**[A capital lockdown](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874856/a-capital-lockdown)**

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COVID-19 may be a thing of the past for the rest of the world but in Pakistan, the lockdowns are here to stay.

Lockdowns to [control the smog](https://www.dawn.com/news/1872733) and lockdowns to [control demonstrations](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874329) — the state has tried and tested all. One could perhaps argue that the internet is also in lockdown but for the fact that its slow speed and blocked apps are a constant state of affairs, while the notion of a lockdown is temporary, with an end in sight.

The lockdown is here because the PTI is [on its way](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874555) again from KP to Islamabad with a crowd. Its size varies on social media, depending on who is commenting, while mainstream media too is in lockdown. On the latter, while discussions about the protest are aplenty, there is little to no reporting. And there are no visuals. In a way, it’s like the smog in summer — everyone knows it’s still there but it doesn’t need to be addressed because it’s less visible.

No one can say whether the protest will end with Ali Amin Gandapur and Arif Alvi dancing to the tune of The Final Countdown, with parliament in the backdrop. But there is merit to the argument that the lockdown in itself is a defeat for the government for it shows not just nervousness but also puts paid to its claims of a healthy economy with interest from investors abroad.

The PTI understands this even better than it did in October. Its journey to Islamabad is making leisurely progress, and it is comfortable in the knowledge that the government is scoring an own goal by locking up half the country, leading to economic losses as well as running the risk of shortages of necessities in urban centres. At the same time, the slow march is tiring out police which was deployed days earlier. In a vlog on Sunday night from D-Chowk, Asad Toor reported that Sindh Police recruits were without warm clothes as they patrolled on a cold winter night.

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But this is not to say the PTI faces no risks. Those in government in KP and others who are part of one assembly or another also do not want to upset the applecart too much, despite the pressure from Imran Khan and the workers. This was evident not just in the constant reports of PTI leaders who wanted to delay the protests; in addition, the criticism being directed at Gandapur since his [disappearance at the previous protest](https://www.dawn.com/news/1863395) in Islamabad from the party base also shows the pressures the KP government has to juggle.

At the same time, the crowds accompanying the KP rally shows that the party workers and supporters are not sufficiently disgruntled by the leadership to stay at home.

However, it is still worth asking what the PTI hopes to achieve. Overthrowing the government as an aim is great for rhetoric but it is doubtful if even the party ideologues believe it. Second, in Pakistan, protests usually set the stage for a weakening of a government rather than prove to be the final blow. But in this specific case, the PTI might be more interested in using it as a bargaining chip. There is now a strong perception that the release of Imran Khan’s wife was a result of the previous protest. This time around too the reports of the negotiations held before this protest point to this; the PTI asked for the release of Yasmin Rashid and other prisoners in Lahore as a confidence-building measure.

If the demand is (or isn’t) conceded, this game of cat and mouse can be played again and again.

Perhaps, though, it is also important to understand why the PTI can play this game repeatedly, considering it has a government in KP and the province’s short distance from Islamabad.

It appears there was some understanding at the time of election that depriving the PTI of forming a government in KP would perhaps lead to far too much instability. And this is why the party now has the ability to march in large numbers to Islamabad. While there are constant [threats to impose governor’s rule](https://www.dawn.com/news/1863170) in the province, this would be a foolhardy step. The already volatile situation in KP will simply worsen.

However, even this would not have been enough for the PTI to mount such shows of power were it was not for the fragile economic situation.

Despite the non-stop repression in Punjab, each such occasion allows young men to play a cat-and-mouse game with the police for hours. It may not show that Pakistan is at the cusp of a revolution but the possibility of violence on the streets cannot be discounted. With Pakistan’s demographic numbers and the economy, this is a risk no one can calculate accurately, regardless of the multiple analyses about Punjab’s DNA of subservience.

This is what PTI and Khan are counting on. And not a revolution.

Postscript: Perhaps this is a good time to ask what the state plans to do with the PTI prisoners. It has been over a year since these people were detained — in jails as well as [military custody](https://www.dawn.com/news/1832439) — without any kind of trial. We are told via trusted journalists and *tajziakaars* (analysts) that they cannot be freed, cannot be forgiven, for the ‘crime’ was so great. And that this is also to create deterrence.

Indeed, Pakistan society has always been big on deterrence — if we hanged a few thousand in the streets, corruption would stop, or if a rapist was hanged, the crime would stop. But thankfully, for reasons of incompetence, we have rarely managed such events of brutality, though it has allowed the myth to continue.

Still, it needs to be pointed out that at times a state needs to calculate if the deterrence it creates at the cost of people’s anger and hatred is worth the risk. The prisoners need to be released, all of them, and especially the women. The trials can continue but without this endless incarceration. It is time to send Yasmin Rashid home.

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