**[On a collision course](https://www.dawn.com/news/1875081/on-a-collision-course)**

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A PANICKING administration is desperately trying to prevent raging crowds from [storming the capital](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874364), breaking through all the barriers on their way. For the past several days, Islamabad has been in a virtual state of [lockdown with containers](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874329) blocking the main arteries. Most of Punjab’s motorways and highways were [closed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874555) to stop the marchers.

Yet all those measures seemed to [have failed](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874500/pti-pushes-on-for-powershow-in-capital). The rampaging multitudes [broke through](https://www.dawn.com/news/1875036/pti-activists-sail-in-uncharted-waters-to-reinforce-protest) the siege and entered the city. The army has been called in after a night of violence that left [security personnel dead](https://www.dawn.com/news/1874896/pti-protesters-reach-d-chowk-amid-intense-tear-gas-shelling#:~:text=3%20Rangers%2C%20cop%20die%20in%20%E2%80%98attack%20by%20protesters%E2%80%99) and wounded.

According to reports, the troops have been given shoot-on-sight orders, as the situation is slipping from the hands of the civil administration. Troop deployment is generally seen as the last resort to prevent a looming collapse.

It may not be the first time in the country that the army has been called in to act in aid of the civilian administration but never before has it faced such a challenging situation in the capital. The decision will have its own repercussions, with the troops confronting a highly volatile crowd not willing to back down. It’s a dangerous situation that may lead to a direct confrontation between the troops and protesters. What happens next is anybody’s guess.

It is, perhaps, the most serious situation the country has faced of late. The worsening confrontation between the PTI-led opposition and the establishment-backed ruling coalition threatens to plunge the country into anarchy.

Tensions had been building up since the [controversial](https://www.dawn.com/news/1807877) Feb 8 elections, which deprived the PTI of its majority in the newly elected National Assembly. Moreover, the continued [detention](https://www.dawn.com/news/1810025) of former prime minister Imran Khan and several other senior leaders of the PTI, allegedly on fabricated charges, fuelled an already combustible situation.

What is happening in the capital has shaken the ruling dispensation.

But what is happening now has shaken the dispensation. It’s true that the PTI has made several failed attempts to storm the capital in the past but the intensity and ferocity of the latest march has come as a big surprise to even many of its supporters. The measures taken by the government to stop the angry protesters have failed. Even the use of brute force by the administration and the deployment of troops are unlikely to crush what has been described by the PTI leaders as the final onslaught.

It appears to have been a well-calculated move by Imran Khan to give the [Nov 24 protest call](https://www.dawn.com/news/1872269) when the ruling coalition, with the support of the security establishment, had pushed through some [controversial changes](https://www.dawn.com/news/1866480) in the Constitution, undermining judicial independence. The attempt to turn the apex court into an extension of the executive had also raised concerns in opposition ranks. For many, it was the end of hope of getting any relief from the tamed courts.

Scores of opposition leaders are languishing in prison without trial. Despite his getting bail from the courts on major charges, the government has refused to release the former prime minister, framing new cases against him instead. The government’s highhandedness has further infuriated his supporters. Imran Khan’s call for the final protest galvanised not only his party supporters but also others who were unhappy with the security apparatus’s growing influence.

Notwithstanding his flawed populist rhetoric, the incarcerated former prime minster is undoubtedly the most powerful political leader in the country. Perhaps, no other political leader in the country’s history has enjoyed such wide support that cuts across the class divide. The Feb 8 elections when the people came out in large numbers to vote for unknown PTI-supported candidates, despite the fact that the party had been deprived of its symbol and not even allowed to campaign, was rightly described by some analysts as a revolution through the ballot.

Yet, massive manipulation kept the party out of power and a government with questionable legitimacy was installed. All that has further enhanced Khan’s support base as seen in the large turnout of protesters this week on his call. Although most of the marchers came from KP that is being ruled by the PTI, there has also been significant participation from other provinces.

Surely, the PTI’s control in KP has massively boosted the party’s political position, while the province’s proximity to the capital has proved highly advantageous for the party in organising the march. But there has been sizeable participation from Punjab despite the closure of highways and the clampdown on party activists. The impressive show of strength by the party in Islamabad will also activate party supporters in the country’s largest and most powerful province.

It is also a moment of reckoning for a fragile ruling alliance and the powers that be. Any move to crush the protest through brute force would have far-reaching political consequences. The government stands on a weak wicket. Panic underlies the bravado of some of the federal ministers. Not even the backing of those at the top can protect the political dispensation against the consequences of its doubtful legitimacy and vanishing support base.

Most worrisome, however, is that any direct confrontation between the protesters and the security forces could lead to a civil war-like situation with disastrous consequences for the safety and unity of the country. The troops are already fighting insurgents in KP and Balochistan and any clash with protesters in the capital could have serious consequences.

It is imperative that the security forces be withdrawn from the capital before the situation reaches a point of no return. Most importantly, it is the political forces that should be allowed to resolve the political crisis through negotiations. The onus lies mainly on the government to initiate talks with the opposition. The government must realise that it cannot stay in power for long without a public mandate. It cannot stand against the power of the people.

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