may not want to be seen as the one that led the country to default. Unfortunately, they may not have the required depth of public support to carry out tough economic decisions at this time and may opt to instead leave power and let a caretaker government take needed economic action without any political consequences.

As for the US response, former PM Khan has alleged that the current government would "[would soon approach the US for help](#)...on the pretext that [former PM] Imran would return [to power] if the money was not provided". The US, as per former PM Khan, [would ask for military bases in return](#). On May 6, 2022, US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke to the new Pakistani FM Mr. Bilawal Bhutto Zardari and [highlighted the need for strong US-Pakistan relations](#) in order to combat terrorism and stability in Afghanistan, along with expanding the scope of the relationship to include increased trade and investment. FM Zardari was [also invited to the US](#) to meet with his US counterpart.

If the US does provide the much-needed liquidity and the Pakistani economy is stabilised, there is a chance that the pressure from the Pakistani public will subside. Relying on that, the Pakistani Army would then be more confident about waiting out the current anti-establishment

⁹ However, the SCP did not rule on whether the dissident MNAs would be disqualified for life. According to critics, this essentially defeats the purpose of the Presidential reference as the PTI had hoped a lifetime disqualification would serve as a future deterrent to "[end horse-trading](#)". However, this ruling is likely to serve as some form of deterrence to not facilitate it.



Supporters of former Pakistan's prime minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, hold flags and signs as they gather during a public rally, on April 13, 2022 in Peshawar, Pakistan. Imran Khan delivers a speech to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's supporters during a public rally in Peshawar, (Hussain Ali - Anadolu Agency)

sentiment. However, as the saying goes, there is no such thing as a free lunch and it is presumptuous that the US would provide much-needed support without extracting a price such as military bases in Pakistan as former PM Khan stated. That may lead to [even more public pressure on the current government](#), given the move's unpopularity in the country, perhaps leading to the political chaos that may put additional pressure on both the military and the SCP to support the declaration of early elections within the next three to six months. This is especially since they seem to have already chosen to underpin a mechanism via which the current NA can be dissolved by announcing the verdict for Article 63A and declaring the dissidents' votes as illegal. Much of former PM Khan's narrative would be validated and there is a high chance that he would win the general election with a two-thirds majority in the NA. However, it does not seem like the US is in any rush to help the current government economically considering the stringent IMF conditions for program continuation are still in place, despite FM Zardari meeting Secretary Blinken in the US in late May 2022.

Former PM Khan has repeatedly stated that [his promised reforms are impossible](#) without his party securing a two-thirds majority in the NA. Whether that would be suitable for both internal and external stakeholders remains to be seen, which is why the chances for this scenario are highly dependent on the manner in which the current government manages the Pakistani economy from here onwards.

Given the pessimistic [micro and macroeconomic indicators](#) not just in Pakistan but globally at the moment, this may prove to be an uphill task and the current government may choose to dissolve the NA. This is even more likely given that public sentiment may have been very negatively impacted by the state violence displayed during the PTI's long march to Islamabad on May 25-26, 2022.

Delayed Elections

The second scenario is a delayed election, possibly even beyond June 2023 when the next general election is supposed to take place. For the sake of argument, if the US provides the much-needed liquidity (without demanding military bases) and the Pakistani economy does stabilize leading to a change in Pakistani public sentiment towards both the US and the Pakistani institutions such as the military and the judiciary, much of the former PM Khan's narrative may lose steam. This will lead to a much more comfortable political environment for the current government. On behalf of the US, such an action can be likened to the Marshall Plan, formally known as the European Recovery Program, from April 1948 to December 1951 when US-sponsored programming helped to rehabilitate the post-World War II economies of 17 European countries "[in order to create stable conditions in which democratic institutions could survive](#)". There are analysts who believe that the Marshall Plan was primarily a "political rather than an economic success" i.e. "the primary stimulative effect of

the Marshall Plan would come from beneficiaries seeing that the United States was committed to helping restore them as [free and independent nations](#). Indeed, the “Marshall Plan succeeded in [keeping Communists out of government](#)” by, for example, giving French and Italian leaders popular support they likely did not have otherwise. However, given the current US government’s preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and the US President Biden administration’s [thinly veiled disregard for Pakistani interests](#), fuelled even more by criticism it garnered due to the botched US withdrawal from Afghanistan that Pakistan believes it [was unfairly scapegoated for](#), such a move from the US is not very likely. However, there are ways in which the US could support Pakistan in a meaningful way that would help the current Pakistani government achieve credibility and notability, such as the US could potentially [provide key support](#) in getting whitelisted by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) that may help improve trade and investment in Pakistan.

Another factor, however, is more likely to influence the chances of a delayed election and that is the Pakistani COAS General Bajwa’s potential extension of term when he is supposed to retire in November 2022. In August 2019, former PM Khan had issued the COAS a three-year term extension that was supposed to be in response to changing ground realities and the risk of deteriorating regional security, particularly related to India’s revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution and consequently Kashmir’s autonomy as well as Pakistan’s ongoing help in the US-Afghan Peace Process at the time. Critics saw this as an attempt by then PM Khan to ensure [smooth sailing for his government](#) for another three years”, as they believed that the Pakistan Army under COAS General Bajwa [had paved, or perhaps primed](#), the path for Khan” to become PM. At the time, the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Asif Saeed Khosa had suspended the extension due to a petition challenging questioned the validity of the need for such a move: “[I]f at all there is any regional security threat then it is the gallant armed forces as an institution that are to meet the said threat and [an individual’s role in that regard may be minimal](#)”. However, the SCP finally gave the COAS a six-month extension, the [legal basis of which is still unclear](#) and asked the government to have parliament legislate on the matter of such extensions. The PM Khan-led government secured the support of the main opposition parties and introduced three bills in the NA [to raise the retirement age from 60 to 64 years](#) for the COAS as well as other service chiefs. In January 2022, then PM Khan was asked whether he would provide another extension to COAS General Bajwa to which he responded that he [had not thought](#) about it” as of yet. According to him, November was too far ahead in time so “then [why there is worry about extension](#) in the tenure of the army chief”.

This suggests that former PM Khan may have expected COAS General Bajwa’s extension to become a contentious

issue moving forward, particularly after the clash over the transfer of DG ISI General Faiz Hameed a few months earlier as underscored above. Though the Pakistan Army has stated that COAS General Bajwa “is [neither asking for an extension nor will he accept](#) it”, this may be one of the reasons why the election may be delayed: when PM Sharif was asked whether he would grant an extension to COAS General Bajwa on May 16, 2022, he said that “he will see to it when the time comes adding that [every institution works within its constitutional ambit](#)”. While the answer is vague, it is pertinent to note that PM Sharif may consider it, while it is safe to say that former PM Khan, if he comes back to power before November 2022, is not likely to do so. As per The New York Times, “the [Pakistani] military has often found civilian [politicians willing to do its bidding](#). Every time civilian politicians bend laws to accommodate the uniformed autocrats, they undermine the trust of the people [and] damage the long-term prospects for democracy”. Political ramifications aside, for the PM Sharif led government in Pakistan this is likely one of the major factors determining election timing in the country. Once the extension has been granted in November 2022, the election may be held on time in June 2023 or even before in 2023. In that case, former PM Khan would have to maintain the momentum he has now when it comes to public support in order to come back to power with a two-thirds majority, which may prove to be difficult.

In this scenario also, maintaining public support is key: the current setup is expected to follow populist measures that are not likely to help the economy in the long term but may serve to soothe public sentiment momentarily till the next election. An example of this is [maintaining government subsidies for fuel consumption in the country](#), which led to Pakistan’s stock market falling to its lowest since December 2020 as it was an important condition for the resumption of the IMF programme. It must be reiterated that PM Khan had apparently not cancelled the trip to Russia as Moscow was ready to provide Pakistan with petroleum products at a 30 per cent cheaper rate compared to international prices and may have been able to meet both IMF commitments as well as reduced fuel costs for the average Pakistani. Such populist measures without innovative solutions from the current government may help tide it over to the next general election but may not lead to long term economic benefits for the country. This is likely going to inform the election narrative for the PTI that will highlight the current government’s supposed short-sightedness. It seems clear that the current government is adamant on not giving up power by delaying elections till at least June 2023, if not beyond. Several senior officials from the current government have also said that [elections will not take place without electoral reforms](#) and that is expected to take time. As per the current government, some electoral reforms are needed such as not allowing the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) because there is a higher chance of [more sophisticated fraud](#) through the manipulation of software

and hardware". Indeed, there are arguments against the use of EVMs: "technology adds more steps to the process and thus increases the [possibility of error](#) with each additional step, all of which are largely unseen by the voter". The current government also believes that overseas Pakistanis' voting rights should not be instrumentalized as they have "dual citizenship" and thus may not be as committed to the country's wellbeing. However, experts believe that the [overseas Pakistanis' votes are likely to benefit the PTI](#) and that may be the reason why the current government passed a bill in NA to [withdraw their voting rights](#) within their first month of governance on May 11, 2022.

Additionally, it must be acknowledged that unfortunately, Pakistan has had a [long history](#) of "election managing" or "making and breaking" governments, which is also known as "political engineering" in the country. One of the ways this "rigging" has been done in the country is via the "[delimitation of constituencies](#), one of the essential exercises before elections and often designed to suit one party or be against the interests of the other". As of May 16, 2022, the PTI has accused the ECP of having an "[illegal and unconstitutional](#)" delimitation schedule, but the SCP has delayed hearing the case due to a small technical error in the party's plea. The military and judiciary in Pakistan are considered by many experts to work "[hand in glove](#)", as is evident in the SCP's invocation of the "[doctrine of necessity](#)" in the past to rubber-stamp past military coups. It can be said that these signs point toward the Pakistani establishment preferring a delayed election. In that case, the chances of former PM Khan winning the election with a two-thirds majority in the NA are not as high as they would be if the election is announced within the next three to six months, even though he may still win if the public sentiment remains with him. However, if the current government led by PM Sharif manages the economy reasonably well and public sentiment appears to shift in their favour, and there is continued support from the Pakistani institutions, there is a chance former PM Khan may not come back to power at all.

Martial Law

There is yet another scenario that may play out in the coming months and that is an imposition of martial law in Pakistan. Pakistan is no stranger to military governments as it has spent decades under military rule. This is more likely to happen if the current Pakistani government under PM Sharif is not able to handle the Pakistani economic situation and/or assert more control over policy areas that have historically been under the influence of the military including [foreign policy and defence](#), that are more or less [intertwined in the case of Pakistan](#).

PM Sharif is not likely to want to assert more control over Pakistan's foreign policy and this assumption is based on historical precedent itself: during the last PMLN government (the party PM Sharif belongs to) when his elder

brother Nawaz Sharif was the PM, there was no FM in the Pakistani government at all. In fact, the PM at the time only had an advisor on foreign affairs and he was not trained in foreign policy specifically. Instead, the advisor had been chosen based on his close relationship with the PM. This sheds light on how little importance the past Sharif governments have given to Pakistan's foreign and defence policy, leaving it almost entirely in the military's hands. As per analysts, "the [absence of a dedicated foreign minister](#) explains the abysmal management of foreign affairs" during the last time the current set-up was in power. There is little indication that this predisposition may change this time, particularly given the circumstances under which the current government has come to power.

Thus, a delayed election that could result in a potential extension for the COAS with much of the country's foreign and defence policy under control without dissolving the NA and announcing martial law seems to be more of an amenable solution for the military. This may be preferable for the Pakistan Army as it has already faced a credibility crisis, particularly for its alleged role in the ouster of former PM Khan as noted above. This mistrust is related to the facilitation of US drone strikes and has continued until today and has become a source of controversy for the military along with the infamous National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO) that granted amnesty to politicians who were accused of corruption, and left the country between January 1986 and October 1999, the time between two states of martial law in Pakistan and was declared unconstitutional by the SCP in December 2009. The Pakistan military may thus prefer exerting "[behind-the-scenes influence](#) to maintain its firm grip on politics and national security" instead of direct governance.