

Pakistani army opens fire in brazen, US-backed massacre of pro-Imran Khan protest

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Tens of thousands of supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan converged on Islamabad from locations across Pakistan this week. They were met by a massive deployment of riot police with shoot-to-kill orders from the Pakistani army, which has held the Islamist-populist prime minister in prison for over a year.

Arriving in Islamabad, protesters found Pakistan's capital in a state of siege. Schools and shops were closed, Internet was cut off in much of the city, and 20,000 riot police used containers to blockade major streets. Violent clashes erupted when protesters tried to reach D Chow ("Democracy Square") at the center of the capital's government district, with riot police initially firing rubber bullets and tear gas.

By Tuesday night, however, a massacre was underway, as Pakistani security forces opened fire on crowds of protesters. Videos have now appeared on social media, despite the Pakistani state's Internet cut-off, showing protesters fleeing in the streets amid the sound of machine gun fire, leaving behind charred vehicles and large pools of blood.

A viral video showed military police pushing a protester who was praying off a tall shipping container, reportedly to his death.

Pakistani authorities brazenly denied that a massacre had taken place, manifestly hoping that massive Internet shutdowns would censor reports of the massacre. Islamabad police chief Ali Rizvi denied that live ammunition had been used on Tuesday but confirmed making 600 arrests that day. By now, press reports Pakistani police have arrested over 1,000 people.

The office of Pakistani Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, asked about reports that live ammunition had been used against the protests, issued a lying denial. It stated: "As of now, no death has been reported, and the claims circulating regarding any such incidents are baseless and unverified."

This was because the Pakistani army was suppressing reports of the massacre it had carried out and trying to make it impossible to verify what reports had emerged. By now, however, the censorship is collapsing, as evidence floods social media that the army and Naqvi's office oversaw the

murder of dozens or hundreds of people.

Healthcare workers have confirmed Pakistani officials are censoring medical records. "At least seven have died and four are in critical condition in the hospital. Eight more have been admitted to the hospital with bullet wounds," one Islamabad doctor in told the *Guardian* on Wednesday. "All record of dead and injured have been confiscated by authorities. We are not allowed to talk. Senior government officials are visiting the hospital to hide the records."

Officials of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice) party have given estimates of the number of dead ranging from six to over 200.

Reports make clear the working class backgrounds of many of the victims. Pakistan's liberal *Dawn* newspaper wrote, "Mubeen Aurangzeb—one of the men named by [PTI official] Salman Akram Raja—was buried in his native village Jandar Bari in UC Phalkot, Abbottabad. Another victim, identified only as Qadir—a father of seven who worked as a daily wage labourer in Lahore—was interred in his native village of Soban Gali in UC Sherwan."

On Wednesday, US State Department spokesman Matthew Miller issued a statement washing his hands of the massacre. Presenting the Pakistani army's conduct as "maintaining law and order," Miller said: "We call on protesters to demonstrate peacefully and refrain from violence, and at the same time, we call on Pakistani authorities to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms and to ensure respect for Pakistan's laws and constitution as they work to maintain law and order."

The massacre was carried out by the Pakistani army, but it has the fingerprints of Washington and its European allies all over it. Khan is in prison as a result of an imperialist vendetta after he fell afoul of US-NATO war plans against Russia and China.

Khan is a bourgeois politician who, in power, imposed IMF austerity programs against the working class. However, he tried purchase Russian oil and gas and to develop trade relations with neighboring China through Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. When Khan visited Moscow shortly after the

Russia-Ukraine war began and rejected calls from US and European officials to cut ties to Moscow, asking if Pakistanis are their “slaves,” the imperialist powers marked him for removal.

Khan was ousted barely a month later, in a no-confidence vote on April 10, 2022. In August 2023, anonymous Pakistani officers leaked a diplomatic note, or “cypher,” recording how US State Department official Donald Lu warned officials at the Pakistani embassy in Washington that the Biden administration viewed Khan’s removal as non-negotiable.

The cable quotes Lu: “people here and in Europe are quite concerned about why Pakistan is taking such an aggressively neutral position (on Ukraine), if such a position is even possible. It does not seem such a neutral stand to us.” Lu said the US National Security Council believed it was “quite clear that this is the Prime Minister’s policy.”

Lu indicated Washington would not forgive Pakistan if it did not oust Khan: “I think if the no-confidence vote against the Prime Minister succeeds, all will be forgiven in Washington because the Russia visit is being looked at as a decision by the Prime Minister. Otherwise I think it will be tough going ahead.”

In conclusion, Lu stressed that Khan’s overture to Moscow had seriously damaged US-Pakistani relations and the no-confidence vote against Khan was key: “I would argue that it has already created a dent in the relationship from our perspective ... Let us wait for a few days to see whether the political situation changes, which would mean that we would not have a big disagreement about this issue and the dent would go away very quickly. Otherwise, we will have to confront this issue head on and decide how to manage it.”

The US State Department refused to address reports on the cypher for eight months. Finally, this March, Miller issued a brief, absurd denial that the cypher showed any US pressure to oust Khan: “Nothing in these purported comments shows the United States taking a position on who the leader of Pakistan should be.”

After Khan’s ouster, Pakistan accepted a new, shattering IMF austerity package raising taxes and energy costs, as the new Pakistani government ended Russian energy purchases. This devastated living conditions for workers and rural oppressed in Pakistan. Poverty rates doubled to 40 percent. Last month, a World Bank report concluded poverty will remain at least that high through 2026.

Pakistan’s economic collapse, Khan’s arrest in May 2023, and the blatant rigging of the February 2024 elections in favor of the Pakistan Muslim League (N) government have provoked explosive popular opposition.

Khan and the PTI, for their part, represent factions of the

Pakistani bourgeoisie and political establishment desperate to control mass anger. They have repeatedly called off protests they had scheduled in to preserve national “unity” and prevent a movement in the working class against imperialism and its agents in the Pakistani bourgeoisie.

Indeed, Khan canceled the first protest he called against his own removal, the May 2022 “Azadi March,” warning of workers’ hatred of military police. “The hatred against police had already intensified and seeing me [at D-Chowk] would have further stoked the sentiments of my workers,” he said. “I was 100 per cent sure that bullets will be fired. People from our side were also ready as some of them were carrying pistols. It would have led to further hatred against the police and the army and caused divisions within the country.”

This week, the PTI again called off protests, to cool off mass anger after the massacre. It tweeted: “In view of the government’s brutality and the government’s plan to turn the capital into a slaughterhouse for unarmed citizens, [we] announce the suspension of the peaceful protest for the time being.”

Working class opposition to IMF austerity, war with Russia, and the murderous US-backed Pakistani dictatorship must be hardened, based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. The struggle against the Pakistani military regime to defend living conditions and obtain basic democratic rights requires the building of an international movement in the working class, against US-NATO imperialist war and the diktat of finance capital, and for socialism.



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