

Imran Khan's Ouster: Parliamentary Maneuvering and Judicial Intervention in Pakistan's Politics

Areez Tariq

Independent Political Analyst

Email: areeztariqkhan@gmail.com

Abstract: On 10 April 2022 Pakistan's National Assembly removed Prime Minister Imran Khan via a motion of no-confidence, ending a turbulent three-year premiership. The episode combined parliamentary arithmetic, an aborted dissolution attempt, a decisive Supreme Court ruling, high-stakes coalition bargaining, contested narratives of foreign interference, and intensified public mobilization. This article reconstructs the constitutional and political sequence of events, analyzes the proximate and structural causes, evaluates institutional roles (parliament, judiciary, and military), and assesses consequences for Pakistan's democratic stability. Drawing on contemporaneous reporting, legal orders, parliamentary records, and scholarly commentary, the paper argues that Khan's fall was driven primarily by coalition defections and a judicially enforced return to parliamentary procedure, while subsequent politicization of institutions accelerated polarization and litigative politics.

Keywords: Imran Khan; No-confidence Motion; Supreme Court of Pakistan; Civil–Military Relations; Political Polarization.

INTRODUCTION

The removal of Imran Khan as prime minister in April 2022 represents a pivotal moment in Pakistan's recent democratic trajectory. After a months-long opposition campaign and intense intra-elite bargaining, the National Assembly voted in favour of a no-confidence motion on 10 April 2022; the motion secured 174 votes in a 342-member house, passing the simple majority threshold and officially terminating Khan's premiership. The chain of events included a dramatic attempt by the prime minister to forestall the vote by advising the president to dissolve parliament, and a swift intervention by the Supreme Court that restored the assembly and ordered the vote to proceed. These moments — parliamentary, judicial, and extra-institutional — are crucial for understanding how parliamentary democracies in fragile institutional contexts resolve executive crises. This article assembles the available evidence and situates the episode within longer-term patterns in Pakistani politics.

METHODOLOGY AND SOURCES

This study synthesizes primary news reporting (national and international press), legal reporting of the Supreme Court's April 2022 decision restoring

the National Assembly, parliamentary records and contemporaneous reporting of Assembly proceedings, and post-event commentary by scholars and policy analysts. Where possible, factual claims are cross-checked against multiple reputable outlets (Reuters, Dawn, Al Jazeera) and legal summaries (Constitution Net and court reporting). The aim is not archival exhaustiveness but a rigorous reconstruction that emphasizes institutional steps, actor incentives, and systemic implications.

POLITICAL BACKGROUND (2018–2022): ELECTORAL VICTORY AND FRAGILITY

Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) emerged as the single largest party in the 2018 general election; Khan formed a coalition government and became prime minister in August 2018. His tenure was marked by an ambitious reformist rhetoric and confrontations with established political elites, yet also by persistent macroeconomic pressures, rising inflation, and governance shortfalls. PTI's coalition depended on smaller parties and independents for a working majority, rendering its hold on the Assembly contingent and inherently vulnerable to defections. These structural conditions set the stage for opposition parties — notably the Pakistan Muslim

League (Nawaz, PML-N) and Pakistan People's Party (PPP) — to explore and eventually execute parliamentary strategies for removal once they perceived coalition partners' fragility and economic grievances had sufficiently eroded the government's support.

THE NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION: TIMELINE AND PARLIAMENTARY MANOEUVRES

Filing and early parliamentary procedure: The opposition coalition formally lodged a no-confidence motion in early March 2022; a parliamentary instrument permitted under the Constitution when a majority of the National Assembly seeks to express lack of confidence in the head of government. Opposition actors coordinated across party lines to secure signatures and pledges from smaller partners and independent lawmakers. Initial Assembly sittings were marked by procedural adjournments and filibusters — symptomatic of a legislature engaged in high-stakes bargaining over both procedure and membership.

Deputy Speaker dismissal (3 April 2022): On 3 April 2022 the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly, Qasim Khan Suri, unexpectedly dismissed the no-confidence motion, citing Article 5 (allegiance to the state) and alleging foreign interference prompted the motion. This unilateral dismissal was politically fraught and precipitated immediate legal and political contestation; critics argued that the Deputy Speaker lacked the constitutional basis to strike down a motion submitted under the Assembly's rules. The Deputy Speaker's move effectively transformed a parliamentary arithmetic contest into a constitutional crisis.

Prime Minister's advice to dissolve the Assembly (3 April 2022): Prime Minister Khan advised President Arif Alvi to dissolve the National Assembly on 3 April, and the president signed an order under the constitutional article permitting dissolution of the lower house on the prime minister's advice. The dissolution sought to force early elections and avoid the no-confidence vote, a tactic available under the Constitution but previously subject to judicial scrutiny when used to

evade parliamentary oversight. The dissolution temporarily halted parliamentary proceedings and amplified political tension nationwide.

JUDICIAL INTERVENTION: THE SUPREME COURT'S RESTORATION ORDER

The Supreme Court of Pakistan took suo motu notice of the crisis. On 7–8 April 2022 the Court ruled that the presidential dissolution order (issued on 3 April) “was contrary to the Constitution and of no legal effect” and ordered the National Assembly to be restored and reconvened to decide the no-confidence motion. The Court declared that the Assembly “was in existence at all times, and continues to remain and be so,” thereby nullifying the dissolution and removing the government's escape route from parliamentary accountability. This judicial intervention was the pivotal legal turning point: it removed the non-parliamentary option and compelled the political contest to resolve through a vote. The Court's text emphasized constitutional supremacy and the need to observe parliamentary remedies rather than executive shortcuts.

(Short quotation from reporting on the judgment: the Court held that the dissolution “was contrary to the Constitution and of no legal effect, and it is hereby set aside.”)

Significance of the ruling: The Court's intervention can be read institutionally in two ways. First, as a formal enforcement of constitutional boundaries, preventing the executive from bypassing legislative scrutiny. Second, in the Pakistani context, any powerful judicial action is immediately politicized — some actors praised the decision as upholding constitutionalism, while others accused the judiciary of partisanship or of being embedded within elite bargaining. Regardless of perspective, the ruling shifted the strategic terrain: the no-confidence vote would now be fought inside the Assembly rather than through extra-parliamentary maneuvers.

THE DECISIVE ASSEMBLY SITTINGS: DEFECTIONS AND THE VOTE (9–10 APRIL 2022)

When the Assembly sat to consider the motion on 9–10 April, proceedings were chaotic. The speaker, Asad Qaiser, resigned minutes before the vote, citing pressure and allegations of a foreign conspiracy. The resignation of the speaker — coupled with prior disruptions and a late change in presiding officers — reflected the intense contestation and deepening institutional disarray. The opposition managed to secure alternate procedural arrangements to hold the vote; after extended deliberations and intermittent adjournments, the motion was put to a roll-call and passed with 174 votes, removing Khan. The opposition immediately moved to elect Shehbaz Sharif as the new prime minister.

Numerical mechanics: The arithmetic was simple but decisive: coalition defections and the withdrawal of support by smaller partners reduced PTI's effective bloc below a majority threshold. The opposition's ability to assemble a cross-party majority at the crucial moment meant that parliamentary procedure — despite attempts to delay or invalidate it — ultimately produced a change in government. Contemporary reporting highlights the role of last-minute switching by individual legislators as the immediate proximate cause.

EXPLAINING DEFECTIONS: MOTIVES AND MECHANISMS

Why did coalition partners defect — or at least fail to remain loyal — at the decisive juncture? Several proximate incentives and constraints explain the defections:

Local-level political calculus: Many small parties and independents weigh the benefits of proximity to the ruling coalition (development funds, patronage) against electoral and political survival. Perceived weakness in the central government reduces the expected returns of staying loyal. When opposition leaders coordinate

convincingly and appear set to win, the rational calculation for some legislators tilts toward switching.

Economic pressures and governance dissatisfaction: Rising inflation, currency depreciation, and economic hardship reduced the government's public approval and gave political cover to partners to justify switching. Notably, while economic malaise rarely alone explains an ouster, it shapes elite perceptions of a government's political durability.

Persuasion, inducements, and coercion: Media reporting and political commentary alleged that inducements (material and political) and pressures were used to secure defections. While verifying such claims is difficult — and allegations of corruption or coercion have been contested by the actors involved — they reflect common mechanisms in coalition politics where switching can be facilitated by offers of ministerial positions, local benefits, or other incentives.

Strategic coordination by the opposition: The opposition's pragmatic alliance-building reduced transaction costs for defectors: the cross-ideological coalition made individual switching less risky because the alternative government was likely to be stable enough to deliver patronage.

NARRATIVE CONTESTATION: FOREIGN INTERFERENCE, THE “CIPHER,” AND PUBLIC MOBILIZATION

Following the no-confidence campaign and the vote, Imran Khan and senior PTI leaders promoted a narrative that external powers — particularly the United States — had pressured Pakistani stakeholders to orchestrate his removal. This alleged “foreign conspiracy” gained traction in certain public spheres and became a central grievance framing for PTI's street mobilization. Reports referenced a diplomatic “cipher” — a classified diplomatic communication — that Khan's camp suggested evidenced external pressure. U.S. officials rejected allegations of orchestrating regime change, and public debate became polarized between those who accepted the foreign-interference narrative and those who

insisted the removal was a domestic parliamentary outcome. Journalistic investigations and leaks produced contested readings of diplomatic traffic, but no publicly accepted, conclusive evidence emerged to show foreign orchestration of the parliamentary vote. The political utility of the conspiracy narrative, however, was unmistakable: it both mobilized PTI supporters and delegitimized the succeeding coalition in the eyes of that constituency.

Street politics and escalation: In the aftermath of the vote, PTI organized mass rallies and protests, characterizing the new government as illegitimate and demanding early elections. The successive months showed a dramatic escalation: arrests of PTI leaders, a proliferation of legal cases against Khan and associates, and confrontations with security forces. The mass mobilization strategy both sustained PTI's political relevance and sharpened polarization, making reconciliation and normal parliamentary functioning more difficult.

THE MILITARY'S ROLE: AMBIGUITY, INFLUENCE, AND PERCEPTION

Pakistan's military has a long history of decisive interventions in politics. In the April 2022 episode, there was no overt coup or public declaration of military control; nevertheless, the institution's backstage influence — via its networks, relationships with political elites, and role in shaping strategic incentives — remained a persistent subtext. Observers and politicians offered competing accounts: some argued the military's stance shifted away from Khan at a key moment, while others emphasized that the military remained publicly neutral. Because the military does not ordinarily disclose internal political deliberations, public analysis must rely on indirect indicators and on actors' assertions; this opacity often breeds competing narratives and fuels politicization of the institution. Ultimately, whether or how the military influenced the outcome remains partly opaque, but its reputational and structural weight shaped actors' calculations throughout the crisis.

LEGAL AFTERMATH AND LITIGATIVE POLITICS

After his removal, Imran Khan faced multiple legal challenges — criminal cases, allegations of corruption, and proceedings tied to the disclosure of diplomatic communications. Some cases resulted in convictions and temporary disqualifications, while others were reversed or remained contested in courts. The proliferation of legal actions against prominent political actors has deep implications for Pakistani democratic practice: litigation becomes a mechanism for political competition, sometimes substituting electoral channels and producing cycles of judicialization and politicized prosecutions. The use of courts as instruments of political contestation may strengthen rule-of-law mechanisms in some instances, but it also risks delegitimizing judicial impartiality if perceived as selective or ideologically motivated.

ANALYTICAL SYNTHESIS: PROXIMATE AND STRUCTURAL CAUSES OF THE FALL

A compact causal account synthesizes the evidence:

Proximate cause — parliamentary arithmetic: The immediate, dispositive mechanism was the loss of majority support in the National Assembly owing to defections and withdrawal of allied support. The opposition's ability to secure 174 votes was the essential factor producing Khan's removal.

Structural vulnerabilities — coalition fragility and governance deficits: PTI's dependence on a heterogeneous coalition, combined with public dissatisfaction over the economy and governance, made the government susceptible to strategic switching by parties and independents.

Institutional constraint — judicial enforcement of constitutional procedure: The Supreme Court's ruling that the president's dissolution was unconstitutional forced the crisis back into parliamentary channels, eliminating an extralegal means for the executive to remain in office and

thereby enabling the no-confidence vote to proceed. The Court's legal framing was decisive in narrowing the strategic options available to the prime minister.

Narrative and performative politics: Allegations of foreign interference and competing narratives shaped public perceptions and post-vote mobilizations, intensifying polarization but not altering the parliamentary arithmetic that had already determined the outcome.

Opacity of military influence: While direct and public military intervention was absent, the institution's perceived preferences and behind-the-scenes networks influenced how political actors anticipated likely outcomes and therefore how they behaved. The exact nature of any military influence remains uncertain owing to the institution's opacity.

CONSEQUENCES FOR DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL NORMS

Short-term: The immediate aftermath of Khan's removal was marked by a sharp escalation in political contention. PTI mobilized its support base through street protests, public rallies, and social media campaigns, framing the no-confidence motion as illegitimate and externally driven. Simultaneously, legal contestation became a central tool of political struggle, with petitions filed in courts over procedural irregularities and alleged conspiracies. Administrative measures against PTI leaders—ranging from arrests to restrictions on assemblies—further deepened the sense of grievance among Khan's supporters. The new coalition government, confronted with a severe balance-of-payments crisis and looming default, directed its early efforts toward stabilizing governance, seeking international financial assistance, and restoring diplomatic relations. Yet, this pragmatic focus on economic survival unfolded in parallel with a rapidly intensifying political divide that limited prospects for consensus-building.

Medium- to long-term: The episode exposed several structural risks to democratic consolidation in Pakistan. First, the repeated reliance on litigative politics risks eroding the predictability of electoral competition, as courts increasingly become arenas of partisan contestation rather than neutral arbiters. Second, the normalization of conspiracy narratives—especially those invoking foreign interference—weakens citizens' trust in domestic institutions and reduces space for compromise. Third, the fragility of coalition governance, dependent on opaque intra-elite bargaining, raises the likelihood of abrupt government collapses, undermining policy continuity and institutional credibility. Finally, the removal of Khan highlighted a paradox: while constitutional procedures such as parliamentary votes and judicial review operated formally, their effectiveness was conditioned by the broader political ecosystem shaped by patronage networks, civil-military relations, and a deeply polarized media landscape.

CONCLUSION

Imran Khan's removal in April 2022 was the result of intersecting political, institutional, and strategic factors. The parliamentary vote — enabled by coalition defections — was the proximate mechanism, but the episode cannot be understood without reference to institutional constraints (a pivotal Supreme Court ruling), economic pressures, and the broader political ecology including narratives of foreign interference and the shadow of military influence. The event demonstrates both the resilience and fragility of Pakistan's democratic institutions: constitutional procedures ultimately decided the premiership, yet persistent opacity in elite bargaining, the politicization of legal institutions, and polarized public narratives complicate the prospects for stable, routinized democratic governance. For scholars and policymakers, the episode offers a cautionary lesson: formal rules matter, but democratic consolidation requires transparent coalition practices, depoliticized legal processes, and mechanisms to rebuild cross-party trust.

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