

## Pakistan in 2019

### *Navigating Major Power Relations amid Economic Crisis*

#### ABSTRACT

Relatively prudent foreign policy maneuvers stole the headlines in 2019, overshadowing Pakistan's downward economic spiral and political decay. The Imran Khan government made the most of extra-regional strategic opportunities with the US and China while weathering a collapsing bilateral relationship with India. Officials struggled to arrest a mounting economic crisis. The state further accelerated the long-term corrosion of Pakistan's political institutions with threats to federalism, suppression of opposition elements, and greater space for the military at the expense of civilians.

**KEYWORDS:** Pakistan, India, conflict, economic crisis, political institutions

IN 2019, PAKISTAN'S RELATIONSHIPS of strategic consequence were shuffled, its economy struggled, and its political institutions witnessed deeper erosion. The government did its best when dealt a difficult strategic relations hand, with modest improvements in relations with the US, a modicum of discord with China, and a relationship with India that plunged into conflict. By contrast, false optimism and mismanagement may have exacerbated a spiraling economic crisis, slowing recovery even after another IMF bailout. Disruptive political developments, meanwhile, continued to erode Pakistan's political institutions and governance structures, further tilting the balance between center and periphery, state and individual, and military and civilian.

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## STRATEGIC RELATIONS WITH THE UNITED STATES, CHINA, AND INDIA

The year brought several consequential shifts in Pakistan's strategic relations with three major powers. As relations with the US began to thaw, the China relationship plateaued. Most dramatically, Pakistan's rivalry with India intensified after major military and diplomatic clashes.

*United States.* Largely owing to US reliance on Pakistan to reach a negotiated settlement in Afghanistan, Pakistan's relationship with the US improved in 2019. Relations had plummeted in recent years due to intensified US pressure on Pakistan to rein in the Afghan Taliban and a dramatic cutoff of all military aid. But as US strategy—driven by a president who has sought to extricate the US from its longest war—elevated political negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, as Islamabad had long advocated, the US began to rely more on Pakistan for facilitation.

In January 2019, after the fourth of nine rounds of Qatar-hosted negotiations with the Taliban, US officials were optimistic about a peace deal. Pakistan was credited with playing a central role behind the scenes, reportedly putting “unprecedented pressure” on the Taliban to negotiate with the US.<sup>1</sup> The Pakistani government also released Mullah Baradar—who was named the Taliban's chief negotiator in January—from custody. Though ostensibly motivated by concerns over US withdrawal and Afghan instability, Pakistan's support of the process was likely also a response to US pressure, economic crisis, and increasing isolation.

In return, the US initiated efforts to “reset” the US–Pakistan relationship, offering support for trade, investment, and a new IMF loan. Nevertheless, it was clear that Afghanistan and counterterrorism would remain at the center of the relationship. Though short on formal agreements, the visit to the White House in July by top officials served as recognition of Pakistan's contributions to the Afghan peace process. Notably, Prime Minister Imran Khan appeared to build a personal rapport with President Trump, with whom he had an extended one-on-one meeting. At Khan's invitation, Trump

1. Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Jibrán Ahmad, “Long a Spoiler, Pakistan Starts Behind-Scenes Aid to U.S.-Taliban Talks,” Reuters, February 8, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan-exclusive/exclusive-long-a-spoiler-pakistan-starts-behind-scenes-aid-to-u-s-taliban-talks-idUSKCN1PXoEV>>.

said he was open to mediating the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan, which the Indian government found disquieting.

Pakistan still faced an uphill climb in Washington. During Khan's visit, the foreign minister, Shah Mehmood Qureshi, complained that career senior officials had closed DC's doors until Islamabad found a way to maneuver around official processes.<sup>2</sup> Frustrated by Pakistan's poor image in Washington, Khan met with congressional leaders to revive the Pakistan Caucus, the government of Pakistan signed a contract with a DC lobbying firm, and the prime minister and the Pakistani ambassador managed to place op-eds in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The efforts seemed to produce dividends soon after Khan's visit: the US State Department released funds for technical servicing of Pakistan's F-16 program, and some months later, Pakistan's participation in US military training and education programs was resumed.<sup>3</sup>

The Afghan peace process halted abruptly in September, when talks were suspended, but the US–Pakistan relationship continues to modestly improve. Though partly motivated by a desire for nuclear risk reduction in South Asian crises, the upgraded relations primarily stem from growing recognition that any US drawdown in Afghanistan depends greatly on the US–Pakistan relationship. This would be bolstered if it turns out that Pakistan played a significant role in motivating successful negotiations with the Taliban as well as a ceasefire, a development anticipated in the final days of December.

*China.* While US–Pakistan relations have softened, Pakistan's relationship with China—often exaggerated with lofty rhetoric about an “all-weather” partnership—has started to drift back down to earth due to several sources of friction.

At the end of 2018, Prime Minister Khan and Commerce Minister Abdul Razak Dawood called for a halt and reassessment of China-Pakistan

2. Saeed Shah and Bill Spindle, “Pakistan Works with Trump to Prod Taliban in Afghan Peace Talks,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 19, 2019, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/pakistan-works-with-trump-to-prod-taliban-in-afghan-peace-talks-11563553895>>; “Doors Now Open for Revival of Diplomatic Relations between US, Pakistan: FM Qureshi,” *Dawn*, July 23, 2019, <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495731>>.

3. Shamil Shams, “US Approves Support for Pakistan's F-16s amid Afghanistan Outreach,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 27, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/us-approves-support-for-pakistans-f-16s-amid-afghanistan-outreach/a-49766828>>; Jonathan Landay, “US to Resume Military Training Program for Pakistan: State Department,” Reuters, December 19, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-pakistan/u-s-to-resume-military-training-program-for-pakistan-state-department-idUSKBN1YO03S>>.

Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, exposing an increasing realization that the initiative has not yielded the returns to the local economy the government had hoped for, such as more productivity, revenue, or jobs. In January 2019 Pakistani officials asked China to shift its investment focus from power and infrastructure projects to industrialization, agriculture, and education, even though the overwhelming majority of the CPEC portfolio consisted of large infrastructure and energy investments, where Chinese firms and workers can capture most of the benefits.<sup>4</sup>

The transparency conditions accompanying the May IMF loan, which Beijing encouraged, inconveniently exposed Pakistan's US\$ 6.5 billion debt to China from July 2018 through April 2019, including non-CPEC projects like the Karachi nuclear plant.<sup>5</sup> Debt sustainability concerns have likely led to a deliberately slower approach to CPEC projects in 2019, potentially backed by the army, to rebalance Pakistan's position within great-power competition. The 2018/19 fiscal year brought a 77% decline in Chinese investment, and compliance with IMF austerity policies was expected to deal CPEC projects an estimated 60% spending cut.<sup>6</sup>

If the CPEC triggers concern in Islamabad, Pakistan's relationship with violent non-state actors has provoked growing impatience in Beijing. China has kept Pakistan off the Financial Action Task Force's "black list" for terrorist financing, but it strongly criticized Pakistan's shortfalls when it (China) held the task force presidency in 2019. Though terrorist organizations based in Pakistan directly threaten Chinese interests, China has long counted on Islamabad to keep it informed of Uighur separatists within Pakistan's militant networks, particularly in tribal areas. Chinese concerns may grow as it intensifies its mass detention of ethnic Uighurs in Xinjiang. Also of direct concern to China are extremist groups in Balochistan Province targeting

4. Go Yamada, "Pakistan Asks China to Diversify Investments, PM Adviser Says," *Nikkei Asian Review*, January 4, 2019, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-asks-China-to-diversify-investments-PM-adviser-says>>; Daud Khattak, "Belt and Road Tests China's Image in Pakistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 10, 2019, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/10/belt-and-road-tests-china-image-pakistan-imran-khan-xi-jinping-diplomacy-special-relationship/>>.

5. Shahbaz Rana, "China Leads with 75% Share in Total Foreign Loans," *Express Tribune*, May 23, 2019, <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/1978533/2-pakistan-discloses-borrowing-china/>>.

6. James Pershing, "Can CPEC Meet Pakistan's Development Goals?" *Reconnecting Asia*, July 11, 2019, <<https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/can-pec-meet-pakistans-development-goals/>>; Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan Slashes Annual Funding for Belt and Road Projects," *Nikkei Asian Review*, June 17, 2019, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Pakistan-slashes-annual-funding-for-Belt-and-Road-projects>>.

Chinese assets and 30,000 nationals in Pakistan. The Balochistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for an attack in May, when heavily armed gunmen stormed a luxury hotel in Gwadar, the seaport where China has considerable economic and strategic interests. In response, China publicly called on Pakistan to guarantee security for CPEC projects and workers.

For its part, Pakistan has been disappointed with Chinese backing in its spats with India. China appeared to play a limited role in Balakot, one of the most intense crises between India and Pakistan in the past two decades, outlined below. China did convene a closed-door session of the UN Security Council at Pakistan's behest after India in August revoked Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy provisions. But Beijing also threw cold water on the prospect of any military action, later reframing Kashmir as a bilateral problem before a high-level meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>7</sup>

Misbehavior by Chinese nationals living in Pakistan, who have been accused of sex trafficking, labor law violations, and bank fraud, as well as growing concern among Pakistani religious leaders about China's treatment of ethnic Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang (including Pakistani citizens' relatives), may also generate new friction in the relationship.<sup>8</sup>

*India.* Pakistan's relations with India plummeted dramatically after military and diplomatic clashes in 2019. The year began with some optimism. Prime Minister Khan announced the Kartarpur Corridor, allowing Sikh pilgrims to visit holy shrines in Pakistan, and several overtures to resume dialogue with New Delhi presaged a slight thaw in relations, which would soon be overshadowed by conflict.

On February 14, just weeks before the Indian national elections, a suicide bomber attacked an Indian paramilitary convoy, killing over 40 troops, the worst single attack in Kashmir in decades. While the perpetrator hailed from India-controlled Kashmir, a Pakistan-based terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attacks, leading India to hold Pakistan responsible.

7. Shamil Shams, "Pakistan's Imran Khan in China to Talk Kashmir, Economic Ties," *Deutsche Welle*, October 8, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/pakistans-imran-khan-in-china-to-talk-kashmir-economic-ties/a-50733091>>; Atul Aneja, "China Changes Tack on Kashmir," *The Hindu*, October 8, 2019, <<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/china-changes-tack-on-kashmir/article29620986.ece>>.

8. Atif Khan, "Pakistan Asks China to Soften Restrictions on Muslims," *The Nation* (Karachi), September 20, 2018. This article was published but then removed from *The Nation's* website.

After some minor counterterrorist operations in the Kashmir Valley, on February 26 the Indian Air Force crossed over the Line of Control into Pakistani airspace for the first time since the 1971 India–Pakistan War, conducting airstrikes on an alleged terrorist camp in Balakot, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, within Pakistan proper.

While India claimed to have killed several hundred militants, open source analyses cast substantial doubt on this. Nevertheless, the following day Pakistan Air Force fighters retaliated with strikes just across the Line of Control, close to an Indian Army brigade headquarters, but hit only dirt. In an ensuing air battle, the Pakistan Air Force shot down an Indian MiG-21 warplane and captured its pilot, while India claimed to have shot down a more advanced Pakistan F-16 fighter aircraft, which Pakistan denied and was subsequently proved false. An Indian air defense missile also inadvertently shot down its own transport helicopter, which was carrying six troops and a civilian.

Reports suggest that India then threatened Pakistan with missile strikes, while its nuclear-armed submarine was fully operational and deployed. Third-party efforts by the US and others, along with Pakistan's quick return of the Indian pilot, helped de-escalate the crisis, though intense cross-border fighting continued for weeks. While Pakistan appeared to prevail in the air battles, India had signaled its resolve to cross significant thresholds.

On August 5, relations took another nosedive when the Indian government mobilized troops into the Kashmir Valley, arrested hundreds of political leaders, imposed a communications blackout, and revoked the special constitutional status of Kashmir by scrapping Articles 370 and 35A. While this had long been the platform of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, the abruptness and speed of the revocation caught Pakistan by surprise and drew harsh criticism from its government. In a diplomatic pressure campaign, Prime Minister Khan met with several world leaders to sound an alarm for impending genocide and the risk of nuclear conflict with India. With China's support, Pakistan pushed for a closed-door UN Security Council meeting on Kashmir, the first since 1965, but beyond this diplomatic landmark, Pakistan's efforts achieved little traction.<sup>9</sup>

9. Yashwant Raj, "Imran Khan 'Disappointed' Kashmir Campaign Not Working," *Hindustan Times*, September 25, 2019, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/imran-khan-disappointed-kashmir-campaign-not-working/story-7RvuqauxzTSxsQYUjyeGO.html>>.

Hyperbolic rhetoric and analogies to Nazi Germany risked constraining Pakistan's diplomatic options with India. Reports of Pakistani citizens seeking to storm the Line of Control *en masse* suggested that segments of society had grown frustrated by a seemingly timid, failing government strategy to counter Indian policy. Some in Pakistan's strategic circles, including serving and retired Army officers, lobbied for more aggressive, militarized countermeasures and a strategy of brinkmanship to galvanize international interventions.<sup>10</sup> Although the prime minister publicly warned against military action and "jihad," government curbs on militant organizations (imposed after severe international pressure) threatened to unravel.<sup>11</sup>

### PAKISTAN'S ECONOMY: SCLEROTIC LEADERSHIP, BITTER MEDICINE

Pakistan's economic struggles deepened in 2019, punctuated by high expectations and met by disappointment, indecisive and haphazard leadership, and some bitter pills. Confronting persistent twin deficits and a balance-of-payments crisis, the government finally ended its foot-dragging and sought an IMF bailout, which severely constrained social welfare plans and presaged higher inflation and economic slowdown.

Imran Khan's newly elected Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government rode into power with grand plans to meet high expectations in managing inflation, reducing unemployment, and enhancing social welfare, but it faced harsh fiscal constraints. The promised 10 million new jobs and five million houses were put on hold as the government struggled to manage fiscal and current account deficits with several one-off injections of loans, deposits, and payment deferrals from China and Saudi Arabia to cover past borrowing. However, absent a total overhaul of rent-seeking structures, Pakistan had few meaningful options beyond fiscal adjustments.

10. Asad Durrani, "Breaking the Siege," *Strategic Foresight for Asia*, September 30, 2019, <<https://strafasia.com/breaking-the-siege/>>.

11. Abu Arqam Naqash and Charlotte Greenfield, "Anger, Impatience Mount in Pakistani Kashmir as Khan Makes Diplomatic Push," Reuters, September 26, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-pakistan/anger-impatience-mount-in-pakistani-kashmir-as-khan-makes-diplomatic-push-idUSKBN1WB150>>; Shahid Hamid, "PM Imran Warns against Crossing LoC for Kashmir Jihad," *Express Tribune*, September 19, 2019, <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2060101/1-pm-imran-warns-crossing-loc-kashmir-jihad/>>.

An expanding deficit due to expenditure growth and revenue shortfalls imposed frustrating constraints on planned social welfare schemes.<sup>12</sup> In February, Khan announced a scheme to provide free health care to nearly 80 million poor citizens. In March, he pledged 80 billion rupees (US\$ 500 million) for Ehsaas, a program to help families and particularly women secure loans for buying or building homes. The unfortunate timing of a steep economic downturn and pursuit of an IMF loan severely restricted Ehsaas resourcing, though it was later supplemented by a US\$ 200 million contribution from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Oil exploration efforts brought a second economic disappointment. In January, Exxon Mobil, ENI, and two Pakistani companies began drilling off the coast of Karachi, as the prime minister hailed the discovery of “massive” oil and gas reserves that could solve the country’s economic woes. But by May, the companies reported that no reserves had been discovered and the well would be plugged and abandoned.

Poor leadership, incompetence, and indecision accelerated the economy’s steep decline until the IMF approved a US\$ 6 billion bailout package—Pakistan’s 13th since the 1980s—in July, almost a year after the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf government’s election. Drift and paralysis gripped the government, in part because during the 2018 election both Khan and Finance Minister Asad Umar had opposed assistance from international lending institutions.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, a reshuffle of the cabinet and economic team in April, resulting in a new finance minister, finance secretary, and head of the Pakistan Central Bank, paved a path back to the IMF.

To secure an IMF loan, the Pakistan government pursued several stabilization policies, including fiscal and monetary tightening, new taxes, and removing foreign exchange controls. Inflation continued to rise, and rupee devaluation hit hard. At the same time, anti-corruption efforts intertwined with political rivalries, and asset declaration for tax liability had a chilling effect on investor confidence. The May IMF bailout agreement demanded

12. Salman Masood, “Imran Khan Calls for Vast Anti-Poverty Plan, but Money Is Tight,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/world/asia/imran-khan-pakistan-poverty.html>>.

13. Amber Shamsi, “Pakistan Could Get By without an IMF Loan: Finance Minister Asad Umar,” *Samaa TV*, January 10, 2019, <<https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/01/pakistan-could-get-by-without-an-imf-loan-finance-minister-asad-umar/>>; Salman Masood, “Pakistan to Accept \$6 Billion Bailout From I.M.F.,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/world/asia/pakistan-imf-bailout.html>>.

further devaluation, austerity, and a broadened tax base, as well as reform of the budget-draining energy sector and state-owned enterprises.

Involving the military in the stewardship of the economy also sent mixed signals and added to the muddled leadership. In June, Khan announced the establishment of the National Development Council to chart strategies for development and growth. The council would focus on national economic security to defend against threats from within (e.g., debt and tax delinquency) and without (e.g., efforts to sabotage and subvert connectivity projects like CPEC).<sup>14</sup> Headed by the prime minister, the council included several cabinet ministers but also the chief of the army, suggesting that the military had assumed formal responsibilities for the economy.

The bitter medicine of austerity measures necessitated a narrower FY 2019/20 budget, but without major reforms. The country's focus on economic stabilization also meant that recovery and growth were likely to remain a couple years off, as some economists forecasted long-term high inflation, rising layoffs, and millions slipping below the poverty line. Economic growth was revised down from an expected 6.2% to 3.3% in 2018–19 and forecasted as 2.4% for 2019–20, the lowest since the global financial crisis.<sup>15</sup> By the summer, the country had entered a significant economic slowdown, with manufacturing declining and profits falling, as the stock market hit a four-year low and firms braced for aggressive tax collection. Rising consumer prices and deteriorating economic health also manifested in the reported decline in consumption of meat and rising vegetarianism in Pakistan.<sup>16</sup>

## CONTENTIOUS POLITICS, ERODING INSTITUTIONS

While the Imran Khan government claimed unified civil and military backing, Pakistani politics remained fractured and tumultuous in 2019. Apart

14. Pervez Tahir, "Understanding the National Development Council," *Express Tribune*, June 21, 2019, <<https://tribune.com.pk/story/199675/6-understanding-national-development-council/>>; Farhatullah Babar, "Debating the Economy," *Friday Times*, July 5, 2019, <<https://www.thefridaytimes.com/debating-the-economy/>>.

15. Hufsa Chaudhry, "Budget 2020: Govt Predicts 2.4pc Growth, Rs7 Trillion in Expenditures," *Dawn*, June 12, 2019, <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1484102>>.

16. Khurram Hussain, "Scenes from an Economic Downturn," *Dawn*, October, 20, 2019, <<https://www.dawn.com/news/1511548/scenes-from-an-economic-downturn>>; Haroon Janjua, "Growing Vegetarianism in Pakistan: A Choice or a Necessity?" *Deutsche Welle*, October 1, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/growing-vegetarianism-in-pakistan-a-choice-or-a-necessity/a-50660939>>.

from its economic tribulations, Pakistan also experienced several challenges to what remained of its democratic governance, institutions, and norms.

First, the constitution's 18th Amendment was feared to be under threat, as opposition leaders warned in February of a "conspiracy" to roll back the amendment, which devolved powers to the provinces, and to reinstate a presidential system. Passed by a consensus of the Pakistan National Assembly in 2010, the amendment devolved unprecedented authority and fiscal resources to the provinces. But it has since come under fire, including from the army chief's "Bajwa Doctrine," which charges that the amendment starved the federal center of resources and authority, resulting in policy incoherence.<sup>17</sup> A federal general services tax could constitute the first claw-back of authority to the center.

Also, democratically elected politicians have been targeted for harassment and imprisonment. The jailing of political opponents suggested that Khan's electoral promise of an anti-corruption campaign had transformed into a political witch-hunt. In a short span in summer 2019, several opposition leaders, including former President Asif Zardari, Hamza Shahbaz, former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, Rana Sanaullah, and Maryam Nawaz, had been imprisoned on charges of corruption, money laundering, and even drug trafficking.<sup>18</sup> In the long run, the vendetta-driven fratricide of rival political parties may further weaken civilians relative to the military.

Another political party, the Pashtun Tahafuz [Protection] Movement (PTM), which gained momentum in 2018 for defending the rights of tribal Pashtuns, was also targeted for state repression. PTM claims of Pashtun marginalization, harassment, and forced disappearances had put it in the crosshairs of the military, which acknowledged and sought to redress Pashtun grievances, but viewed the PTM's anti-state sentiment with deep suspicion.

The state sought to subject the PTM to media blackouts, limit its leaders' movements, and delegitimize them through allegations of links to enemy

17. Suhail Warraich, "The Bajwa Doctrine: From Chauvinism to Realism," *News International*, March 18, 2018, <<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/293885-the-bajwa-doctrine-from-chauvinism-to-realism>>.

18. Shaiq Hussain and Pamela Constable, "Pakistan, Mired in Debt and Inflation, Cracks Down on Corruption," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2019, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/pakistan-mired-in-debt-and-inflation-cracks-down-on-corruption/2019/06/18/bfoc20c4-910a-11e9-956a-88c291ab5c38\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/pakistan-mired-in-debt-and-inflation-cracks-down-on-corruption/2019/06/18/bfoc20c4-910a-11e9-956a-88c291ab5c38_story.html)>.

intelligence agencies. In late April, a senior Army official ominously warned that the PTM's "time is up." After an encounter in which government forces killed between eight and 13 PTM activists (and accused the protesters of opening fire), two PTM leaders elected to the National Assembly in July 2018 were arrested, charged with terrorism, murder, and conspiracy, and—after release on bail—banned from international travel. The heavy-handed treatment of the PTM exemplified the state's broader curtailment of space for civil society expression by activists, journalists, and critics, as well as increased aggressive surveillance and harassment. More broadly, independent media in the country have been subject to new regulations, intimidation, financial pressure campaigns, and outright censorship, which critics attributed to both the political and the military leadership of the country.<sup>19</sup>

Another departure from institutional norms was the August extension of the term of Pakistan's army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, for another three years, revealing a potential concentration of power. The extension was justified on the grounds of regional security, and potentially brought stability for the Khan regime.<sup>20</sup> Previous extensions had been given while Pakistan was fighting a violent insurgency. While extremism continues to thrive, terrorism steadily declined in 2019, reaching its lowest ebb since 2003, despite some high-profile attacks in Balochistan.

In late October, following the precedent set by Imran Khan's 2014 *dharna* (sit-in), Maulana Fazlur Rehman, leader of the hard-line religious Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam party, led the Azadi [Freedom] March and sit-in on the streets of Islamabad. The march demanded that the Khan government resign for its economic failures, and was backed by all the major parties, including the Pakistan People's Party and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz, and even (according to rumors) elements within the military who were unhappy with Bajwa's term extension.<sup>21</sup> Within three weeks, the *dharna* had ended, but speculation grew about Khan's precarious position and scenarios for his

19. Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "Extreme Fear and Self-Censorship: Media Freedom under Threat in Pakistan," *The Guardian*, November 5, 2019, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/extreme-fear-and-self-censorship-media-in-pakistan-under-attack>>.

20. Saad Sayeed, "Pakistan Army Chief Gets Three-Year Extension," Reuters, August 19, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-politics-coas/pakistan-army-chief-gets-three-year-extension-idUSKCNiV9I4S>>.

21. Tilak Devasher, "The Maulana's March," *Indian Express*, November 6, 2019, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/maulana-fazlur-rehman-pakistan-azadi-march-6105023/>>.

political ouster and replacement. As has recurred throughout Pakistan's history, civilian political leaders' pursuit of power through unsavory alliances with the establishment and fratricide against other political parties made them willing accomplices in the corrosion of Pakistan's already enfeebled democratic institutions.

Finally, two Supreme Court judgments toward the end of the year showed a new judicial assertiveness but also a judiciary–military cleavage, potentially setting up clashes like the kind that toppled Pakistan's military dictatorship in 2007. First, the Supreme Court took the surprising step of suspending the army chief's extension, challenging the privileging of an individual above the institution and accusing the Law Ministry of procedurally botching the re-appointment. Though unlikely to hold, explanations ranged from motives of personal vindictiveness, to assertion of institutional power, to the conspiratorial: that Bajwa's disgruntled rivals, some passed over for promotion within the military, orchestrated it.

In mid-December the Supreme Court added more fuel to the fire when, in an unprecedented ruling on a seven-year-old case, it convicted former President and Army Chief General Pervez Musharraf of treason and sentenced him to death for suspending the constitution in 2007. The military responded harshly, deriding the judgment. While ostensibly bolstering democratic accountability and civilian rule, the ruling put the Khan government, which depends heavily on the military's support, in an awkward position.<sup>22</sup> It also triggered speculation that Bajwa's rivals had orchestrated this as a catch-22: to either accept a reputational stain on the military, or risk clashing with a judiciary that will determine the fate of his extension in six months.

This judicial activism reminds us that Pakistan's institutions can generate friction, if not direct checks and balances, but are often appropriated as vehicles for various political agendas. While Pakistan's military is said to dominate the state as an overwhelming hegemon, the cleavages suggest some mutipolarity. Operating at times through institutions like the judiciary and exploiting divisions and rivalries within the military itself, civilian and political opposition still have some agency, influence, and maneuvering room in the contest for power.

22. Madiha Afzal, "Why Pakistan's Former Ruler Musharraf was Sentenced to Death, and What It Means," *Brookings Order from Chaos blog*, December 19, 2019, <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/19/why-pakistans-former-ruler-musharraf-was-sentenced-to-death-and-what-it-means/>>.