**Costs & Casualties of Collusion**

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The gloves are off. The collision course between the establishment and the PTI is culminating in a grotesque and flagrant subversion of the flimsy and few pretenses of democracy Pakistan possessed in the past few years.

The reprisals to the reaction following Imran Khan’s arrest earlier in May have been swift and relentless. A palpable atmosphere of dread and fear pervades the country owing to the widespread intimidation, raids, disappearances, and repeated arrests which have targeted PTI leadership, party workers, any supporters who protested aggressively or peacefully, and even their families. Punjab’s integration and identification with both the military and the state has historically made it Pakistan’s political core, saving its major areas from the establishment’s brutal standard operating procedures in peripheralized regions such as Balochistan, Waziristan, and Gilgit Baltistan, or even provinces like Sindh. But recent events, particularly attacks on sites of significance to the military and the attack on the Corps Commander House in Lahore, seem to have eliminated this protective shield. The message is clear: the backlash to Imran Khan’s arrest, which is being termed the Pakistan Army’s 9/11, will be punished and nothing remains off-limits in this retribution’s sweep.

[Elton John’s Glastonbury triumph attracts 7.3 million TV viewers](https://www.nation.com.pk/27-Jun-2023/elton-john-s-glastonbury-triumph-attracts-7-3-million-tv-viewers)

The plan to try civilians in military courts has only aggravated the situation and is an egregious blow to any semblance of civil and democratic rights in the country, not just in the present but also for the future. Afterall, a boundary breached is a boundary set. However, these schemes are being initiated and executed with the collusion and complicity of the country’s ruling coalition of civilian leaders and the so-called Pakistan Democratic Movement can neither be ignored nor excused in this travesty of democracy. With Bilawal Bhutto backing the idea of a ban on the PTI, and Maryam Nawaz backing trials in military courts, it is obvious where these parties stand in this political upheaval. If their lack of opposition to the military’s growing overreach was condemnable, their active support for enabling this overreach is damning. Perhaps it was too idealistic to expect that they would have learnt their lesson that being in cahoots with the military does not guarantee political longevity or protection. In fact, if the country’s political history shows anything, it is that just as quickly as the military bestows favor, it withdraws it too, and that withdrawal is always punitive. It is astounding how many of these parties have suffered at the hands of the military in the past, and yet are endorsing pages from the same playbook for their opponents. Not only are there democratic credentials in tatters, but the role they’ve played and are playing in the havoc that is being wrecked in Pakistan, is criminally undemocratic. Gone are the days of democracy being the best revenge because revenge is being enacted on democracy itself now, or whatever scraps of it Pakistan had. The recent abduction of lawyer and activist Jibran Nasir only indicates that the rope of repression will not stop at PTI supporters but haunt and hound any and all critics of this rancid state of affairs and its subjugation of civil liberties and democratic rights. Many have opined that by distancing himself from the protestors, Imran Khan has thrown them under the bus, but similarly, by colluding and collaborating with the establishment at this crucial moment, the ruling political lot has thrown the entire nation under the boot.

[Mitsotakis’s conservatives clinch landslide Greece election win](https://www.nation.com.pk/27-Jun-2023/mitsotakis-s-conservatives-clinch-landslide-greece-election-win)

This could have been a critical moment for political parties in Pakistan to rise above their differences with the PTI and demonstrate their commitment to democracy by banding together and opposing or attempting to curb the establishment’s wrath and reach, and if not that, at least refusing support for it. Unfortunately, their commitment to political opportunism, expediency, and their appetite for power far outweighs any attachment to principles. And perhaps they believe their political fortunes can remain intact by clinging to the coattails of the establishment as it dismantles and tries to bury yet another experiment gone wrong. Whatever the reason, the choices they have made in this tumultuous time make them injurious and malign forces for this country, its present, and its future.

On the other hand, Imran Khan’s insistence on framing the present situation as a conflict between PTI and one individual signals the narrow and instrumentalist nature of his current politics that declines to account for the power, interests, and interventions of an institution, which he previously benefitted from, and the problem with it. His refusal to move beyond individuals and acknowledge or confront the wider historical and institutional dominance at play, and his penchant for exceptionalizing himself and his party as the first and only movement in Pakistan to truly take up the fight against the establishment and to ever face such levels of oppression also rejects, as Ammar Ali Jan pointed out, the ample space which was available for laying claim to the long history of democratic struggle in Pakistan and allying with various movements of marginalized peoples across the country who continue to lead it. As long as Imran Khan understands and reduces this conflict to a spat with one or two individuals, the scope of his challenge will remain shallow and easy to defeat which the establishment has swiftly done in dismembering the party they helped remake and reassemble for his rise. And with the fragmentation of the PTI and the exodus of defectors to the Tareen group, we witness the engineering resume.

[Ukraine forces recapture new Russian-occupied settlement](https://www.nation.com.pk/27-Jun-2023/ukraine-forces-recapture-new-russian-occupied-settlement)

For now, the situation has reached an uneasy standstill, but it is difficult to see how it can be sustained for long. Force and fear can only silence people’s rage, frustration, and resentment but they can’t extinguish them, especially when their causes still persist. With the economy plunging, the failure of the PDM government to halt it, the widespread suppression, and the denial of any democratic outlet for change, Pakistan’s stability and prosperity remain casualties and its people remain hostages of a cycle the country seems cursed to repeat by those who refuse to stop running its wheel.