

## Pakistan's Political Limbo

Pakistan is engulfed in a political crisis after Prime Minister Imran Khan dissolved the parliament on 3<sup>rd</sup> April, barring a no-confidence vote that was expected to oust him from the government. The president of Pakistan dissolved the parliament on the Prime Minister's advice, who has called for new elections within 90 days after a no-confidence motion was dismissed by the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly by declaring the motion unconstitutional, alleging that it is part of a conspiracy by "foreign powers" to interfere in Pakistan's democracy.

In August 2018, Imran Khan was sworn in as the 22<sup>nd</sup> Prime Minister of Pakistan. It was probably unthinkable that Khan's coalition partners would join hands with the opposition for a no-confidence motion against him. When campaigning in previous elections, Imran Khan had promised eradication of corruption, accountability and repatriation of corruption money from abroad, reduction in external debt, institutional reforms especially in the police, the establishment of a university in the Prime Minister's House, 10 million jobs, 5 million houses and a new beginning of economic development in the country. All these promises could not be fulfilled and Khan and his federal ministers also admitted this for various reasons.

The biggest challenge for Imran Khan's government was the economy. He had claimed that the country's economy would flourish and Pakistan would not go to the IMF for more loans, and there would be an end to the inflation and rising prices in the country. During his tenure, not only did Pakistan's economy see a record decline in the value of the Pakistani rupee, but inflation also saw an increase in the volume of loans. Khan defended his economic policies, claiming that the economic situation had improved but the Corona pandemic resulted in global inflation, which affected Pakistan's economy badly.

Failure to keep allies in a weak government, internal differences between the cabinet and federal ministers, and difficulties in legislation as a result of continuous confrontation also challenged Khan's government.

In the beginning, Imran Khan performed very well in terms of foreign policy. State heads from Saudi Arabia and Malaysia visited Pakistan in early 2019. In the same year, Khan visited the United States; Pakistan also played an important role during the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. But at the end of his rule, Khan alleged that the US is colluding with Pakistani opposition to topple his government, though the US has vehemently denied any involvement.

Oppositions in Pakistan, who had tabled a no-confidence vote, submitted a petition to the Supreme Court of Pakistan on Sunday challenging the actions. Opposition leaders have alleged Imran Khan's move as a violation of the country's constitution and accused him of treason.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan on the fourth consecutive day on 7<sup>th</sup> April gave a decision on the legal status of Imran Khan's move in blocking an attempt to oust him. A five-member Supreme Court bench headed by Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial had been hearing different petitions filed by the opposition parties challenging Imran Khan's decision to dissolve the parliament since 4<sup>th</sup> April. The court had asked the petitioners and respondents to complete their arguments and also sought a record of National Assembly proceedings on the no-confidence vote moved by the opposition against the government. The Supreme Court issued this directive on the second day of hearing on the legality of the deputy speaker of parliament dismissing the motion against Imran Khan without holding a vote of no-confidence. On the fourth day of hearings, the Chief Justice of Pakistan read out the decision and said that the move by Khan to dissolve the parliament is illegal and steps taken for the formation of a caretaker government ahead of new elections were also unconstitutional.

*"It is declared that all actions initiated ... for purposes of holding a general election to elect a new assembly – including but not limited to the appointment of a caretaker prime minister and cabinet – are of no legal effect and are hereby quashed," the court decision said.*

Most legal experts are of the opinion that the Supreme Court's ruling on Imran Khan's actions could have major implications on the future of democracy in Pakistan. Interestingly, no prime minister in Pakistan has

fulfilled a full term in the parliament and the military has ruled for half of the country's history. Many people believe that Khan not only lost the support of the members of his ruling coalition but also the support of the powerful military establishment. On 2<sup>nd</sup> April, just a day before the parliament was dissolved, Pakistan Army's chief Qamar Javed Bajwa publicly contradicted with Imran Khan's allegations against the United States by applauding the long and friendly relationship between the two states. Bajwa also criticized Russia's military attack on Ukraine.

Although the military has distanced itself from the political crisis in the country, statements by the Army chief confirm the deepening differences between the military and Imran Khan. The country's opposition had previously been accusing the military of tacitly supporting Khan and his government. The army has been keen to stable Pakistan's failing relationship with the West especially the US, based on the realization that the country could not survive in the great power politics of the world, compromising national efforts to stabilize the economy and foreign policy.