**[The conviction and after](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809998/the-conviction-and-after)**

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IN what many would describe as a predetermined verdict, a special court has [sentenced](https://www.dawn.com/news/1809793/imran-khan-shah-mahmood-qureshi-sentenced-to-10-years-in-jail-in-cipher-case) former prime minister Imran Khan and his erstwhile foreign minister to a decade behind bars for violating the Official Secrets Act. The court decision announced just a week before general elections is a reminder of the trial and convictions of previous prime ministers.

Imran Khan has met the same fate as many of his predecessors, following the country’s shameful political tradition of removing political leaders from the scene through dubious trials. He was being tried along with Shah Mahmood Qureshi inside prison in the [cipher case](https://www.dawn.com/news/1797694/imran-khan-qureshi-indicted-in-cipher-case-again).

It is the first time a Pakistani leader has been convicted for the disclosure of official secrets. Khan has been accused of using a diplomatic document for his political objectives and misplacing the secret communication. Khan has long held that the document contained a threat from the United States and that it provided proof that his government was being ousted by a conspiracy involving Washington and the then army leadership.

There is no doubt that Khan wrongfully used the cipher message sent by Pakistan’s ambassador to Washington at that time, for concocting a case that his government was being removed through an external conspiracy. He waved the so-called document at a political rally, whipping up public sentiments weeks before his government was removed through a vote of no-confidence. The narrative worked and galvanised his supporters.

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It is evident that the allegation of conspiracy also brought him into confrontation with the military leadership, which had once propped up his government. Indeed, such irresponsible action by the former prime minister cannot be justified.

But it is also apparent that charging him under Section 5 of the Act was driven by a desire for retribution. The allegation of a mistrial was reinforced by the way the court proceedings were conducted inside the prison. The very fact that the verdict was delivered just days before the elections makes the situation murkier.

It is the former prime minister’s second conviction as he was previously held guilty in the [Toshakhana case](https://www.dawn.com/news/1768528) last August, and sentenced to three years’ imprisonment, barring him from standing in the elections. Meanwhile, the unprecedented crackdown against the PTI has demolished the party’s structure.

It was meant to keep one of the country’s largest political parties out of the electoral race. The Election Commission of Pakistan’s [decision](https://www.dawn.com/news/1800094), [upheld](https://www.dawn.com/news/1805488) by the apex court, to strip the party of its electoral symbol — the cricket bat — has dealt the most serious blow to the PTI’s electoral prospects.

Yet despite all the state repression, the PTI has remained a formidable force, challenging its rivals in what is being perceived as managed elections. The sentencing of its two main leaders on the eve of polls seems intended to demoralise the party’s supporters, but the action could also have the opposite result by motivating its supporters to come out to vote in larger numbers.

In such a situation, it would be extremely hard for the security establishment to stop the tide. The sentencing of arguably Pakistan’s most popular political leader could change the entire political environment. If past lessons are any indicator, such actions, taken in the attempt to condemn popular political leaders to a state of isolation, can never succeed. In fact, there are strong indications that the conviction could swell the former prime minister’s support base that mainly comes from the youth, whose large numbers are set to constitute the majority of voters.

That could also spoil the ongoing power game being played by the security establishment with the support of other mainstream political parties. The increasing disillusionment of the people in the electoral process is demonstrated by the lacklustre election campaign by political parties in the field. The ongoing repression targeting the PTI and some other dissenting groups has already created an extremely volatile situation.

What is most worrisome is that Khan’s conviction could widen the existing political polarisation and fuel instability in the country, threatening the entire democratic process. With the credibility of the elections already questionable, prospects of the country moving towards stability look dim.

A weak civilian government coming to power through a dubious election is not likely to govern well and deliver on the economic and national security fronts. The weakening of the democratic political process has already resulted in the lengthening of the security establishment’s shadow over the power structure. Some [reports](https://tribune.com.pk/story/2454258/elected-govt-doesnt-get-a-free-pass-coas) quoting recent comments made by the army chief at a public gathering illustrates the establishment’s critical assessment of the existing political system.

It is not unusual in this country for army chiefs to speak on subjects outside the establishment’s domain. So, it didn’t come as a surprise when the incumbent, speaking to students, spoke on issues ranging from politics to the economy, foreign policy and religion.

It appeared that he had his own vision — some have referred to it as the ‘Gen Asim Munir doctrine’ — of how the country could achieve its promised destiny. It is certainly not the first time similar remarks have been attributed to military heads. Former chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa is also supposed to have had a ‘doctrine’ of his own to get the country on the right course.

Curiously, this public interaction with students took place with elections just around the corner. It may not be coincidental that the public appearance came days before Imran Khan’s latest conviction. It was certainly not an apolitical conversation and has wider connotations for the country’s future course. While the chief’s views about politics mostly reflected an institutional distrust of civilian political leaders, his outlook on the social and cultural issues sounded more portentous.

While there is no indication that the military seeks to take over, it is apparent that it is does not want to give a free hand to civilians either. Distrust of the politicians remains palpable, though there is no reason to doubt that elections will be held. But it remains to be seen how the political landscape is shaped after Khan’s conviction.

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