

Pakistani government intensifies repression after murderous assault on Islamabad protest

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12 December 2024

After perpetrating a massacre of unarmed anti-government protestors on November 26 in Pakistan's capital, the big-business Muslim League (PML-N) led minority government and the country's US-backed military are continuing their brutal crackdown against supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf or Movement for Justice (PTI).

Thousands of Khan supporters who were either arrested while traveling to Islamabad to join the march or during the massacre remain behind bars. They are threatened with severe criminal charges, including under Pakistan's draconian anti-terrorism laws.

Khan himself faces "anti-terrorism" charges for calling for the Nov. 26 protest from his jail cell, as does his wife. She led protesters in their attempt to bring the protest to central Islamabad, the so-called Red Zone, where an anti-democratic blanket ban on all protests is in effect.

PTI spokesman Waqas Akram Sheikh has said 12 party supporters were killed, adding that, "The actual number is higher, but we are sharing only the confirmed figures with the media." The live ammunition fire unleashed in the pitch dark after power was cutoff, left scores, possibly hundreds injured.

The PTI has now called for the launching of a "civil disobedience movement" from Saturday, December 14, unless the government releases its arrested supporters and establishes a "judicial commission" to investigate the Nov. 26 mass arrests and massacre.

At present, the right-wing PTI is viewed sympathetically by a large portion of the population. They resent the military's brutal repression and domineering political role, and view the government—whose election victory was achieved through military-engineered vote-rigging—as illegitimate and committed to imposing IMF austerity.

To the consternation of the dominant factions of the military and Pakistani bourgeoisie, Khan and his PTI continue to retain support within the state apparatus, among some judges and sections of the military itself.

On Tuesday, the military announced that it has initiated court martial proceedings against the former head of its intelligence agency, Lt. Gen. Faiz Hameed, on multiple charges. These include violation of the Official Secrets Act, abuse of authority

and "engaging in political activities." As head of the Inter-Services Intelligence Agency, Hameed masterminded the military's intervention in the 2018 elections to secure victory for Khan and his PTI. Once in power, the PTI quickly jettisoned their phony promises of an Islamic welfare state in favour of imposing still more IMF austerity.

While Khan paid back the military for its support by ceding it more governmental power, especially in the economic sphere, he later ran afoul of the military top brass, the dominant wing of the Pakistani ruling class, and Washington, principally over issues of foreign policy.

Khan and his PTI have time and again indicated their willingness to compromise with the military. They have directed their criticism over the military-engineered ouster of Khan, the stealing of the Feb. 2023 elections, and continuing repression only at certain generals. Above all, they have signaled their eagerness to mend relations with Washington, including by praising Trump on his November 5 election victory.

The military and PML-N led government, meanwhile, have adamantly rejected all PTI overtures. Instead, they have intensified their drive to suppress and criminalize the PTI.

In regard to the November 26 massacre, the government continues to brazenly lie, denying outright that any of the protesters were shot down. Declared Information Minister Attaullah Tarar in a post on X, "These bodies will only be found on TikTok, Facebook and WhatsApp. They are playing politics of jokes and lies with the nation." Although X has been blocked in Pakistan since February for most of the population, it is heavily used by the government, the military and major political parties.

The government and military-intelligence agencies are maintaining a tight grip on the media, enforced through threats and sanctions, to ensure that as little as possible is reported about the crackdown on the PTI and the widening repression more generally. In rare cases where this regime of state censors and media self-censorship is broken, journalists have been targeted, as exemplified by the kidnapping of Matiullah Jan, a prominent journalist, who was later charged with "terrorism." The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan demanded Jan's immediate release and stated that the "authoritarian tactic to

silence journalists must cease.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* was informed by its readers that it was inaccessible in several major cities, including Lahore and Quetta, for several days after November 29 when it published “Pakistani army opens fire in brazen, US-backed massacre of pro-Imran Khan protest.” While it is impossible to accurately assess the extent of this blockade, any such ban is a blatant act of state censorship.

The WWSW article provided an analysis placing the political crisis that has gripped Islamabad in the context of the developing US imperialist-led global war. “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,” it stated.

Significantly, the WWSW article cited at length a leaked diplomatic cable that revealed Washington’s behind-the-scenes role in the ouster of Khan. The cable included extensive quotations of US State Department official Donald Lu in which he warned officials at the Pakistani embassy in Washington that the Biden administration viewed Khan’s removal as non-negotiable.

Pakistan’s bourgeois ruling elite is confronted by an unprecedented multi-faceted crisis. The economy of the nuclear-armed South Asian nation of 240 million people barely averted bankruptcy last year only to see its crisis deepen under a new spell of austerity and pro-market reforms dictated by the IMF.

It is also in a geopolitical impasse, caught in the comprehensive and intensifying US imperialist onslaught on China and its growing economy and global influence. Islamabad traditionally based its economic and security policy on the close strategic partnership between the Pakistani military and the Pentagon, and its “all-weather” alliance with China. This balancing act is increasingly impossible to maintain as Washington accelerates its economic, diplomatic, and military offensive throughout the Asia-Pacific to prepare for war with China to thwart its economic rise.

Above all, the venal Islamabad elite is fearful of its own population. The military operates as a virtual occupation force in the country’s northwestern tribal regions and Balochistan in the west. It employs methods of terror, including extrajudicial killings, disappearances and colonial style collective punishment. In October, the government proscribed the Pashtun Defence Movement or PTM, which has led mass protests against military repression in the tribal regions since its founding in 2018.

As brutal as its response to various nationalist and Islamist groups (the latter rooted in Pakistan’s nurturing and arming of the mujahedeen in the 1980s to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) is, what preoccupies the Islamabad ruling elite even more is its fear of the emergence of mass opposition within the working class. No section of the Islamabad elite has any answer to the social, democratic and egalitarian aspirations

of the Pakistani masses. That is why, amidst widespread opposition, the government is seeking to further strengthen the military’s hand.

The Anti-Terrorism Act Amendment Bill 2024 and Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act, 2024 are being rushed through parliament. The first will further broaden the anti-democratic repressive apparatus erected by the Anti-Terrorism Act of 1997. The bill will allow the security forces to put any individual in “preventive detention” for up to 3 months. Amnesty International found the bill “does not comply with international human rights law and standards, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.”

The 1997 act was a primary tool of the US-backed dictatorship of General Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008) to target its opponents, and was deployed in the fraudulent “war on terror,” which Islamabad used to pursue the broadening of its reactionary alliance with US imperialism.

According to an increasing number of reports, the government is also deploying a new firewall technology to regulate Internet traffic in and out of the country, and spy on the population’s internet usage. The new technology provides the government with unprecedented powers to monitor, throttle, and block online content. Unlike the firewall that it replaced, the new technology cannot be bypassed by using VPN technologies, which it can detect and block. The firewall can also geo-fence content based on its location, and carry out IP-level blocking, allowing for the targeting of specific network addresses. It can detect where messages are generated and received.

Beyond regulating access to the Internet, the government is seeking to broaden the Internet crackdown through the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act. The English-language daily *Dawn*, which has seen the proposal, said the bill seeks “the formation of a Digital Rights Protection Authority (DRPA) to deal with issues such as the removal of online content, prosecuting people for sharing or accessing prohibited content and action against social media platforms where such content is hosted.”

The amendments include the broadening of the definition of “social media platform” to include tools and software used to access social media and any “person managing a system that allows access to social media.” The amendments introduce draconian measures against “fake news,” the catch-all justification for censorship used internationally. One is a new non-bailable offence with up to five years imprisonment or fine of up to one million rupees (most Pakistan workers won’t make 40,000 rupees a month by comparison).



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