


FORUM ESSAY

# Critical Forum: Populism, Hybrid Democracy, and Youth Cultures

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## Introduction

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In 2022 the prime minister and leader of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Party Imran Khan was removed from office following a vote of no confidence. He lost the support of his coalition government based on poor economic performance. Khan also fell out with the military and was disqualified from running for office by the Election Commission Pakistan (ECP) for five years on corruption charges. Despite these setbacks, he retained popularity, and his arrest in May 2023 led to mass protests by his supporters. The public showdown between the state and PTI members following Khan's imprisonment has been used to shut down PTI's continued participation in politics. Meanwhile, ECP announced elections would be held on February 8, 2024. As the economic predicament worsens, it has been interesting to see how the state has utilized negative attitudes toward migrants with Afghan refugees being sent home.<sup>1</sup> The country is in the full throes of disaster capitalism, climate crisis, political turbulence, and heightened securitization.<sup>2</sup> In this forum, we invited critical responses from leading scholars on Pakistan's political and economic crisis. We asked our contributors to critically reflect on issues related to populist politics, the challenges to established

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<sup>1</sup> This triggers a strong link in public perception between economic problems and a refugee group tied in to local and global policies underscoring Pakistan's complex relationship with Afghanistan (Anchita Borthakur, "Afghan Refugees: The Impact on Pakistan," *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 3 (2017): 488–509; and Katja Mielke and Benjamin Etzold, "Afghans' Narrowing Mobility Options in Pakistan and the Right to Transnational Living: A Figurational Perspective," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48, no. 18 (2022): 4347–64).

<sup>2</sup> Niloufer A. Siddiqui, *Under the Gun: Political Parties and Violence in Pakistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire and Revolutionary Horizons* (London: Pluto, 2022); Antony Loewenstein, *Disaster Capitalism: Making a Killing Out of Catastrophe* (London and New York: Verso, 2015); Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (Delhi: Simon and Schuster, 2015).

structures of power and/or the emergence of a new alternative, and the way in which political uncertainty has affected marginalized communities. Our contributors S. Akbar Zaidi, Ayesha Siddiqa, and Aasim Sajjad Akhtar offer insightful commentaries on why the middle class has abandoned economic prosperity in favor of an authentic leader who promised an end to corruption; the political hegemony of a hybrid democracy that relies on civil-military relations; and the impact of digital technologies and the mobilization of youth. Their reflections on Imran Khan's populist leadership style point out the strengths and weaknesses of a mass politics that has not led to a dismissal of the military elite. They show how Khan's politics has introduced new directions in the political landscape that have undermined the soft power of the military among a younger population. While his time in power has contributed to a changing trajectory of civilian-military relations, it has not necessarily led to democratization. Khan's anti-military populism and "Naya [new] Pakistan" politics seem to model itself on Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "New Turkey" without the same influence over the army.<sup>3</sup>

In "Theorizing the Making and Breaking of Imran Khan," S. Akbar Zaidi argues that social science scholarship in Pakistan has been co-opted and extracted to suit the purposes of those who view the country from a geopolitical lens only. In his view, the events leading up to the removal of Imran Khan from the office of Prime Minister in 2022 have followed the protocol required by the existing model of functioning democracy in Pakistan of "democratic, constitutional and electoral norms." He argues that to move away from simplistic explanations ranging from "populism" to "myths about the middle class," there needs to be greater recognition of contributing factors such as an evolving historic hybrid regime and changing middle-class behavior from a conventional desire for economic prosperity to a risky trust in charismatic leadership. Zaidi notes that Imran Khan's challenges to the army have opened up unprecedented fissures among their shared Punjab and Khyber Pukhtunkhwa middle-class supporters, threatening the army's long-term power base through voter mobilization. This is a different view to that offered by Atika Rehman in her analysis of Khan, suggesting that "neither vision, nor courage was there during PTI's tenure."<sup>4</sup>

Ayesha Siddiqa in "New Shades of Praetorianism" revisits the context of a hybrid democracy in Pakistan. Presenting an outlook markedly different to Zaidi's, she notes a steady rise in the army's ownership of national and natural resources, and a political hybridity that is skewed in their favor. She argues that this contributes to a hegemonic hybrid system in which democratic structures and the parliamentary system are unable to sustain the weight of authoritarian influence. Her analysis of Imran Khan's populism with its promise of anti-corruption and appeal to the youth and middle classes is close to what Jan-Werner Müller has described as an ideological system that gives high importance to a "leader." An alternative could be sought in Chantal Mouffe's understanding of democratic populism as a "political strategy" to "re-establish the democratic dimensions of popular sovereignty, of equality."<sup>5</sup> This is an interesting

<sup>3</sup> Hakki Tas, "Populism and Civil-Military Relations," *Democratization* (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/13510347.2023.2255976?needAccess=true> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>4</sup> Atika Rehman, "King Khan," *Prospect Magazine* (<https://pocketmags.com/us/prospect-magazine/april-2023/articles/1281969/king-khan> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>5</sup> Chantal Mouffe draws on her work with Ernesto Laclau to explain her position on populism to David Klemperer ("Interview: Chantal Mouffe on Democracy, Populism, and Why the Left Needs to

position that is not borne out in empirical studies of global populism.<sup>6</sup> The somewhat flawed populist political strategy in Pakistan has come up against unequal civil-military hybridity and the return of a praetorian state with substantial economic power.

The concluding contribution on “Fountain of Youth: The Imperative of Intellectual Pessimism and Willful Optimism” by Aasim Sajjad Akhtar analyses PTI’s significant connection with the youth bulge and how digital social spaces have come to shape political identities. Akhtar considers the intersections in resistance-led narratives across class, ethnicity, and gender, arguing for a progressive redistributive justice that rights the wrongs of an extractive system supported by the military and bourgeois political parties. In his assessment, the work has to be done in tandem with addressing environmental injustice working toward shared planetary futures. Underscoring the importance of gender, he reviews PTI’s contradictory stance toward women, which has contributed to greater participation in elections and grassroots work while deploying a conservative stance on feminism from the top. In his estimation, long-term political change for Pakistan lies in shifting from a narrative of exceptionalism to one of revolutionary feminism building on inclusive and international futures. Akhtar’s representation of a shared future has echoes of a “planetary democracy” envisioned by Achille Mbembe, which demands justice and reparations from the entanglements of neoliberal capitalism, social media, and informational technologies that saturate the everyday.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, the contributors identify the pressure points of a hybrid democracy in which the political system remains vulnerable to military stakeholders. Their elite power base relies on an extractive system and a donor economy. Natural disasters have exacerbated Pakistan’s climate crisis, but it is also an outcome of policy mismanagement. The country is in the grip of “necropolitical power,” and youth identities are subject to “technostructures.”<sup>8</sup> Populist politics and a hybrid military-civilian infrastructure continue to divide the country.

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### Theorizing the Making and Breaking of Imran Khan

S. Akbar Zaidi Imran Khan fauj ke khilaf inqilaab chahte thay magar nakaam huwe [Imran Khan wanted a revolution against the military but failed].<sup>9</sup>

#### Introduction

It has been challenging for social scientists to theorize Pakistan’s political trajectory despite numerous scholars writing monographs attempting to do so. Many have

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Read Spinoza” [<https://tocqueville21.com/interviews/interview-chantal-mouffe-on-democracy-populism-and-why-the-left-needs-to-read-spinoza> (accessed December 14, 2023)].

<sup>6</sup> Carlos de la Torres, “Introduction,” in *Routledge Handbook to Global Populism*, ed., Carlos de la Torres (London: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38 and 93.

<sup>9</sup> Parvez Khattak in *Jang* (August 27, 2023). Khattak was the former PTI chief minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (2013–2018) and minister of defense (2018–2022) under Prime Minister Imran Khan. He was also the former secretary general of the PTI and one of Imran Khan’s closest lieutenants.

written mere chronologies instead of explanations or analyses, with a few notable exceptions.<sup>10</sup> The absence of good social science institutions, to start with, has undermined such output.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan's geopolitics and developments based on factors such as the War on Terror and extensive donor-funded "research" co-opted social scientists, making many of them mere consultants.<sup>12</sup> The quality and nature of social science scholarship in Pakistan has been uneven for decades. Those who have spent their academic years looking at the material conditions that may have indicated the form and nature of the social structural transformation of state and society have been distracted from a granular local social analysis by geopolitics.<sup>13</sup> Unlike most societies and countries, developments in politics or political economy did not follow a knowable or predictable path, with too many unaccounted-for extraneous "unknown unknowns" impacting politics and political developments.

Two examples suggest that when structural social, and class analysis was undertaken, first in the 1980s and then separately in the 1990s, two events outside Pakistan completely dominated subsequent theorization about the state and society in Pakistan. While social scientists looked at how society was being transformed in the 1970s and understood and anticipated the coup and martial law of General Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988), the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan put aside all our understanding of what was going on at a material and structural level in Pakistan, to be replaced by a very different frame of analysis. Similarly, as we started analyzing the 1990s and the decade of four elections between 1988 and 1999, coming to grips with social change and its consequences for political outcomes, 9/11 happened. It brought actors, trends and developments into Pakistan's state and society, which social scientists were unprepared for and had not accounted for.<sup>14</sup> Unlike many other countries,

<sup>10</sup> Some works worth reading include Farzana Shaikh, *Making Sense of Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Saadia Toor, *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan* (London: Pluto Press, 2011); Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Shafik H. Hashmi, ed., *The State of Social Sciences in Pakistan* (Islamabad: Council of Social Sciences, 2001); Inayatullah, Rubina Saigol, and Parvez Tahir, eds., *Social Sciences in Pakistan: A Profile* (Islamabad: Council of Social Sciences, 2005); Matthew McCartney, "In a Desperate State: The Social Sciences and the Overdeveloped State in Pakistan, 1950 to 1983," in *New Perspectives on Pakistan's Political Economy: State, Class, and Social Change*, eds., Matthew McCartney and S Akbar Zaidi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Nadeem ul Haque and David Orden, "Developing Research and a Research Culture: Results from a Pilot Project in Pakistan," *The Pakistan Development Review* 59, no. 3 (2020): 553–70.

<sup>13</sup> During the 1980s and 1990s, the two independent monthly magazines from Karachi, *Herald* and *Newsline*, published much analysis on Pakistan's changing social transformation, including election results or other outcomes. Yet, with military interventions and unexpected events, such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan or 9/11, much of the analysis lost explanatory power. In the case of election analysis and results, see among many, Peoples Democratic Alliance's *How an Election Was Stolen: The PDA White Paper on the Pakistan Elections 1990* (Islamabad: Midasia, 1991); also, Zahid Hussain's "How to Steal an Election" in *Newsline* (September 2002).

<sup>14</sup> One example is when General Pervez Musharraf conducted his coup in October 1999. The economy went into a near default situation given the country's debt, and following sanctions imposed after the 1998 nuclear tests. September 11 changed all that and brought in much windfall aid (Parvez Hasan, Fateh M. Chaudhri, and Eataz Ahmad, "Pakistan's Debt Problem: Its Changing Nature and Growing Gravity [with Comments]," *The Pakistan Development Review* 38, no. 4 [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/i40056773>] (accessed December 14, 2023)]; S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan's Economy: A Political Economy Perspective* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015), Chapter 25; Footnote 5 above).

continuously evolving trends and patterns that allow for some, even limited, prediction or even indicative direction or patterns have not been possible with so many unexpected extraneous disruptions affecting social processes and evolution. Although things have evolved considerably from when social science was considered “dismal” two decades ago, much of what constitutes social science in Pakistan is still dominated by the very general clichéd newspaper reportage of the mundane, day-to-day, even by academics writing in scholarly journals.

### *Theorizing Imran Khan*

Lately, there has been extensive speculation and commentary on the political economy of Pakistan, especially in recent months, surrounding the removal of former prime minister Imran Khan in April 2022.<sup>15</sup> From analysts to journalists and lay observers, numerous arguments and impressions have been presented ranging from the facile “lovers’ spat” to fears of the “little promise of democracy in Pakistan,” to “myths about the middle class,” or those who suggest that there is the “impossibility of democracy” in Pakistan, and the usual suspects who still frame their commentary based on an imagined “clash of institutions,” the military and civilian political parties and forces.<sup>16</sup> A false equivalence is sketched through comparisons between Imran Khan and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s populism. While Modi has grown up in an ideological political party emerging literally from its grassroots, Imran Khan has been a lone crusader, collecting a motley handful of sympathizers just a few years ago. Moreover, the nature of piety has deeper electoral roots in Pakistan, which has manifested itself more recently in India, mainly after Modi’s first election in 2014, allowing the state to carve its requirements in pietist terms. Imran Khan has been seen by some, bordering on the hagiographic, to be “saturated in the promise of rescuing and restoring sovereign agency and power.”<sup>17</sup> For the most part, attempts to theorize beyond the analysis based on personalities and egos—primarily of Imran Khan and the senior-most army officials, the “clash of egos of state male elites”—have been inadequate.<sup>18</sup>

Increasingly, there is mention of the media’s wide and often influential role in shaping opinion and narratives, and many lawyers have also brought in legal,

<sup>15</sup> There have been scores of articles printed in newspapers and on the net since Imran Khan’s removal, by journalists or as editorials in local and international papers and on numerous websites.

<sup>16</sup> Mohammed Hanif’s “The End of the Affair: How Imran Khan Went from the Pakistan Army’s Saviour to Its Nemesis,” *BBC News* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-65711385> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Asadullah Khan Wazir, “Cracks in the System: Growing Middle Class Discontent in Pakistan,” *Pakistan Observer* (<https://thefridaytimes.com/15-Jun-2023/cracks-in-the-system-growing-middle-class-discontent-in-pakistan> [accessed December 13, 2023]); Nadeem Farooq Paracha, *Imran Khan: Myth of the Pakistani Middle Class* (Lahore: Vanguard Books, 2023); Mohammad Waseem, “Clash of Institutions?” (Mahbub ul Haq Research Centre, LUMS, Lahore, July 9, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> See SherAli Tareen’s “Imran Khan’s Battle for Sovereignty” in *Critical Muslim Studies* (<https://criticalmuslimstudies.co.uk/imran-khans-battle-for-sovereignty> [accessed December 14, 2023]). Tareen is one of the very few who has tried to theorize the Imran Khan phenomenon, but, given his great admiration for Khan, he borders on the hagiographic (For example, see SherAli Tareen, “Liberal Fundamentalists and Imranophobia” (<https://www.globalvillagespace.com/liberal-fundamentalists-imranophobia/> [accessed December 14, 2023])).

<sup>18</sup> There are far too many posts and articles in newspapers and on the internet to cite, and a quick search will show that the removal of Imran Khan was supposedly based on a “personality clash” with General Bajwa, the former Chief of Army Staff.

constitutional, and juridical issues and individuals into the political economy and political equations in Pakistan.<sup>19</sup> It is insufficient and lazy to think or theorize that the military simply chose and made Imran Khan, or that Pakistan's politics and political economy function merely based on some perceived "clash of institutions" mantra. Before one begins to untangle many of these and other aspects of Pakistan's political economy, it is necessary to underscore and emphasize some stylized facts, based on material, socioeconomic factors, which often escape such analysis and result in vacuous opinions.

### Some Stylized Facts

Lest it be forgotten, this is the longest stretch of uninterrupted civilian government in Pakistan's 76 years, suggesting a significant shift in politics and governance. Importantly, these civilian governments (2008–2023) have all been *elected*.<sup>20</sup> Pakistan has had three back-to-back elections, and despite evidence of fraud and rigging, there has been civilian transfer of power in 2008, 2013, and 2018. Every expectation is that a fourth civilian elected government will be in force in some months. Despite problems and concerns, four elections are a process that carries weight. Elections are now increasingly anticipated and demanded by numerous constituencies, not least those who want to vote and especially those who expect to win and benefit by winning. Democracies evolve, not always in one direction, and not simply in a linear fashion and are not always strengthened. Moreover, as the experience of Thailand, Egypt, and Pakistan shows, elections and democratic processes give rise to multiple contradictions in an era where some scholars wonder whether India is "still a democracy" having asked "why India's democracy is dying," or whether it is now an "illiberal democracy."<sup>21</sup> Democracy has numerous manifestations and forms. Pakistan has its particular form of participation, perhaps not one to be emulated, but from openly military dictatorships to one where the military requires civilian proxies and surrogates. Notably, the change in government brought about in April 2022 was based on very well-defined and accepted *democratic, constitutional, and electoral* norms, very much part of a functioning democracy. However, while the military played a critical role, as it always has done, the platform, process, and result were very much democratic, not like the method used in 1977 or 1999.

Moreover, the fact that the military requires constitutional amendments to make its unconstitutional actions into law, such as amendments in the Official Secrets Act 1923 allowing "agencies" the power to "arrest suspects or search without warrants,"

<sup>19</sup> Qaisar Abbas and Farooq Sulehria, eds., *From Terrorism to Television Dynamics of Media, State, and Society in Pakistan* (New Delhi: Routledge 2020); Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire, and Revolutionary Horizons* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Pakistan had many civilian governments between 1947 and 1958, followed by martial law and military governments 1958–1971, then an elected government 1971–1977, followed by military rule 1977–1988, and four elected governments each for a short tenure between 1988 and 1999, another military government 1999–2008 (with an elected government from 2002 to 2008), and since then, three elections with elected governments in 2008, 2013, and 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See numerous articles that question the nature of Indian democracy. For instance, see the recent Symposium "Is India Still a Democracy," with essays by Maya Tudor, Tripurdaman Singh, Sumit Ganguly, Rahul Verma, and Vineeta Yadav, with titles like "Why India's Democracy Is Dying," "The Authoritarian Roots of India's Democracy," and others, in *The Journal of Democracy* 34, no. 3 (July 2023). Also see Martin Wolf, "Modi's India Is Moving in an Illiberal Direction," *Financial Times* (<https://www.ft.com/content/bf591089-6e9d-4cf9-ac80-8c63e3b12f42> [accessed December 14, 2023]).



gives new meaning to the term “praetorian democracy.” The 15 years of uninterrupted popular participation through elections has never been witnessed in Pakistan before, suggesting that the naked hegemony of the army may have changed compared to the past. While this is clearly not an ideal form of democracy, such small transitions could indicate possible change.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Pakistan, much responsibility for democratic backsliding rests on the shoulders of democrats as well, who tend to be obsequious and opportunistic and pander to and collude with the military, seeking ways and means to power, compromising all democratic pretensions.

The term “hybrid” has been much used in the public sphere about Imran Khan’s government, implying that the military influenced his civilian, elected government.<sup>23</sup> However, every elected government since 1985—all 10—including the one that replaced Imran Khan, has been hybrid, with different degrees of military influence, interference, and patronage in governance and public and foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> “Hybridity” is a constant, albeit evolving, nature of Pakistan’s democracy and is not new. However, one must highlight the opportunism of political parties that actively concede to pass regulation in Parliament and voluntarily offer space to the military, most recently in July 2023 in amendments to the Pakistan Army Act 1952. Every civilian, elected government in Pakistan gives the military ample space to stay in power.

This so-called hybridity model is not sufficiently theorized and is limited to arguing that even in civilian governments, the military eventually has its way. While the military may be the eventual victor, as we have seen on numerous occasions in the past and as recently as early 2022, the brand of the military has been greatly damaged and maligned by the consistent attacks by Imran Khan. Unlike attacks by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the past, Imran Khan’s defiance is unprecedented, escalating the stakes by naming and shaming two of the most important and influential individuals in the military today.<sup>25</sup> The military has produced and nurtured scores of political leaders, no less Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Nawaz Sharif, and Imran Khan, who eventually took on the military at some point. The need to cultivate

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<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, as has been seen in numerous countries, military dictatorships remerge, and coups take place even after a democratic transition has taken place, such as in Thailand. Democratic changes are not permanent where strong militaries exist or have existed in the past and can constantly challenge democratic politics, as has happened in Turkey and Indonesia.

<sup>23</sup> Among many, see Imtiaz Alam, “As Imran Khan’s Populism Goes Bust, Pakistan’s Hybrid Regime Remains Mired in Crisis” *The Wire* (<https://thewire.in/south-asia/imran-khan-pakistan-populism-hybrid-regime> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Abdul Basit, “Pakistan’s Military Ends Its Experiment with Hybrid Democracy,” *Foreign Policy* (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/25/pakistan-military-imran-khan-hybrid-democracy/> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Nadeem Malik, “Imran Khan’s Ouster Is a Failure of Hybrid Regime in Pakistan,” *The Friday Times* (<https://thefridaytimes.com/13-Apr-2022/imran-khan-s-ouster-is-a-failure-of-hybrid-regime-in-pakistan> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>24</sup> Ian Talbot is wrong when he says, “Since the end of the Musharraf era in 2008, Pakistan has been classified as a hybrid regime with elements of electoral democracy coexisting with continuing military influence,” since this relationship has existed since 1985 (Ian Talbot, “Pakistan’s Hybrid Regime: Growing Democratization, or Increased Authoritarianism?,” in *Routledge Handbook of Autocratization in South Asia*, ed. Sten Widmalm (London: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> Imran Khan called out, on numerous occasions, now retired General Qamar Bajwa, former Chief of Army Staff (COAS), Major-General Faisal Naseer, a senior officer of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), also nicknamed “Dirty Harry” by Imran Khan. He has even said that the current COAS, General Asim Munir, “ordered his arrest” in May 2023.

civilians to do the military's bidding and safeguard its interests could be seen as a weakness, for the military now requires a civilian (elected) government to impose its writ. Those that the military creates come back to undermine their creators. However, the persistent defiance by Imran Khan is unrivalled and, with his public support still significant, has damaged the image and hegemony of the military. He singled out two Chiefs of the Army Staff (including the current one, General Asim Munir) in his very strong tirade. He had not relented for 14 months despite knowing and facing the consequences, damaging the military's sanctimonious image until he was arrested in August 2023. Imran Khan has challenged the military's hegemony unlike any other political leader.

Also, it is worth emphasizing that there is great resentment of the military in most political parties, especially the three largest ones.<sup>26</sup> But the tradition of Pakistani politics is based on collaboration, compromise, and opportunism; therefore, there is benefit to be gained by the military's largesse and their "good offices." While all parties have benefited from collusion with the army, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz group (PMLN) leaders have stepped outside the mutually beneficial relationship by publicly criticizing the military leaders.<sup>27</sup> Imran Khan, yet another of the military's creations who was until recently their blue-eyed boy, has also been highly vocal in naming the head of the military.

The military, especially the army, is often seen as highly united under one command and never lets its internal dissent known to the public. Matters are kept secret and within. However, events around Imran Khan and his pronouncements resulting in the violence of military property—itsself an infrequent occurrence, especially in the heartland of the military, the Punjab—resulted in the army confessing to great disharmony within its ranks when it gave a long list of military personnel found guilty (by the military) and subsequently dismissed from service.<sup>28</sup> Imran Khan has fractured the myth of unity-and-command within the army. His moralizing pietism and nationalism have found much favor and sympathy across different social groups, from the generals to the subalterns.

Imran Khan has also fractured another dominating institution, which used to be pliant and often a junior partner to the military, that of the Superior Judiciary. Not only is the Superior Judiciary now highly politicized, it is split. It has pro- and anti-Imran factions within it, to the extent that the Supreme Court of Pakistan has also been dragged through the mud in popular television talk shows.<sup>29</sup> The history of the

<sup>26</sup> The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), and the PTI.

<sup>27</sup> The most recent manifestation of this has been the somewhat unexpected and confrontational statement by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, hoping to return to Pakistan and become prime minister for the fourth time, when he severely criticized the former Chief of Army Staff, now retired, General Qamar Javed Bajwa and the former ISI chief, General (ret'd.) Faiz Hameed, saying that both "should be brought to justice" and that he would prosecute them, as if they were "criminals of Pakistan." He repeated this statement twice in five days (*Express Tribune* [September 22, 2023]).

<sup>28</sup> This disharmony was made public when the military held three serving major generals and seven brigadiers accountable in the May 9, 2023, assault for "ransacking military installations" in the Punjab. One serving lieutenant general was dismissed, as were other serving officers (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2423641/army-axes-high-ranking-officers-over-may-9-chaos> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>29</sup> The 16-member Supreme Court of Pakistan has been split asunder, with some judges, including the previous chief justice of Pakistan, said to be partial and supporting Imran Khan, while others are either against him or impartial (Zahid Hussain, "The Division within the Top Judiciary and Pakistan's Worsening



Superior Judiciary shows that it is not in disagreement with the wishes of the government and the military, which now seem to be on the “same page.” Sections of the Superior Judiciary are reading a different script, at least for now. Moreover, it is also rare for the sitting government to completely ignore, and hence challenge, directives from the Supreme Court of Pakistan to hold provincial elections on a mandated date, as recently with elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### *Imran Khan and the Middle Classes*

For some analysts, the “middle class” seems to be a recent discovery, and the Imran Khan phenomenon is called a middle class “revolution” of varying nature. For many writers, the middle class has only just emerged. However, a reading of Pakistan’s political economy over the last many decades demonstrates that many middle classes have appeared and existed at many junctures in Pakistan’s history and have played consequential and multiple roles in determining the fate and nature of politics.<sup>30</sup> The first rise of the middle class, mainly in Central Punjab, which changed the face and socioeconomic composition of Pakistan permanently, took place in the 1960s as an outcome of the Green Revolution in agriculture with its consequences for society and industry. Further development of, and in, the middle class took place in the later 1970s and 1980s, when the Gulf States and the Middle East opened up for Pakistani labor, mainly unskilled at that time, but brought about a phenomenal structural transformation in Pakistan. A third wave of the middle class came about in the early 2000s, as globalization and global capital integrated Pakistan’s economy and its people in various forms—the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the War on Terror after 9/11, and growing mobility—through the social, economic, and cultural manifestations of globalization. The middle class has always played a role in politics in Pakistan, first supporting Z.A. Bhutto, then Nawaz Sharif and now Imran Khan.

A point linked to the one above about Imran Khan and the middle class, now repeated by many, is that Pakistan is now (finally) predominantly urban. This observation was raised many decades ago by scholars who argued that even in the 1990s, Pakistan was primarily urban.<sup>31</sup> The new-found nexus of Imran Khan–urban middle class is very old and has only recently seen this manifestation emerge. It is incomprehensible that in 2023, Pakistan is officially considered to be only 38 percent

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Predicament,” *Arab News* (<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2280031> [accessed December 14, 2023]); and, among other examples, Staff Writer, “PM Shehbaz Deplores ‘Double Standards of Justice’ with Imran Khan,” *Nation* (<https://www.nation.com.pk/12-May-2023/pm-shehbaz-deplores-double-standards-of-justice-with-imran-khan> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>30</sup> S. Akbar Zaidi, *Issues in Pakistan’s Economy: A Political Economy Perspective* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2015); Akhtar’s *The Politics of Common Sense*; McCartney and Zaidi’s *New Perspectives on Pakistan’s Political Economy*.

<sup>31</sup> The early work in this regard was done by M. A. Qadeer (“Ruralopolises: The Spatial Organisation and Residential Land Economy of High-density Rural Regions in South Asia,” *Urban Studies* 37, no. 9 [2000]). He develops it in further detail in *Pakistan: Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). Also see Reza Ali, “Underestimating Urbanisation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, nos. 44–45 (2002); Arif Hasan, *The Unplanned Revolution* (Karachi: City Press, 2002); S. Akbar Zaidi, “Rethinking Urban and Rural,” *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1354670> [accessed December 14, 2023]). For a fuller understanding and explanation of the implications of the urban phenomenon, see Chapters 26 and 27 of S. Akbar Zaidi’s *Issues in Pakistan’s Economy*.

urban. If that were the case, the entire structure of Imran Khan-urban-middle-class would not be possible. How scholars, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, still square the Pakistan-is-feudal narrative or argue that the “electoral balance is tipped heavily in favor of the ‘feudal class’,” is beyond comprehension.

The demographic transition underway in Pakistan, with those born at the cusp of or in this millennium, who would have been voters in 2018 and will be again when the next elections are held, have grown up in a very different world. This “youth” has found a new savior. The presence of a political leader like Imran Khan—different from all the leaders in 2018 or 2024—offered them something new, untested, far more charismatic than Maulana Fazlur Rahman, Nawaz Sharif, or Asif Zardari, and perhaps more presentable to this new, young, voter. While voters make their choices for numerous reasons, the moniker “handsome” was applied only to Imran Khan, not to any of the other leaders. Perhaps appearance, deportment, and apparent “polish” mattered to the new millennial voter. As technology has become more mainstream and is cheaply and easily accessible, it was possible to create a new digitalized image of a new leader than to do a makeover of Fazlur Rahman, Nawaz Sharif, or Asif Zardari.

With their smartphones on multiple platforms with limited attention spans, the new millennials fit in well with this new demographic, with more access and information about global trends and influences, better informed than their immediate older peers. Populism, with its empty moralizing slogans on the rule of law, nationalism, sovereignty, economic freedoms, a strong military, anti-corruption, anti-elite, and so on, repeated by the likes of Imran Khan, was well-received by this younger audience looking for a change. The performative displays of his leadership have reverberated with pronouncements like “I am democracy,” bragging to his voters that he “was elected after bagging the most votes in Pakistan won from five constituencies.”<sup>32</sup>

While the military in Pakistan actively manufactured the Imran Khan project, building him as an alternative to the other two major political parties run by Nawaz Sharif and Asif Zardari, Imran Khan had to get himself elected across approximately 150 constituencies. He could have been anointed as an individual head of government. Still, he needed to win across diverse political terrains against well-established and entrenched political opponents in a parliamentary system. Even despite overt backing, support, and rigging, Imran Khan was required to emerge as the head of the single largest party in Pakistan, which he did in 2018. This victory existed not simply on the military’s wishes but on the material social, and economic conditions that produced voters who cast their ballots for the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI). Even bringing “electables” from other parties into the PTI, for the elections would have required getting the electables to be elected. They could have won in any party, not because of the charisma of their new leader, but because the new middle class would have voted for them. The electables were imported into the PTI precisely because they were electable, in any party.

<sup>32</sup> Mumtaz Alvi, “‘I Bagged Most Votes, Won from Five Constituencies’: I am Democracy, Says PM Imran Khan” (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/726928-i-am-democracy-bagged-most-votes-won-from-five-constituencies-says-imran> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

Summarizing the propositions made above, we can identify a few trends. Pakistan continues to be dominated by the middle class economically and politically, as it has been for the last three decades. Imran Khan is the best representative of this class, particularly in the Punjab and in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.<sup>33</sup> Pakistan is now predominantly urban in its social, cultural, economic, and political manifestation. Uninterrupted civilian governments, all elected for 15 years, imply a semblance and form of democracy not seen in the past in Pakistan. While still hegemonic, the military must operate through proxy civilian instruments rather than through naked military government; this change has not been theorized enough. Civilian leaders can challenge and take on the military, albeit at a significant cost to themselves. Still, defiance of the military can be an increasing element of democratic practice with access to enhanced means of communication and connectivity with greater public participation than ever before.

### *The Missing Economics of the Middle Classes*

Numerous analysts writing about Imran Khan have correctly identified strands and themes in Imran Khan's public performativity, which have appealed to the Pakistani middle classes. From his charismatic personality, pietism, nationalism bordering on xenophobia, religious conservatism manifest in numerous catchy initiatives, anti-establishment stands, and misogyny, both the Pakistani male and female constituents of the middle classes have found great attraction in his messages and slogans. Yet there is little discussion on Imran Khan's economic vision, policy and initiatives.

The Imran Khan government's three-and-a-half years were particularly poor in terms of economic performance, with four finance ministers, three governors of the State Bank of Pakistan, and numerous other senior officers circulating at positions, which demonstrated a poor understanding of how to run the economy. If not for COVID-19, the consequences of his government's economic policy would have been far worse. What remains strange in this context is that despite a failing economy, the middle classes continue to support the populist Imran Khan. In contrast, the economy runs on empty, if at all. This blind eye toward a deteriorating economy is an important distinction from the previous three middle-class surges in the economy.

In the 1960s, the middle classes supported the military dictator's development model and, at least in Central Punjab and Karachi, benefited greatly from the so-called Decade of Development. A decade later, the middle classes, satisfied with the religio-economic policies of another dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, supported him with much help and material assistance from Saudi Arabia and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Again, General Pervez Musharraf's lifestyle liberals benefitted from U.S. funding for the War on Terror, with the middle classes and the elite reaping uncountable returns from "investment" in real estate and the stock market. Yet, the middle classes, which supported Imran Khan for three-and-a-half years, suffered financially and economically but mostly adhered to his empty politics. Compared to the three previous waves of the rise of the middle class, usually under extended military rule,

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<sup>33</sup> It is essential to state that the middle class does not dominate in numbers, but access and control to instruments of social and cultural capital allow this dominance.

the middle classes saw their economic prospects diminish substantially under Imran Khan. This economic prosperity was also one reason why, previously, these classes and the elite were willing and eager to compromise with authoritarian military rule, whether under martial law or some less obvious manifestation.<sup>34</sup> The support for Imran Khan by the middle classes, without economic well-being or any policy or sign of anticipated improvement, leaves a gap in our understanding.

Is this a possible, though partial, explanation of why he was removed from power? Had the economy been functioning well, would the military have worked with him despite differences of opinion on appointing key individuals in the army? Imran Khan's government, like many populists, had a lot of slogans but no programs, nothing substantive or concrete was delivered in his three-and-a-half years of leadership.

### *A Provocation, as a Conclusion*

In conclusion, a provocation is offered to explain why Imran Khan and the military fell out. While the more person-related concerns are well-known—the likes or dislikes of individuals, preferred appointments and postings and the conflict thereof—we could look at a more substantive structural and systemic argument. The “same page” Imran Khan–military relationship worked well, with Pakistan's (mainly Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's) ideal, conservative males supporting both. All elements were in sync precisely because there was a collusion of interests and plans. Imran Khan was the continuation of militaristic policies through a civilian guise, not because he was the love child of the military, but because he embodies the practices of aggressive authoritarianism in the image of civilian complicity. He exhibits similar tendencies, programs, aspirations, and virtues as does the military, but in civilian dress, making it easier to legitimize militaristic authoritarianism under a civilian facade. He was not simply doing the military's bidding on behalf of the military but independently following his own priorities. The fact that his and the military's views and practices coincided was based on a similar constituency to which both appeal. While this first worked as complicity, contradictions emerged because it was based on competing political interests, and the military has chosen to eliminate him as a political force.

In the earlier era of Nawaz Sharif, there was great synergy between the Punjab-based middle classes and the military's base, and both worked well for some years. But the discomfort over the distribution of resources, both material and political claims and vision for the country, made the military sideline Nawaz Sharif. Imran Khan has posed a more significant, more formidable challenge so far. He has not been cowed

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<sup>34</sup> At the time of writing, there is a dominant public narrative in Pakistan being endorsed by mainstream influential voices, that the main agenda of the Army-backed Caretaker government is to ensure that the economy stabilizes and improves, and if this latest hybrid regime needs more time to delay the elections, which are constitutionally mandated to take place in 90 days, the Army will ensure there is a delay. As long as the elite, and the middle classes, are economically prosperous, the military can continue to remain the “most popular institution” in Pakistan, at a time when Imran Khan remains the most popular politician in all polls.

down yet and stands his ground backed by many million voters (who could very well walk away from the next elections as a sign of protest).

Over time, Pakistan's social and structural transformation may have given rise to deep contradictions between military authoritarianism and democratic agency. The concessions being asked for by the military through Acts of Parliament show its weakness, not its strength, requiring a civilian/parliamentary facade. If the military and Imran Khan's social base are similar—the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa middle classes—we have an emergent contradiction between the two over who makes decisions regarding power and its manifestation. Imran Khan's continued resistance and protest against the military base can undermine the military's material and ideological fortunes by offering similar, but often distinct, visions of new futures. Despite having similar ideas, civilian autonomy about domestic and international arrangements will also somewhat contradict the military's worldview. The Pakistan military is a significant party to Pakistan's politics, and Imran Khan is its most prominent challenger. His dismissal by the military and their desire to eliminate him politically is based on a realization that their constituencies are similar, and he challenges their hegemony, defiantly, like no one before.

There may well be some truth in what Parvez Khattak said.

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## New Shades of Praetorianism

Ayesha Siddiq

The literature on Pakistan's democracy classifies the system as hybrid—drifting between a weak democratic rule and civil-military authoritarianism.<sup>35</sup> The Economist and Freedom House reports for 2023 have both categorized Pakistan as a hybrid democracy, basing the assessment on the condition of political rights, human rights, political pluralism, civil liberties, functioning of government, and the rule of law. Broadly, the picture emerges of a weak but struggling democracy. Their assessment is understandable given that the events since the beginning of 2023 have pushed Pakistan toward a situation where it has begun to resemble a non-democracy. The use of force, enactment of laws that compromised the power of political stakeholders and expanded influence of the army chief are developments that raise questions about the nature of hybridity—the polity has begun to resemble an evolved form of military authoritarianism where political forces are in an increasingly subordinate-superordinate relationship with the powerful Army General Headquarters (GHQ). The military is asserting itself just like in times of martial law while allowing electoral democracy to meekly survive.

History is repeating itself as the army is targeting a single political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which fell out of favor with the largest armed forces service, especially after May 9. Its supporters are jailed, and efforts are launched to dismember the party so it can't win the next elections. But it is also apparent that other parties are not being given a free hand either. Therefore, the primary argument

<sup>35</sup> Ian Talbot, "Pakistan's Hybrid Regime Growing Democratization or Increased Authoritarianism?" (<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003042211-15/pakistan-hybrid-regime-ian-talbot> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Katherine Adeney, "How to Understand Pakistan's Hybrid Regime: The Importance of a Multidimensional Continuum," *Democratization* 24, no. 1 (2017): 119–21.

of this article is that present developments should not be seen as the beginning of the metamorphosis toward a hybrid military rule but as one of the milestones during a process that started much earlier. The removal of a populist government in 2021, as much as its establishment in 2018, are parts of the process of manipulating the political system into creating more significant space for the military's control of governance. The real change is the military shifting from government control to governance that allows it longevity in power politics and influence on the state. This increase in the military's abusive influence in politics or military praetorianism in the political system cannot be fully understood by merely looking at the continuity of elections. We are observing a gradual creeping control of the state by the military's takeover of governance, a process in which the defense forces have given a noticeable pushback to civilian stakeholders. With changing circumstances, the proverbial lamb clothing is being shed fast to expose a wolf-like regime in which the military has a dominant position. In studying this political setup in which Pakistan has begun to look more like Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's Egypt, the continuation of elections and Parliament are mere distractions to hide where the real power rests. If the political class does not build its capacity to push back the military, the political system will remain more of a hybrid martial law than a hybrid democracy.

### Defining Pakistan's Hybridity

The cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan's removal from power, his incarceration, and a deliberate effort to break his party afterwards may serve as an eyeopener for many who in the past few years were distracted by the seeming stability of the electoral process to think of Pakistan as a hybrid democracy—weak yet fighting for more ground. After 2008, elections had begun to happen regularly, with governments getting voted in instead of being booted out. This was despite discomfort with election results. To many observers, the shift was noticeable and indicated a move away from years of military authoritarianism to becoming hybrid, which Guillermo O' Donnell and Fareed Zakariya described as a flawed or "defective" democracy.<sup>36</sup> Authors like Katherine Adeney extensively used the literature on hybridity to point out the political contestation and democracy struggling to get on its feet. The author pointed out a flaw in existing literature that failed to capture sufficiently the emerging political unity against the military.<sup>37</sup> She based her assessment on W. Merkel's three measures of "vertical legitimacy, horizontal accountability and effective government" to conclude that while democracy might be weak, politicians were asserting themselves.<sup>38</sup> Muhammad Waseem concurs with this hypothesis, arguing in his book *Political Conflict in Pakistan* that the political class creates a parallel pole through its negotiation with the army.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the political party system may be weak but not redundant.

While electoral democracy is an essential pointer, focusing on it tends to hide the system's metamorphosis from this imagined hybridity to, as pointed out by columnist

<sup>36</sup> Adeney, "How to Understand Pakistan's Hybrid Regime," 120.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 119–21.

<sup>38</sup> W. Merkel, "Embedded and Defective Democracies," *Democratization* 11, no. 5 (2004): 33–58.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammad Waseem, *Political Conflict in Pakistan* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2022), 149–246.



Fasih Zaka, “naked praetorianism,” which indicates the extent of the military’s manipulation of the political process and strategic control of the state.<sup>40</sup> Controlling governance allows the military to remain in charge without coming into direct power. It is a military hegemonic order in which the politically powerful army has penetrated all political stakeholders and societal groups—from traditional to populist politics and from media to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector.<sup>41</sup> In her 2023 publication, Rabia Chaudhry talked about military hegemony by reviewing its extended role in the welfare sector and engaging in activities that blur and violate civil-military boundaries.<sup>42</sup> So even if we try to employ Asim Sajjad Akhtar’s narrative of hegemony in Pakistan as a combination of neo-liberal capitalism and the emerging middle class, the military is central to the debate as representative of the middle class and entrepreneurial forces.<sup>43</sup>

### *From Hybrid Democracy to Hybrid Martial Law*

Even if we insist on not calling Pakistan a “non-democracy” because elections are held regularly and a multiparty system is in play, a glance at sociopolitical conditions makes the argument a tough sell.<sup>44</sup> The military junta, through the Chief of Army Staff (COAS), has begun to give direction to the state without declaring martial law. While speaking to private entrepreneurs in Lahore and Karachi, the COAS, General Asim Munir condemned all politicians as insincere.<sup>45</sup> Within months of assuming charge as service chief in November 2022, Munir’s displeasure with the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) began to be felt. The confrontation between the party and the army further opened doors to subversion of the political system. From watching over a delay in elections beyond the stipulated constitutional period of 90 days and overseeing selection of an interim prime minister known for connections with the establishment, to hounding the PTI and imprisoning hundreds of its followers, the army’s hand is visible in such negative management of electoral democracy and the political system.<sup>46</sup> Though the delay was explained as necessitated by the Election Commission of Pakistan’s (ECP) need to redraw constituencies based on the latest

<sup>40</sup> Fasih Zaka (@fasi\_zaka), Post, Twitter, August 2, 2023, 10:22 a.m., [https://twitter.com/fasi\\_zaka/status/1686744243849588741?s=20](https://twitter.com/fasi_zaka/status/1686744243849588741?s=20).

<sup>41</sup> Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy 2nd Edition* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 298–310.

<sup>42</sup> Rabia Chaudhry, *The Changing Dynamics of Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan: Soldiers of Development* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

<sup>43</sup> Asim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire, and Revolutionary Horizons* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 16–35.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Jay Diamond, “Is Pakistan the (Reverse) Wave of the Future?,” *Journal of Democracy* 11, no. 3 (July 2000), 91–92.

<sup>45</sup> Staff Writer, “Army Chief Believes No Political Party Is Sincere with Country, Says Businessman Motiwala,” *The Friday Times* (<https://thefridaytimes.com/05-Sep-2023/army-chief-believes-no-political-party-is-sincere-with-country-says-businessman-motiwala> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>46</sup> Adnan Aamir, “Who Is Anwaar Kakar, Pakistan’s New Caretaker Prime Minister?,” *Nikkei Asia* (<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Who-is-Anwaar-Kakar-Pakistan-s-new-caretaker-prime-minister> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

population census, the argument was debated and not stomached by the public.<sup>47</sup> The delaying tactic was accompanied by dismembering the PTI into smaller pieces to block its possible success in the coming elections. From the standpoint of military praetorianism, such action was considered a necessary treatment for a party that had fallen out of favor with the establishment. Moreover, it had to be dealt with severely as a punishment for inspiring—what sources claim is—a mini rebellion inside the armed forces against the COAS and an open provocation against the army on May 9. PTI supporters attacked military memorabilia and buildings, a violent attack that the army has not confronted except in the form of a civil war in East Pakistan in 1970–1971. In this respect, the crackdown on the PTI was more brutal than blocking political parties in the past that had fallen out of favor with the armed forces. The post-May 9 political conditions call into question the possibility of free and fair elections.

The adulteration of the electoral system is driven both by the military's urge to demolish a populist leader Imran Khan and a longer-term plan to dominate everyday governance. As I argue in the later part of the article, Imran Khan's populism contributed toward strengthening the armed forces. The PTI's creation in 2018, its failure, and its forced removal in 2022 contributed to enhancing the military's control of governance.

### *Imagining Change, 2008–2022*

The military's rapid shift toward hegemonizing the polity should be viewed as a process rather than an event or as driven by an individual moment in recent history. There is a deep distrust regarding the political class and their intent to stabilize and modernize the state. However, constant intervention and periodic playing the arbiter in politics is costly for the military's image and maintaining its legitimacy among the masses. Since the second martial law in 1969, every intervention and the period after brings more criticism. This was obvious in 2006–2007 when the lawyer's movement not only raised voices against the Musharraf government but also attacked the military's economic predation. Slogans like “*yeh jo dehshatgardi hey is key peechey wardi hey*” [behind every act of terrorism is the military] or “*yeh watan key sajiley jawano sarey raqbey tumharey liyay hein*” [oh great soldiers all the agricultural lands are for you] referring to the armed forces allotment of urban and rural land to its personnel, aimed at questioning exploitation of national resources by the armed forces. This posed a challenge for the generals, especially when the top leadership of two main parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz group (PMLN) came together. In 2006, both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif signed the Charter of Democracy (CoD) to cooperate in the future and to ensure pushback to the Army GHQ.

The Imran Khan project, as vouched by senior politician and leader of the Pashtun ethnic National Democratic Movement (NDM) Party, Afrasiab Khattak, was launched

<sup>47</sup> Asif Shahzad, “Pakistan Elections to Be Delayed by New Census” *Reuters* (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-general-elections-under-new-census-indicates-delay-2023-08-05/#:~:text=%22It%20was%20a%20consensus%20decision,will%20take%20about%20four%20months> [accessed December 14, 2022]).

in 2008.<sup>48</sup> It indicated the military junta's realization to rebuild the organization's reputation considered vital for the army's longevity in power politics. Civilian stakeholders developing understanding among themselves would emerge as a counterweight to the military. A fractured polity with parties working at cross purposes, not ideologically but at a personal level, naturally makes the defense establishment look better. The plan to bring in a third political alternative may have been inspired by political developments in Bangladesh, where, from 2006 to 2008, the military colluded with the caretaker government and tried to influence political choices and perhaps create a third option.<sup>49</sup> Indian scholar Baladas Goshal termed this political hyperactivity of the military without taking power as aiming for "power without responsibility."<sup>50</sup>

Where the Bangladeshi army failed, Pakistan gained by injecting a third option in Imran Khan's populism, whose benefits can be seen in three ways. First, it created a populist narrative of building a *Naya Pakistan* (New Pakistan) that automatically labeled the old one as redundant and harmful. Second, Khan's narrative highlighted anti-corruption that inspired the youth and urban middle class toward new ideological politics. Just like in Turkey, where, as author and journalist Ece Temelkuran suggests, democracy was pushed back through the introduction of "ruthless populism," Khan's narrative normalized fascism and authoritarianism.<sup>51</sup> Though the PTI got the urban middle class interested in electoral politics, its ideological stance aimed at eliminating all opposition and introduced a non-compromising and aggressive style. This generated greater polarization and allowed the army to act and justify its bigger political role. Third, Khan was also a favorite because he voluntarily marketed the concept of hybridity in which the military got greater ingress in governance. From heading the *Naya Pakistan* Housing Authority to the national airline, armed forces personnel penetrated almost every government department. The then prime minister Khan even allowed the army chief to hold meetings with business groups and media.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Army Chief, General (retd.) Qamar Javed Bajwa was elevated from the role of an army commander to a member of the National Development Council, a body formed at the highest level for economic planning in 2019.<sup>53</sup> Around that time, other bodies also cropped up, such as the National Coordination Committee (NCC) and National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) to fight COVID-19 and natural emergencies, the National Locust Control Center (NLCC) to fight locusts, and the National Intelligence Coordination

<sup>48</sup> Afrasiab Khattak, Personal communication to author, June 20, 2023.

<sup>49</sup> Baladas Goshal, "The Anatomy of Military Interventions in Asia: The Case of Bangladesh," *India Quarterly* 65, no. 9 (2009): 70–80.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Ece Temelkuran, *How to Lose a Country: The Seven Steps from Democracy to Dictatorship* (London: Fourth Estate, 2019): 15–48.

<sup>52</sup> Staff Writer, "Pakistan's Top Business Leaders Meet Army Chief Gen Bajwa," *Geo TV* (<https://www.geo.tv/latest/249798-pakistans-top-business-leaders-meet-army-chief-gen-bajwa>) [accessed December 14, 2023]].

<sup>53</sup> Staff Writer, "Pakistan Army Chief Made Member of Newly Developed National Development Council," *Times of India* (<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/pakistan/pakistan-army-chief-made-member-of-newly-established-national-development-council/articleshow/69843874.cms>) [accessed December 14, 2023]].

Committee, a supra intelligence body headed by the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to overlook intelligence activities by all civilian and military intel organizations.<sup>54</sup> There was no challenge to the military's ingress in private business as the Khan government took measures such as allowing tax exemption to two major military business networks in the finance bill for 2021.<sup>55</sup>

Civil-military hybridity was publicly embraced as an equal and operational partnership between the civilian government and the army that would work effectively in dealing with challenges.<sup>56</sup> Khan welcomed the complex decision-making structure in journalist Fahd Hussain's article and wholeheartedly and unquestioningly accepted this institutional relationship that made the army chief his equal rather than a subordinate. He even allowed the army chief to meet businessmen and media personnel.<sup>57</sup> However, this kind of hybridity did not start in 2018.<sup>58</sup> I would argue that hybridity under the Khan regime was an advanced version of what started in 2013, if not earlier. As argued earlier, the military's intervention in governance was planned in 2008 and implemented in different ways starting in 2013 when the top four-star generals were made members of the National Security Committee (NSC).<sup>59</sup> This was also when the National Security Division was raised as an independent body but under more significant influence of the army. This infrastructure was created in an environment where the Parliament had little capacity to oversee and regulate military matters. From 2008 to 2013, the Parliament surrendered its right to regulate weapons procurement.<sup>60</sup> These were not just ordinary moves but the military establishing its institutional superiority and autonomy. The abovementioned developments are a serious assault on democracy as senior generals acquiring an equal responsibility to manage the state can only lead to greater military control and weaker democracy.

### *Politics and Governance after Imran Khan*

The military already dominated the governance system when the GHQ was confronted with the problem of containing Imran Khan after his removal in April 2022. Despite the past confrontation between the army and the PMLN, the party did

<sup>54</sup> Ayesha Siddiq, "Imran Khan and the Generals" *The Diplomat* (<https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/08/imran-khan-and-the-generals> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Azaz Syed, "Military Names Its Officers for NACTA's Joint Intelligence Directorate," *The News International* (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/125681-Military-names-its-officers-for-Nactas-Joint-Intelligence-Directorate> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>55</sup> Shahbaz Rana, "Govt Frees AWT from Income Tax" *The Express Tribune* (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2308175/govt-frees-awt-from-income-tax> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>56</sup> Fahd Hussain, "Command and Control Governance," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1568272> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>57</sup> Zee News, "Pakistan's Top Business Leaders Meet Army Chief General Bajwa," YouTube Video, 02:18, October 3, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rV3vioQllyg> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>58</sup> Staff Writer, "Off the Record?: COAS Bajwa Met Dozens of TV Anchors, Social Media Continues to Speculate," *Naya Daur* (<https://nayadaur.tv/28-Apr-2021/off-the-record-coas-bajwa-met-dozens-of-tv-anchors-social-media-continues-to-speculate> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>59</sup> Ayesha Siddiq's "Imran Khan and the Generals" *The Diplomat* (<https://thedi diplomat.com/2021/08/imran-khan-and-the-generals> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>60</sup> Sartaj Aziz, *Between Dreams and Realities: Some Milestones in Pakistan's History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, Pakistan, 2020).

not resist power expansion of the defense forces. For example, the Finance Bill 2021 passed by a majority vote also included the PPP and the PMLN who initially criticized it.<sup>61</sup> The PMLN government also passed the notorious Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2017. Projected to curb hate speech, the law was eventually used to gag political activists and dissidents.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the party supported PTI's decision to extend General Bajwa's tenure as Army chief along with the PPP and other parties.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) granted 9,000 acres of land to the military and continues to look forward to an understanding with the Army to help it return to power in the federal government at some future stage.<sup>64</sup> Over the years, political players have contested military power to eventually surrender and accept GHQ's dominance and partnership to retain a share in power politics.

Imran Khan, being a new entrant in the game of power politics, erred like his predecessors to imagine his populism was sufficient to fend off the military or that he could decisively divide the institution from within. Indeed, his narrative of fighting against corruption and creating a *Naya Pakistan* caught on even in military circles. Numerous war veterans and military families fought on his side to the extent of being imprisoned after May 9.<sup>65</sup> But, it empowered the military state more in using the events of May 9 to justify the use of brute force against PTI supporters and all forms of dissidents. The military propaganda presented PTI's aggression against military symbols and buildings as a rebellion against the state and an act of terrorism. The Army used it as an excuse to tighten control over Khan's populism. His opponents saw the confrontation between the PTI and the Army as a way to enter into a cooperative arrangement with the generals while his followers were confronted with a further deterioration of the democratic process experienced through increased infringement by the military under the excuse of correcting the domestic balance disturbed by Khan's politics.

The military had two apparent reasons to intervene in making its role more pronounced after 2021. First, it saw its autonomy (not its power) being challenged by Khan, whose bid to select a COAS of his choice for furthering his personal power ambitions was not allowed by the junta. Constitutionally, the prime minister appoints the service chiefs, but he cannot do so without consultation and agreement of the outgoing COAS and the Army as an institution. Any move to disturb the Army's internal cohesion is not allowed. Khan's case differed from Nawaz Sharif's, who was removed in October 1999 for wanting to do the same. Second, Khan's popularity seems

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<sup>61</sup> Shahbaz Rana, "NA Clears Budget with Majority Vote," *The Express Tribune* (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2307934/na-clears-budget-with-majority-vote> [accessed December 14, 2023]); Javed Hussain, "Opposition Criticizes Budget 2021, Deems it 'Anti-People,'" *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1563059> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>62</sup> Fariha Aziz, "Project Peca I: How to Silence a Nation," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1725805> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>63</sup> Asim Hashim, "Pakistan Passes Bill Legalizing Extensions for Military Chiefs," *Aljazeera* (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/1/8/pakistan-passes-bill-legalising-extensions-for-military-chiefs> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>64</sup> Correspondent, "Sindh Allots 9,000 Acres of Land to Army," *Khaleej Times* (<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/world/sindh-allots-9000-acres-of-land-to-army> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>65</sup> Staff Writer, "Khadija Shah Sent to Jail for Another Fourteen Days," *The Nation* (<https://www.nation.com.pk/04-Jul-2023/khadija-shah-sent-to-jail-for-another-14-days> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

to have grown after his removal in April 2022, incidentally proportionate to his political opponents and the Army. Despite that, earlier in 2020, even Nawaz Sharif had publicly named and shamed top Army officers, a campaign that the PMLN later abandoned; Khan seems to have made the anti-Army narrative more popular.<sup>66</sup> The PTI leader seems to have drawn a wedge within the more prominent military fraternity, with numerous military families, and war veterans supporting him against the COAS. Although the May 9 PTI protest did not compare with the Tahrir Square demonstrations in Egypt in 2011, it confirmed Khan's potential for weaponizing politics against the Army. Though the PTI protestors were in the hundreds, unlike in Egypt in 2011, where hundreds of thousands of protestors demonstrated for President Hosni Mubarak's removal, forcing the military to concede to the demand, the act of protest that denoted willingness to violently question the military came as a shock. Subsequently, a narrative was spread not just decrying the May 9 attack but presenting it as an attack of terrorism and an attack on the state's security.<sup>67</sup>

Notably, the May 9 events were used by the GHQ to arm-twist the politically weak coalition government of the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) to concede to legal changes to help the Army with repressive measures to curb the PTI. The outgoing Parliament passed the Army act earnestly, giving the service greater power to act against its own personnel to curb internal political dissent.<sup>68</sup> The Shahbaz Sharif government, which shared the Army's resentment against the PTI, looked away as hundreds of Khan party supporters were jailed, women incarcerated, and several key party civilian members handed over to the Army for trial.<sup>69</sup>

### *The Journey toward Non-Democracy*

Removing Khan from power and the center of Pakistan's politics wasn't just an isolated event as it turned into a defining moment for the country's democracy. The Army used its partnership with the PTI's opposition and fear of Khan's politics to attain greater power for itself. The urge to undermine Khan's growing popularity, combined with the precarious conditions that the PDM government inherited in the form of a declining economy, rising oil prices, and a challenging deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) entrenched the Shahbaz Sharif government's dependence on the GHQ. To win in the 2024 elections, the PMLN and the PPP need to inspire confidence in the economy. One of the reasons the PTI leader lost confidence in the military was his inability to beef up the country's national reserves and

<sup>66</sup> Staff Writer, "Nawaz Sharif Blames Gen Bajwa & Gen Faiz for Pakistan's Current Turmoil," *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/nawaz-sharif-blames-gen-bajwa-gen-faiz-for-pakistans-current-turmoil/article66413716.ece> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>67</sup> ARY News, "Progress Regarding the rarest of Culprits Involved in 9th May Attacks," YouTube Video, 00:47, May 19, 2023 (<https://videos.arynews.tv/video/x8l27tc/> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>68</sup> Staff Writer, "President Alvi Signs Army, Official Secrets Acts into Law (<https://www.brecorder.com/news/40258747> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>69</sup> Staff Writer, "PTI Lawyer Haider Majeed Handed Over to Military for Trial," *Daily Pakistan* (<https://en.dailyakistan.com.pk/21-Aug-2023/pti-lawyer-haider-majeed-handed-over-to-military-for-trial> [accessed December 14, 2022]); Rana Bilal, "PTI Chief's Nephew Handed Over to Military for Trial, LHC told," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1770793> [accessed December 14, 2023]).



resources.<sup>70</sup> The coalition government increased the Army's partnership in economic decision-making and control of the state infrastructure to show their loyalty to the military and gain popularity with the public by using this as a premise to stabilize the financial system. Furthermore, the Shahbaz Sharif government gave the military and intelligence agencies vetting power over civil service appointments.<sup>71</sup> This will have long-term implications in strengthening the military's power by undermining the civil bureaucracy, reversing the relationship between two state bureaucracies reverting it to the status quo of the 1950s. The superordinate-subordinate relationship that the civil bureaucracy had with its military counterpart changed, especially after the 1990s with the restoration of electoral democracy.<sup>72</sup> Despite a weak democracy, there was an alignment between civil servants and political parties based on patronage provided by the latter, this was referred to as a politicization of the bureaucracy. With this law, politicization will not stop, but it will put the military in the driving seat as a patron with the power to reward or punish bureaucrats.

Similarly, giving the Army a bigger role in economic management will have long-lasting implications. The Sharif government made the Army chief a member of the newly formed Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) responsible for bringing foreign investment in the country.<sup>73</sup> Unlike the past when the Khan government gave a role to the COAS as an economic planning body, the SIFC also includes another Army officer to be deputed to the newly formed body to coordinate investment operations. The role is critical as the unique body would also privatize national assets. Islamabad is already negotiating with the United Arab Emirate (UAE) to sell Karachi Port Trust, three major airports, and much more. In another unprecedented move, the Army launched its corporate farming initiative "FonGrow" to operationalize its plans to energize the agricultural sector.<sup>74</sup> The Army hopes to take charge of hundreds of thousands of acres of state land and further enhance productivity through mechanized farming and bringing foreign investment for export-oriented growth.

What appears like an ambitious plan is fraught with long-term risks for the economy, society, and politics. The Army spearheading the economic program is a reminder of a similar mistake made by the military ruler, Field Marshal Ayub Khan. His development plan deepened the chasm between the eastern and western wings of the country, eventually resulting in a civil war and, finally breakaway of the east wing. Economists like Kaiser Bengali have already challenged the efficacy of the plan that, according to him, will have a long-term impact in depleting the productivity of the

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<sup>70</sup> Haris Gazdar, "At the Heart of Imran Khan's Loss of Power—The Economy," *The Wire* (<https://thewire.in/south-asia/at-the-heart-of-imran-khans-loss-of-power-the-economy> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>71</sup> Shah Meer Baloch, "Fear for Democracy in Pakistan as ISI Gets Power over Civil Service," *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/12/fear-for-democracy-in-pakistan-as-isi-gets-power-over-civil-service> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>72</sup> Saeed Shafqat, *Civil-Military Relations in Pakistan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997): 9.

<sup>73</sup> Staff Writer, "New 'Investment Facilitation' Council Gives Pakistan Army Formal Seat at Economic Table," *Arab News* (<https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2325301/pakistan> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>74</sup> Staff Writer, "Army Chief, PM Inaugurate Pakistan's First Corporate Farm to Modernize Agricultural Practices," *Arab News* (<https://arab.news/wqj93> [accessed December 14, 2023]).

soil and creating sociopolitical problems.<sup>75</sup> One of the possible major issues pertains to the distribution of water and other resources, which, in turn, will feed into the inter-provincial and ethnic divide. Water distribution is already a politically emotive issue.<sup>76</sup> But more importantly, the Army has a history of stealing water in South Punjab by forcibly taking water from the canals without official authorization for private use.<sup>77</sup> It is also impossible not to bring into discussion the impact on approximately 20 million landless peasants in the country. Thus far, many would get evicted from state land that they occupied if the military acquired the land for its corporate ventures as in the case of Okara farms or for the personal gain of individual officers or personnel. Landless peasants would then shift to other vacant state land, which they may be deprived of because the Army will acquire more land for corporate farming.<sup>78</sup> Driven by its arrogance and power the military's corporate imagination will also influence the long-term politics of the state as has happened in other cases of a combination between ugly power and capitalist ambitions of state-backed companies. As the American United Fruit Company expanded its footprints in Central America, it gravely damaged democratic institutions and curbed media freedom and human rights. The company turned several states into banana republics, nourished military dictators and fed into an environment building that led to the violent removal of democratic leaders like Chile's Allende and created greater poverty and large-scale political victimization.<sup>79</sup>

Pakistan's military has a history of extracting national resources through its corporate ventures in the name of the welfare of its personnel. Successive governments have made the mistake of not understanding how economic extraction deepens political predation. The new formula can potentially change the overall sociopolitical milieu drastically, clipping the wings of democracy.

## Conclusion

In July 2000, Larry Diamond frowned on Pakistan's military coup of October 1999 as the most serious reversal of democracy. A middle-sized country with nuclear capability returning to military rule came as a shock reversing an overall democratic trend. However, after 2008, many felt hopeful as the country returned to electoral democracy, which by 2022 seemed uninterrupted. The trend took attention away from the fact that Pakistan had embraced a guided democracy in which the military used elections and the Parliament to consolidate its control of the state. Completely distracted by electoral competition and lacking the ability to negotiate with the generals, political stakeholders conceded greater space to maneuver the armed forces by creating provisions in the Constitution and decision-making structure to provide further roles to military echelons.

<sup>75</sup> Imtiaz Gul, "White Elephants of Economy Thriving at Cost of Public: Kaiser Bengali Warns of Corporate Farming Risks," YouTube Video, 25:59 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQIT\\_GGtGZo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQIT_GGtGZo) [accessed December 14, 2023]).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Siddiqi, *Military Inc.*, 313–314.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 233–34.

<sup>79</sup> Peter Chapman, *Bananas: How United Fruit Company Shaped the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2022): 127–41 and 173–90.

A more significant institutional role in governance was, indeed, a plan initiated after 2006 when the two main political parties, the PMLN and the PPP, signed the Charter of Democracy to empower them against the military's exploitation. To counter this, the military launched the populist project of Imran Khan but also shifted its emphasis away from control of government to governance. The objective of the populist project was to deepen further the military's entrenchment in both state and society. Getting rid of Khan is yet another project that will require even greater military intervention that political parties will ignore at the risk to democracy.

In conclusion, I have argued that Pakistan's political elites have given the military free access to governance and economic roles, damaging democracy. In addition, the Army has been granted extractive powers over national resources, paving the way for economic, political, and ecological disasters. As a result of these favors, the Army generals have gained in power over political parties. Deploying a colonialist strategy of divide and rule, they use the electoral system to usher in their preferred candidate. Furthermore, the insertion of political hybridity and conditions after 2013 have marked the future direction of Pakistan as a controlled democracy that is unable to recover from the military's influence unless political stakeholders evolve a plan to reduce, if not eliminate, the armed forces' intervention in the day-to-day running of the state and involvement in economic decision-making. It is worrying that the new military leadership is not worried about its visibility as a praetorian entity and seems willing to apply force where required to attain its goals. This will not bode well for the political future, human rights, and civil liberties.

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### Fountain of Youth: The Imperative of Intellectual Pessimism and Willful Optimism

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

The largely undifferentiated category of "youth" has become increasingly prominent in Pakistani politics, culture, and economy in recent years. This is not by chance. Never before in the country's history has its demographic profile looked like it does today—the median age of the 250 million-strong population is 23, and approximately 160 million Pakistanis are under the age of 25. When this demographic explosion is considered alongside the ubiquitous availability of mobile internet and budget smartphones, it can be posited that the youthful majority of Pakistanis now increasingly inhabits what, in recent work, I have called a "digital lifeworld."<sup>80</sup>

No mainstream political-ideological formation has identified itself more with "youth"—and captured the imagination of significant numbers of young people—than the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). As striking is the popularity that Imran Khan boasts among youthful segments of Pakistan's population today, far exceeding any of his rivals.

Young people were at the forefront of the PTI's sensational rise during and after its October 2011 public meeting in Lahore and remained prominent during its equally sensational fall from April 2022 onward. The concerted crackdown on the party after

<sup>80</sup> Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, *The Struggle for Hegemony in Pakistan: Fear, Desire, and Revolutionary Horizons* (London: Pluto, 2022). The present article draws in significant measure from this work.

the events of May 9, 2022, has also clarified, however, the apparent limitations of youthful social media-savvy PTI supporters; while the latter are still able to (quite literally) make waves in online spaces, their ability to mobilize on-the-ground has been dealt a potentially fatal blow by the forces of state repression.

Indeed, the systematic dismantling of the PTI by the military establishment illuminates a great deal about the nature and extent of its support base, especially those who fall into the “youth” bracket. Recent events have underscored the diaspora’s role in sustaining the PTI, the party’s popularity (or lack thereof) in the ethnic peripheries, class composition, and ideological positions in Pakistan’s political economy.

In this brief exposition, I explore some of these issues against the backdrop of Pakistan’s unique demographic moment and the emergence of the digital lifeworld. I submit that social-scientific methodologies concerned with making sense of contemporary political life in Pakistan and the postcolonial world at large must become more attentive to the centrality of the digital. Drawing from—and beyond—the experience of the PTI and Imran Khan, I consider the potentialities for Pakistan’s youthful majority to coalesce around a left-progressive political project that can meaningfully challenge the militarized, classed, racialized, and gendered structure of power.

This essay is organized as follows: I briefly interrogate the category of “youth” and its contribution to the PTI’s ascendance to governmental power. In particular, I consider cleavages within “youth” along class, ethnic-national, and gender lines. I then move on to an analysis of development since the party was ousted from governmental power in April 2022. I conclude by reflecting on how an alternative left-progressive hegemony can be constructed in light of the PTI experience.

### **Deconstructing the “Youth”**

One of the main rhetorical devices deployed by the PTI during its rise to power (2011–2018) was to emphasize the alienation from mainstream political parties of ordinary Pakistanis in general and “youth” in particular. These parties were derided for being family fiefdoms, internally undemocratic, and endemically “corrupt.” Such rhetoric has a long genealogy in Pakistani politics, with military dictators Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and Pervez Musharraf justifying their overthrow of civilian governments under similar pretexts.<sup>81</sup>

Nevertheless, how the PTI reconstructed an otherwise hackneyed narrative to secure the allegiances of a younger generation of Pakistani—particularly through social media and other digital platforms—demands attention in its own right. Crucial in this regard was the cult of personality developed around Imran Khan’s person; unlike other political leaders hailing from dynastic families like the Bhuttos and Sharifs, Khan was depicted as a self-made and incorruptible man who had transcended parochial interests to win Pakistan a cricket world cup and build an unmatched cancer hospital.

The popularization of this narrative generated huge credibility for Imran Khan, but it is telling that it took more than a decade after he entered politics for his breakthrough moment. All critical analyses of his “launching” in the early 2010s, after

<sup>81</sup> Mazhar Aziz, *Military Control in Pakistan: The Parallel State* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

almost 15 lean years for the PTI, emphasize the military establishment's role in lending Khan a substantial helping hand. I concur. But it is essential to consider other interrelated aspects too.

First, the end of the 2000s and early 2010s marked the breakthrough moment for digital networks as smartphones and cellular internet became accessible to a significant cross-section of Pakistani society. Second, the Musharraf dictatorship (1999–2008) represented the heyday of Pakistani neoliberalism, christening around what I have termed a hegemonic “middle-class aspiration.” Finally, the military establishment had also entered the digital age, its Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) wing putting money and professional brainpower into movies, songs, memes, and more to propagate traditional ideological tropes through new technologies. In this emergent digital lifeworld, a familiar Pakistani hero in the shape of Imran Khan was made the vehicle to take on the usual suspects—“corrupt” politicians—whilst familiarly upholding “national security” and ushering in “development.”

Yet, like all khaki-backed governing regimes before it, the new era of digitalized hegemony was, despite its pretensions, unable to acquire anything like universal consent. That the PTI and Imran Khan were relatively successful in controlling digital spaces confirmed that these spaces at best abstracted from, and at worst mirrored entrenched, classed, racialized, and gendered social networks.

### Class

There is, to my knowledge, no scholarly or even journalistic study that explicitly analyzes the class base of any major political party in contemporary Pakistan. Studies on electoral outcomes, including the 2018 general election, which brought the PTI to power, primarily focus on the role of manipulation by the military establishment and the role of “big men” or what are widely called “electables” in Pakistan.<sup>82</sup>

In government, all three major political parties—the PTI, Pakistan People's Party (PPP), and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)—have more or less been pro-business in their orientation whilst also acceding to IMF conditionalities in varying degrees. The PPP has, through the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), dedicated a modicum of public resources to social security and cash transfers, a policy that was retained by the PTI (2018–2022) under the guise of the Ehsaas program.<sup>83</sup> However, the overall policy tilt of both parties is uninhibitedly pro-capital and anti-worker; all mainstream political players, including the military establishment, privilege financialized forms of accumulation (like real estate) alongside natural resources capture/grabs.<sup>84</sup>

To return specifically to the PTI's class base, the anecdotal evidence suggests that the party's most vocal and politically prominent segments hail from relatively affluent class backgrounds. This is apparent from social media platforms like Twitter, now X, as well as from the nature of its public mobilizations from 2011 onwards,

<sup>82</sup> Hasan Javid and Mariam Mufti, “Electoral Manipulation or Astute Electoral Strategy? Explaining the Results of Pakistan's 2018 Election,” *Asian Affairs* 49, no. 2 (2022): 65–87.

<sup>83</sup> It also won some plaudits for introducing the Sehat Card in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which provides lower-class segments free or highly subsidized health care, but the jury is out on its overall effectiveness, and its “successes” tend to camouflage that it is, at best, a publicly funded private insurance scheme.

<sup>84</sup> Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, “Aid or Albatross?,” *Discourse* 1, no. 2 (2022): 23–24

during which the party was able to draw in surprisingly large crowds in political gatherings across the country, including unprecedented numbers from the historically apolitical middle and upper-middle classes.<sup>85</sup>

At the same time, however, I think it is important not to understate how the PTI's overall pitch to the "youth" drew in support from lower class brackets.<sup>86</sup> More specifically, in the absence of other mainstream parties able and willing to speak the language of class politics, the PTI's "them versus us" discursive politics attracted less affluent segments aspiring to upward mobility but often unable to climb the social ladder.

Put differently, the PTI concerned itself with the plight of "the poor" to the extent that it could benefit from established patronage-based modalities of politics—in effect denying the autonomous political agency of subordinate classes. One example to which I was privy was street vendors in Islamabad, whom, under the guise of the *Ehsaas Rehri Baan* initiative, were issued formal licenses to operate in a handful of the city's markets (sector G-11 being the most prominent). However, the party stopped short of backing an institutionalized process of union-building.<sup>87</sup> When these licenses were revoked by the new government after April 2022, the PTI was neither committed to organized street action nor could it do much more than make noise on social media platforms.<sup>88</sup>

### *Ethnic-National Identity*

Ethnic-national identity has arguably been the most significant fault line in Pakistani politics; the Pakistani state retains the dubious distinction of being the only modern nation-state in which a majority of the population has seceded to form a separate country. It is noteworthy that the PTI has appeared to generate at least as much support in unevenly developed ethnic-national social formations as any other mainstream party in recent decades. It won successive general elections in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) in 2013 and 2018 and in the latter election, secured a plurality of seats in Punjab and urban Sindh. For context, urban Sindh was dominated by the Urdu-speaking Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) for most of the three decades before the 2018 election, KP, previously a battleground between Pashtun nationalists and the religious right, and Punjab controlled by various factions of the Pakistan Muslim League.<sup>89</sup> For the PTI to make inroads into all of these bastions demands consideration.

<sup>85</sup> Umair Javed, "Continuity and Change in Naya Pakistan," *Catalyst* 2, no. 4 (2019): 83.

<sup>86</sup> With respect to social media platforms, the PTI has nevertheless also established itself as the far-and-away leader on Tik Tok, which caters to a much more humble class audience than platforms such as Twitter (Abdul Moiz Malk, "Tik Tok: The New Frontier for Political Info-Wars," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1755000>) [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>87</sup> Indeed, a systematic commitment to class-based politics would have seen the PTI focus on trade unionization in a plethora of sectors, the revival of student unions, as well as efforts to create peasant-farmer collectives in rural regions.

<sup>88</sup> Staff Writer, "Imran Slams Govt. for Demolishing Vendor Carts Provided under Ehsaas Initiative," *Dunya News* (<https://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/696184-Imran-slams-govt-for-demolishing-Ehsaas-vendor-carts-in-Islamabad>) [accessed December 15, 2023].

<sup>89</sup> The MQM renamed itself Muttahida Qaumi Movement in 1997.



It is worth being reminded that many electoral outcomes reflected the PTI's military-backed strategy to win over "electables." Furthermore, the PTI remained vastly distant, and at times, outrightly opposed to many youth-led ethnic-national political struggles outside of the mainstream, including the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) as well as Baloch, Sindhi, and other activists campaigning against enforced disappearances. More generally, the PTI reinforced standardized ideological narratives about Islam, Pakistan, and Urdu as the national language, including the highly regressive Single National Curriculum.<sup>90</sup> Additionally, the PTI online support base deployed textbook right-wing fear-mongering tactics. It was effectively hand-in-glove with the military establishment in talking up foreign conspiracies, demonizing opponents for being anti-state, and stoking fears about a "fifth generation war." All of these represent continuity with statist hegemonic apparatuses of the past.

An overall report card reads as follows: The PTI made most inroads among young people in the core region of central and northern Punjab, alongside more developed parts of KP (most notably the Peshawar Valley and Swat) and urban Sindh.<sup>91</sup> It was moderately successful in mobilizing support in Siraiki-speaking south Punjab. Generally, it had the least support in Baloch and Sindhi heartlands whilst positioning itself, particularly in government, against democratic federalism in general.<sup>92</sup>

### Gender

In its genesis and during the years before and after gaining governmental power, the PTI was generally perceived to have created space for young women to enter the public and political sphere. Its public rallies featured song and dance, with noteworthy participation of young women and girls. Young women also emerged as some of the best known PTI activists on social media and digital platforms, which in turn was key to encouraging other women to become members or sympathizers of the party. At higher levels of the party, a significant number of relatively young women acquired prominent positions, took on elected seats in the National Assembly and Senate, and became spokespersons for the party.<sup>93</sup>

That many of these women hailed from relatively affluent backgrounds—and, in some cases, highly elite families—should not detract from the visibility accorded by the party to female leadership. In an extremely male-dominated public sphere, where patriarchal norms and violence are rife, the PTI allowed young women to challenge the status quo. Unfortunately, however, many of the PTI's women leaders towed extremely retrogressive party lines on numerous issues. The party took virtually no meaningful policy initiative to address patriarchal structures in the almost four years

<sup>90</sup> Faisal Bari, "Pakistan's Education Reform Test," *Current History* 120, no. 825 (2021): 133–39.

<sup>91</sup> It also won elections in the disputed territories of Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu Kashmir (AJK), but this represented little more than an established trend.

<sup>92</sup> In fact, for as long as the PTI remained close to the military establishment, Imran Khan and the party leadership appeared to be willing to roll back the 18th amendment and introduce a presidential form of government (Saqib Virk, "Opposition Warns Govt. against Bringing in Presidential System," *The Express Tribune* (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2254711/opposition-warns-govt-against-bringing-in-presidential-system>) [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>93</sup> Some examples include Maleeha Bokhari, Tayyaba Raja, Khadija Shah, Kanwal Shauzab, Shandana Gulzar, and Ayla Malik.

that it remained in government. There are enough examples of harassment of women by men at the highest echelons of the party—Imran Khan included—to suggest that misogyny remained rife within the PTI.<sup>94</sup> As significant was Khan's public rants about women's skimpy dressing as the primary cause of sexual assaults; by repeatedly blaming the victim and refusing to back down on his misogynistic positions, Khan set an example to be replicated by party leaders and activists.<sup>95</sup>

### *The Fall from Grace*

In this section, I reflect on what the PTI's dramatic decline has illustrated about its political genus and broader matters relating to the future of politics in military-dominated Pakistan against the backdrop of the digital lifeworld. I want to start by noting a very important self-perception of the prototypical PTI worker, especially in the wake of the significant state repression to which s/he has been subjected since May 2023. Simply, the young PTI supporter believes her/himself to have taken on a vanguard role in resisting military domination in contemporary Pakistan.<sup>96</sup> This is not to be dismissed as delusion, notwithstanding the PTI's otherwise insular worldview. Notably, many PTI workers/supporters have been jailed and suffered other forms of sanction by the state's coercive apparatus, including many of its prominent young women leaders.

The PTI retains the ability, even in the face of significant persecution, to mobilize public opinion in digital spaces in large part due to its considerable support base in the diaspora. Here too, it is youth that plays a major role; the example of Shayan Ali, a 17-year-old London-born Pakistani, is instructive. Ali has garnered a massive online following, and, alongside others, is able to make interventions in faraway geographies with significant effects in Pakistan itself.<sup>97</sup>

The persistence of "digitalized resistance" by PTI followers after the military's crackdown on the party certainly does not reflect any deepening of party positions on class, gender, ethnic-national identity, and other deep fault lines in Pakistan's polity, economy, and society. But it is still notable that large numbers of young people in Pakistan and abroad, many of whom have historically imbibed pro-establishment political positions, have had a political awakening of sorts with regard to the role of the military. To stretch this point further, PTI workers/supporters from working-class backgrounds who have been incarcerated or faced other forms of persecution—many of whose social media profiles do not garner attention—have been forced to fend for themselves with no support from the party leadership or the organization at

<sup>94</sup> Sune Engel Rasmussen and Nosheen Abbas, "Pakistan MP Who Says Imran Khan Harassed Her Faces Wave of Abuse," *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/25/pakistani-mp-says-imran-khan-harassed-her-abuse-ayesha-gulalai-wazir> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>95</sup> Soofia Tariq, "Outrage after Pakistan PM Imran Khan Blames Rape Crisis on Women," *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/25/outrage-after-pakistan-pm-imran-khan-blames-crisis-on-women> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>96</sup> Indeed, the anti-establishment claim extends to the global political economy; the PTI insists that Imran Khan was deposed in a US-backed regime change operation because he wanted to move Pakistan closer to anti-Western powers: Russia and China.

<sup>97</sup> Ayaz Akbar Yousazai, "UK-based PTI Social Media Activist Shayan Ali Booked under Anti-Terror Law," *The News* (<https://www.thenews.com.pk/latest/1101420-uk-based-pti-social-media-activist-shayan-ali-booked-under-anti-terror-law> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

large. This speaks to the party's limitations and the space that could exist for a genuine political alternative foregrounding party cadres from working-class backgrounds. It is worth bearing in mind that many of the young party workers who, so to speak, have been left high and dry, hail from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I am privy to many such workers' families seeking legal aid from left-progressives with whom they were at loggerheads when the PTI was in government.

To pay attention to the experiences of "youth" after the PTI was ousted from government—particularly those from lower class backgrounds and hailing from ethnic peripheries—is, I wish to reiterate, important for a number of interrelated reasons. First, they confirm that online spaces will remain a major site of hegemonic contestation and do not necessarily translate into on-the-ground political presence/mobilization. Second, they underline that the original military-backed hegemonic project in the form of the Imran Khan-led PTI has created swathes of young people who are at least superficially challenging military domination. Third, they represent a (most likely fleeting) opportunity for burgeoning dissent to be channeled toward a hegemonic alternative that names and challenges the hydra-headed monster that currently rules Pakistan.<sup>98</sup>

### *The Aftermath*

Pakistan is gripped by a plethora of inter-related crises, which, even while coercion is visited upon PTI and other political workers by the post-PTI regime, cannot simply be swept under the carpet.<sup>99</sup> The PTI's dismantling has heralded a wider clampdown on political forces across most of the ideological spectrum, save the far right. But history teaches that viable and persistent hegemonies are reliant less on coercion and more on the generation of consent. To date, the post-PTI regime has done little more than reassert hegemonic middle-class aspiration inasmuch as it has adopted the same policy regime as its predecessors. The emphasis remains on resource grabs, financialized accumulation, and extraction of geostrategic rents from external patrons as diverse as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Gulf kingdoms, and China.

Arguably, the most notable initiative taken since May 2023 is the announcement of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), which will reportedly operate under the direct supervision of the Chief of Army Staff (COAS).<sup>100</sup> The SIFC represents a clean chit for foreign investors to exploit mineral resources and grab agricultural lands for so-called corporate farming. The official website explicitly advertises an "investment-friendly regime, featuring a high ease of doing business, tax reduction, tax holidays, and special economic zones" whilst also "boasting a consumer market with a vibrant middle class."<sup>101</sup> Such heady claims are not new. When it was introduced to similar fanfare in 2015, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

<sup>98</sup> Aasim Sajjad Akhtar, "Who Runs Pakistan," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1773422> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>99</sup> It is important to note that left-progressives too have been persecuted in the post-May 9 conjuncture, most notably PTM (Umer Burney, "Islamabad Court Sends Ali Wazir on Judicial Remand in Rioting Case," *Dawn* (<https://www.dawn.com/news/1771564> [accessed December 15, 2023])).

<sup>100</sup> Rizwan Shehzad, "Army to Oversee Economic Revival," *The Express Tribune* (<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2422716/army-to-oversee-economic-revival> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

<sup>101</sup> Special Investment Facilitation Council, "SIFC at a Glance," *Government of Pakistan* (<https://www.sifc.gov.pk/> [accessed December 15, 2023]).

was widely hailed as a “game-changer” with limitless potential to meet the employment and other needs of Pakistan’s youthful population. Indeed, all militarized hegemonies throughout Pakistan’s history have featured similarly grand claims, including Field Marshal Ayub Khan’s “Decade of Development” and General Pervez Musharraf’s “Silent Revolution.” But never before in Pakistan’s history has the militarized ruling class had to generate consent from such a young population, of which a large segment was previously the proverbial foot soldier of a khaki-backed political project that has now boomeranged on the military.

The glitzy advertising around the SIFC neglects to mention that enormous structural problems beset the Pakistani economy. These include ballooning external debt, including a debt repayment burden of almost \$70 billion between 2023 and 2026, as well as an unemployment rate in the double digits, with rates for age groups under 30 particularly high. Persistent financial insolvency is explained by the very same “tax holidays” for the rich and powerful that the SIFC promises; in this regard the two most powerful players are foreign capital and Pakistan’s own inimitable “Military Inc.”<sup>102</sup>

### *The Left Imperative*

Yet the fundamental question remains how to foment a political subject that can meaningfully challenge the increasingly contradicted militarized hegemonic order based on what Antonio Gramsci would call a substantive national-popular will. Indeed, aside from the Pakistani state’s stuttering failure to forge a meaningful “national” identity, Pakistani progressives have their own tortured tryst with the country’s highly vexed national question.<sup>103</sup>

With time, and particularly in the post-Cold War world, ethnic-nationalist movements in Pakistan, with exception, have become more distant from admittedly weak leftist and working-class movements. The PTI experience does hint at the potentialities of a younger generation of working people closing ranks across ethnic-national lines. Still, of course in the PTI’s case, this happened based on established unitary statist narratives. Equally important is a recognition that where the PTI’s reliance on “digitalized resistance” has proven insufficient, young leftists and ethnic-nationalists operating in digital spaces must not be over-reliant on such spaces; indeed, progressives must overcome the “competition of oppressions” that many engage in unreflexively in the digital lifeworld. Even further, a robust theorization of politics under conditions of digitalization is both a necessary and sufficient condition for an alternative hegemony in the face of growing surveillance on the one hand and individual alienation on the other.

In my estimation, ethnic-nationalists and the left are both charged with creating new avenues of theory and practice in which the national question, class question, and, crucially, the ecological question speak to one another.<sup>104</sup> While the historical

<sup>102</sup> Ayesha Siddiq, *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan’s Military Economy* (London: Pluto, 2007).

<sup>103</sup> Kamran Asdar Ali, “Communists in a Muslim Land: Cultural Debates in Pakistan’s Early Years,” *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 501–34.

<sup>104</sup> A useful starting point in this regard is Mallick’s brilliant exposition of “partisan universal” and “concrete universal” (Ayyaz Mallick, “From Partisan Universal to Concrete Universal? The Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement in Pakistan,” *Antipode* 52, no. 6 [2020]: 1774–93).

dialectic of class struggle and national liberation can be excavated from a shared past, the ecological imperative is about the putatively shared future of all young working people living in one of the most climate-change-prone countries in the world.

Indeed, the complete lack of will by the military establishment and all bourgeois political parties to even marginally reform Pakistan's extractive political economy to cater to the future of an exceedingly young population is mirrored by the intelligentsia at large. A wide cross-section of TV anchors, columnists, university professors, and digital "influencers" perpetually invoke the need for "foreign investment," with little concern for the working masses or ravaged natural ecosystems. In such a context, progressives can and must devise a political imaginary for ecological restoration, economic redistribution, and a multinational society in tandem with one another. I should add that where leftists and ethnic-nationalists are charged with closing ranks, this is also necessary vis-à-vis Pakistan's fourth wave of feminists, led by young women who occupy the digital lifeworld.<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, the PTI experience points to the need for a much more substantive horizon for women's liberation in what is an utterly male-dominated public and political sphere. If nothing else, Pakistan's fourth wave of feminists would benefit from mutual acknowledgment of a plurality of potentially "revolutionary feminisms."<sup>106</sup> Ultimately, the challenge is to articulate—in theory and practice—an emancipatory framework founded upon the dialectical unity of class, gender, ethnic-national, and the ecological imperative. A political project that learns meaningfully from the PTI experience and seeks to decisively transcend it demands, borrowing again from Gramsci, intellectual pessimism and willful optimism. Pessimism of the intellect is essential—a recognition of the race to the bottom in economic, political, and cultural life—because only such an unapologetic acknowledgment of the objective situation can generate the self-reflexivity and willful optimism to foment the collective political subject both necessary and sufficient to articulate a hegemonic alternative.

Finally, a note in closing: avoiding Pakistani exceptionalism in the current conjuncture is essential. Look at neighboring India, for instance, where an even more acute version of hegemonic middle-class aspiration that has undergirded the BJP's hegemonic project, is precipitating a downward spiral of majoritarian hate that was unimaginable only a few short years ago. In our increasingly digital lifeworld—and a highly financialized and digitalized global political economy—it is theoretically unviable to remain wedded to methodological nationalism. Perhaps even more importantly, Pakistani exceptionalism impedes our ability to imagine and, ultimately, do, the politics of revolutionary internationalism.

<sup>105</sup> Rubina Saigol and Nida U. Chaudhry, *Contradictions and Ambiguities of Feminism in Pakistan: Exploring the Fourth Wave* (Islamabad: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020).

<sup>106</sup> I borrow here the title of the recently published volume by Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, *Revolutionary Feminisms: Conversations on Collective Action and Radical Thought* (London: Verso, 2020).

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