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Pakistan: Political situation, including events related the removal and arrest of Prime Minister Imran Khan; political parties and alliances (2022–December 2023)
[PAK201759.E]

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

This Response to Information Request covers the period of events in Pakistan from January 2022 to December 2023. For more information on the political parties and alliances in Pakistan, see Response to Information Request PAK200860 of January 2022.

1. Political Situation Overview

According to the *Political Handbook of the World 2022-2023*, the domestic political environment of Pakistan has been "particularly turbulent" since 2020 (*Political Handbook of the World 2023*, 21). Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) reports that security situation in the country had "deteriorated since mid-2021" and that domestic politics were among the causes of the insecurity (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 2.34). According to *Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022*, which "assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries," one of the "significant" challenges that Pakistan confronted between 2019 and 2021 was "growing political polarization" (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2022, 2, 3).

Australia's DFAT reports that the military is "widely" seen as the "most capable institution" in the country and holds "considerable influence over domestic politics and dominates foreign and security policy" (2022-01-25, para. 5.4). Freedom House notes that the military "exerts enormous influence over security and other policy issues, intimidates the media, and

enjoys impunity for indiscriminate or extralegal use of force" (2023-03-09a, overview). The *BTI 2022* reports that Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government worked "closely with the military establishment," and granted them "considerable space to intervene in governance and policymaking" (2022, 3). Freedom House similarly notes that the PTI government of Khan "generally deferred to the army on key national security and foreign policy issues," but that in the last months of his tenure as Prime Minister, Imran Khan and his opponents "accused" each other of working with the military to "either achieve or take power in 2022, as the opposition agitated to displace the PTI government" (2023-03-09a, Sec. C1).

2. The Removal from Office of Imran Khan

According to Freedom House, in March 2022, the PTI-led government lost its majority when the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) "withheld its support" (2023-03-09a, Sec. A1). The *Handbook* indicates that Khan, the leader of PTI, attempted to dissolve the parliament to avoid a no-confidence vote but was eventually ousted on April 10, 2022, four years into his five-year term as Prime Minister (*Political Handbook of the World* 2023, 3, 21). Sources state that Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) was elected as the Prime Minister by the National Assembly on April 11, 2022 (*Political Handbook of the World* 2023, 3; Australia n.d.).

The US Department of State's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022* indicates that on May 25, 2022, Khan led a march from Peshawar to Islamabad to oppose his expulsion from office (US 2023-03-20, 38). Reuters notes that the government called the protest "illegal" (2022-05-25). The US *Country Reports 2022* notes that the march was impeded "due to barriers imposed" by the State, two people "reportedly" died, and "thousands" were arrested (US 2023-03-20, 38). According to Al Jazeera, authorities placed shipping containers and trucks to block the major roads leading to Islamabad and "at least a dozen" protestors and "several" policemen were wounded in clashes (2022-05-26).

According to Freedom House, Khan received "terrorism charges over a speech" delivered at a PTI rally in August 2022 (2023-03-09a, Sec. B2). According to Al Jazeera, he was charged under an "anti-terror" law, but charges were "later dropped" (2023-05-09).

Sources report that in November 2022, Khan was shot and injured in the leg during a rally in Wazirabad by an individual who was arrested at the scene (Al Jazeera 2022-11-03; Reuters 2022-11-03). The Associated Press (AP) notes that Khan was heading to the capital in a "large convoy" of vehicles as part of "his campaign aimed at forcing the government to hold early elections" (2022-11-03). Sources note that one person was killed in

the attack (Freedom House 2023-03-09a, Sec. E1; Al Jazeera 2022-11-03; Reuters 2022-11-03).

3. Imran Khan's Arrests

Sources report that Khan was arrested by authorities on May 9, 2023 (CNN 2023-05-09; Al Jazeera 2023-05-09; *The Guardian* 2023-05-09) over corruption charges related to "illegal land transactions" (*The Guardian* 2023-05-09). Reuters states that Khan's arrest came a day after the military "rebuked him for repeatedly accusing a senior military officer of trying to engineer his assassination and the former armed forces chief of being behind his removal from power" in 2022 (Reuters 2023-05-09). According to sources, Khan was released on bail on May 12, 2023 (*The Guardian* 2023-05-14; HRW 2023-05-20).

Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that after Khan's arrest "[v]iolence swept across" the country, and police used "tear gas, rubber bullets, and charged protesters with batons" (2023-05-20). Sources note that following Khan's arrest, a protest erupted in the city of Quetta and one person was killed by the police (CNN 2023-05-09; Reuters 2023-05-09).

According to sources, Khan was again arrested on August 5, 2023, after a court sentenced him to three years in prison for "illegally selling state gifts" while in office from 2018 to 2022 (Al Jazeera 2023-08-05; VOA 2023-08-05; *The Economic Times* 2023-08-05).

Sources state that in October 2022, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) barred Khan from holding office for five years (Freedom House 2023-03-09a; AP 2022-10-21; *The Guardian* 2022-10-21) over accusations that he made "false statements on assets and liabilities" while he was in power (Freedom House 2023-03-09a) or for "unlawfully" selling state gifts and concealing assets (AP 2022-10-21). According to sources, Khan nominated Gohar Ali Khan to run as chairman of the PTI party for the national election scheduled for February 2024 (Reuters 2023-12-02; Al Jazeera 2023-12-02).

4. Political Parties and Alliances

Australia's DFAT reports that Pakistani politics includes a "broad" range of political, ethnic, and religious groups (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 3.69). The website of the ECP provides the names of 175 political parties that are "enlisted" (Pakistan n.d.).

According to a UK Home Office report on political parties in Pakistan, the mainstream parties include the Awami National Party (ANP), MQM, PML-N, Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), PTI, and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) (UK 2023-05-24, para. 10.1, 10.2, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7). Bertelsmann Stiftung indicates that "[m]ainstream political parties in Pakistan are weak, and lack organizational capacity, internal democracy, clear ideological identities,

and programmatic platforms based on the aggregation and articulation of popular demands" (2022, 15).

According to Freedom House, after the vote of no confidence in April 2022, a coalition including the PML-N, PPP, and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) assumed office (Freedom House 2023-03-09a, Sec. A2).

4.1. Kashmir Secessionist Parties

According to sources, there are two territories in the Kashmir region of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, overview; Sharma, et al. 2019, xvii). Sources further indicate that in Kashmir, "[s]mall nationalist parties opposed to union with Pakistan are actively marginalized or barred outright" from politics (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. B1) or that secessionist parties are "barred" from elections, while parties "advocating [for] autonomy are tolerated" (Sharma, et al. 2019, xvii).

Freedom House states that both territories have local-level government, "but council elections have been rare" (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. A2). Sources note that in 2022, local voting was held in AJK (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. A2; HRCP 2023, 20) for the first time since 1991, and the PTI won the most seats, but "slightly less" than PML-N and PPP combined (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. A2). According to Freedom House, there is a "well-established pattern" wherein winning parties in federal elections also win elections in AJK and GB (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. A2). The same source indicates that GB had not held local council elections in almost two decades and that neither region has representation in the Pakistani Parliament (Freedom House 2023-03-09b, Sec. A2).

5. Political and Electoral Environment

According to Australia's DFAT report, except for Ahmadis who must "effectively ... renounce" their religion, minority groups do not encounter "formal restrictions" to participate in federal or provincial parliaments, although "informal barriers exist" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 3.69). The same source notes that Shia are "well represented" in parliament and "regularly contest elections for mainstream" political parties (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 3.57). Sources note that of 342 seats in the National Assembly, 10 seats are allocated to "non-Muslim minorities" and 60 seats are reserved for women (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 2.26; Freedom House 2023-03-09a, Sec. A2). Freedom House notes, however, that the political participation of non-Muslims "remains marginal" (2023-03-09a, Sec. B4).

The US *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022* indicates that there are "no reports of restrictions" on political parties participating in elections "except for those prohibited due to terrorist affiliations" (US 2023-03-20, 38).

6. Elections

According to Freedom House, "[s]everal major parties and numerous smaller parties and independents" participate in elections and hold seats in parliament and provincial legislatures (2023-03-09a, Sec. B1). The same source notes, however, that "established parties maintain patronage networks and other advantages of incumbency" that "hamper competition" in their "provincial strongholds" (Freedom House 2023-03-09a, Sec. B1). Freedom House states that in "recent years, major parties' freedom to operate" is linked to their relationships with "unelected" branches of the government, which have used "legal and extralegal means to sideline figures they object to" (2023-03-09a, Sec. B1).

Freedom House states that in the October 2022 by-election resulting from Imran Khan's removal from office, the PTI won six of eight seats available, while the PPP won the other two, after a "large" number of assembly members submitted their resignations, eleven of which were accepted by the speaker (Freedom House 2023-03-09a, Sec. A2).

According to the BBC, by-elections in Punjab were called in July 2022 after members of parliament were "disqualified for switching allegiance" in their votes in the election of Shehbaz Sharif's son as Punjab's Chief Minister (BBC 2022-07-18). Sources indicate that PTI party won 15 of 20 seats in Punjab province by-elections while the PML-N gained four of the seats, and one seat went to an independent candidate (BBC 2022-07-18; *Dawn* 2022-07-18).

6.1 2024 National Elections

Media sources state that Pakistan's parliament was dissolved on August 9, 2023, and that a "caretaker government" has been running the country since that time (RFE/RL 2023-11-02; Al Jazeera 2023-11-02) with Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar at its head (Al Jazeera 2023-11-02). Sources quoting the ECP reported that national elections would be held on February 8, 2024 (RFE/RL 2023-11-02; Al Jazeera 2023-11-02). According to the CIA *World Factbook*, the next National Assembly election was rescheduled from October 2023 due to the "redrawing of many electoral district boundaries" (US 2023-11-14). Media sources report that according to the ECP, national elections should have been held within 90 days of the dissolution of parliament but were delayed because of a constitutional requirement that electoral borders be redrawn based on the latest census (RFE/RL 2023-11-02; Al Jazeera 2023-11-02).

7. Political Opposition, Protests, and Violence

The US *Country Reports 2022* report notes that the Constitution of Pakistan provides for "freedom of peaceful assembly and association, but the government restricted these rights" (US 2023-03-20, 28). Australia's DFAT reports that political and religious groups "stage protests across" Pakistan, which can attract "large crowds and turn violent" (Australia

2022-01-25, para. 2.45). The same source notes that "[p]olitically motivated violence has historically occurred across Pakistan, especially in Karachi and Balochistan," but has "substantially reduced in recent years" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 3.72). Australia's DFAT reports that "[l]arge" protests can arise over "political issues such as enforced disappearances and minority and women's rights" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 3.86). The US *Country Reports 2022* indicates that militants carry out "numerous attacks on political party offices and candidates" (US 2023-03-20, 19).

HRW states that Pakistan's sedition law is "vague and overly broad" and has "often" been used against political opponents and journalists (2023-01-12). Freedom House notes that after Khan was dismissed in April 2022, he and "other" PTI leaders encountered "judicial and administrative scrutiny" (2023-03-09a, Sec. B2). Al Jazeera reports that police detained "more" than 4,000 people in the wake of protests following the arrest of Khan in May 2022 (2023-05-19). Sources indicate that in May 2022, a senior leader of the PTI was detained for a day by police (Amnesty International 2023-03-27, 287; Al Jazeera 2022-05-22), in an arrest her family suggests was "politically motivated due to her criticism" of the state and the military (Amnesty International 2023-03-27, 287). Sources note that in August 2022, another senior PTI politician was arrested (Amnesty International 2023-03-27, 288; HRW 2023-01-12) after "publicly criticizing" the military (Amnesty International 2023-03-27, 288) or on charges of "sedition and incitement to mutiny" for stating that junior military officers should disobey orders that are against public opinion (HRW 2023-01-12). According to Amnesty International, the detainee and PTI officials alleged that he was "tortured" while in detention, but medical reports and authorities "refuted" this claim (Amnesty International 2023-03-27, 288).

8. Forced Disappearances and Extrajudicial Killings

According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, Pakistan "continues to experience the enforced disappearance of activists and individuals allegedly kidnapped by the military and intelligence agencies" (2022, 14). Australia's DFAT reports that those targeted for disappearance include "suspected militants, activists, students, opposition politicians, human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 4.4). The US *Country Reports 2022* indicates that according to "human rights organizations," authorities "arrested and caused the disappearance of Pashtun, Sindhi, and Baloch human rights activists, as well as Sindhi and Baloch nationalists, without cause or warrant" (US 2023-03-20, 4). Corroborating information could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

According to Australia's DFAT report, "[s]uspects are often killed in 'encounters,' widely understood as a euphemism for extrajudicial killings" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 4.2). The same source reports that in "typical" encounters, suspects, who have "sometimes previously been forcibly

disappeared, are given (unloaded) weapons and driven to a location where they are either arrested or killed by police," during a supposed "gunfight" (Australia 2022-01-25, para. 4.2). The *US Country Reports 2022* indicates that there were "numerous media reports" of authorities or their agents committing "extrajudicial killings" of suspected militants during "police encounters" (US 2023-03-20, 19).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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