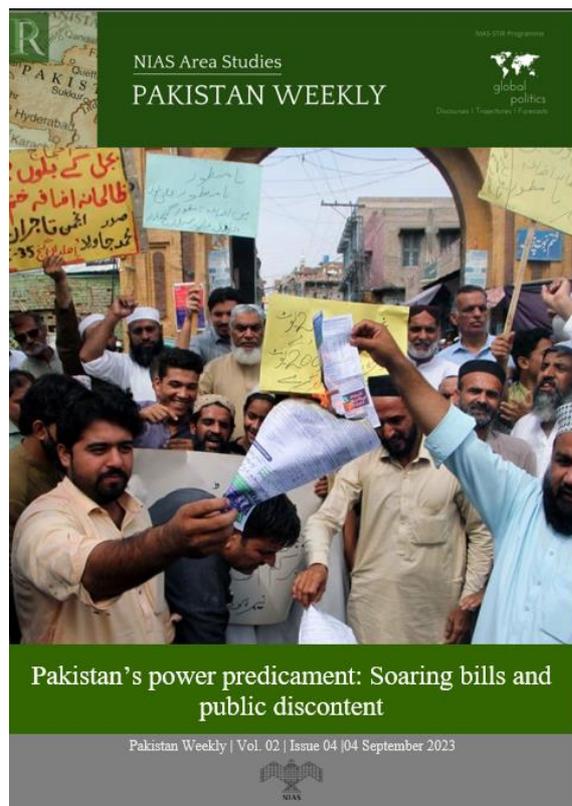


Pakistan's power predicament: Soaring bills and public discontent



PR SPECIAL COMMENTARY

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Global Politics is a primary focus of the NIAS Programme on Science, Technology, and International Relations (STIR). The primary focus is on contemporary world affairs. The Programme publishes *The World This Week*, and *NIAS Fortnightly on Science Technology and International Relations*.

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About NIAS Pakistan Reader

Pakistan Reader is an academic exercise at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in the Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore, India. The objective of its alert - "Pakistan Reader - Evening Brief" is to update the readers on contemporary developments within Pakistan, on a regular basis.

The PR Evening Briefs are a part of the focus on Pakistan at the International Strategic and Security Programme (ISSSP) within the NIAS.

PR Special Commentary

Pakistan's power predicament: Soaring bills and public discontent

By Dhriti Mukherjee

Although the issue of hiked bills has been prevalent for a considerable amount of time, the mass public dissatisfaction has risen due to the free rider problem, an absence of transparent records, and similar hikes in food and fuel prices.

The electricity bill crisis

On 04 September, following a sustained rise in the price of electricity bills, public protests began becoming widespread. Since the third week of August, Pakistan has been experiencing inflated electricity bills, with rates jumping by 100 per cent to 200 per cent.

The Interim Finance Minister Shamshad Akhtar stated that there was no "fiscal space" to help consumers with the electricity crisis, as the economy is facing 30 per cent inflation. She has described this to be a "worse than anticipated" economic situation. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) revealed headline inflation of 27.4 per cent in August. It has elicited public protest via shutting down shops and signs that denounced the "the unreasonable increase in electricity bills and taxes." People took to the streets to burn their bills in protest, with threats of a civil disobedience emerging in recent days.

Although the issue of hiked bills has been prevalent for a considerable amount of time, the mass public dissatisfaction has risen due to the free rider problem, an absence of transparent records, and similar hikes in food and fuel prices. It was also heightened due to the government's statements, with the energy minister saying that the "the soaring dollar rate and increase in global petroleum prices have meant that petroleum products are costing Pakistan much more." This is why electricity rates rose, "since the power was partly being generated from expensive imported fuel."

What caused the soar?

There are several causes that contributed to the soar in bill prices. The major cause is the circular debt that is rampant in the economy. According to a board member of the State Bank of Pakistan, the underlying cause behind this is that "Independent power producer contracts are dollar-denominated and based on capacity payments, which has resulted in the circular debt problem." This debt has been furthered due to unreleased subsidies and interest charges on delayed payments, to reach PKR 2.64 trillion rupees as of August 2023. As the government has failed to address this deep rooted issue, according to a [report](#) by *The News International*, 50 per cent of the electricity bill is attributed to "government inefficiencies."

Another major issue that has become the recipient of public backlash is the supply of free units of electricity to power sector employees. The practice of providing free electricity in Pakistan has resulted in a substantial financial burden on both state-owned entities in the power sector and government departments. A former CEO of a power distribution company Disco emphasized the relative insignificance of the cost of free electricity units for power sector employees alone compared to the enormous capacity payments. Approximately 120,000 employees of state-owned organizations receive electricity based on their pay scales, amounting to PKR 22 billion annually.

Aside from this, like the JI party, many have attributed the crisis to the agreements made by previous governments with the IPPs. This agreement stipulates that regardless of how much electricity was distributed, the government remains obligated to pay them. Owing to ongoing weather conditions which generated low consumer demand, and the exorbitant surging rates, many IPPs shut down and remained idle. Despite this, consumers have been urged by Kakar to pay PKR 1.3 trillion in the form of capacity payments.

What has been the government's response?

The increase has been "passed on to the consumers." Subsequently, Interim Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar has described the protests to be politically motivated, based on the actions by some parties with reference to the inflated bills. This majorly includes the protests staged by the Jamaat-e-Islami party, whose leader blames the agreements made with Individual Power Producers (IPPs) for the inflated bills.

Having earlier promised relief to power consumer over their bills, Kakar has now termed the situation as a "non-issue," implying that the concerns of these individuals would not be addressed. He has attributed the surging electricity prices to the stringent conditions of the USD three billion bailout agreement forged with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As per the agreement, the IMF required the Pakistani government to increase their tax revenue, as a result of which the prices went up by PKR 7.5 per unit. 40 to 50 per cent of electricity bills are linked to taxes imposed by the government, exclusive of a tariff rationalisation surcharge and a

financial surcharge. These costs have been translated into increased rates from power distribution companies, leading to mass outcry. The caretaker government has tried to reassure the public by saying that since “markets are psychological,” economic and financial conditions will improve.

What are the likely fallouts?

Pakistan faces mounting political pressure, particularly regarding the timeline for the upcoming general elections. During inception, the caretaker government vowed to meet the IMF requirements and continue the policies that were being pursued by the previous government. The ‘balancing act between the Constitution and the ECP’ that is currently ongoing has led to concerns about potential delays. This delay is potentially the cause behind the government not having a long term goal in mind. Political experts have stated that even if it wanted to subsidise the bills, it “has nothing” to borrow from. Thus, its hands are tied. Shehbaz Sharif on the economic turmoil over the electricity bills stated, “unless they give a date of election and spell out priorities, things are going to get worse, unfortunately.”

The uncertainty surrounding the elections and the hike in prices have led to instability in the capital market, discouraged investments, and could exacerbate capital flight. Engineering firms particularly lost out on their competitiveness due to challenges in efficiency and achieving goals, creating a shortage. 95 per cent of firms have reportedly had no access to finance, and 78pc companies have also been experiencing operational inefficiency due to power fluctuations. Companies are also undoing severe financial strain, as they are forced to invest in uninterrupted power supply

(UPS) systems. Additionally, the supply chain disruptions have reduced their international competitiveness. The confluence of the crises mentioned above present a significant threat to Pakistan’s economic future.

However, it is important to note that the caretaker government has nothing to lose politically, regardless of how this situation is resolved. Although their tenure is uncertain, there are no implications that this challenge imposes on them. Since it is an ad hoc government, once the general election results are declared, the problem of inflated bills will inevitably become the problem of the next government.

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PR Short Notes

Pakistan's election timeline: Balancing act between ECP and Constitution

By Dhriti Mukherjee



Source: Dawn

Can ECP deliver faster elections while upholding constitutional mandates?

On 1 September, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) demonstrated its determination to expedite the general polls, by stating that it aims to complete the delimitation of constituencies by 30 November. This decision paves the way for potential elections in late January 2024, with 28 January as the most likely date, unless the Supreme Court intervenes. In case of practical difficulties, the election date could be pushed to 4 February.

An ECP official stated regarding the Supreme Court's potential intervention, "We will comply with it [SC order]." However, the ECP is still awaiting the Supreme Court's judgment on its review petition concerning elections in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa following the dissolution of the provincial assemblies.

ECP's commitment to expedited elections aligned within constitutional boundaries?

The ECP has repeatedly emphasized its commitment to conducting elections as soon as possible. This commitment aligns with feedback from political parties, with the goal of holding elections following the amended delimitation schedule. The Supreme Court's recent judgement that rejected the ECP's review petition holds the potential to result in implications that will be felt in the upcoming polls. Legal experts are of the view that the judgment sets a precedent that could influence the timing of elections as per the Constitution, which mandates them by 8 November.

Doubt over ECP's consistency regarding election timelines?

Recently, there have been concerns that question the reliability of the ECP in meeting the timelines put forth by the constitution. Earlier this year, the ECP refused to hold elections for the Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab assemblies within the mandatory 90-day period, defying both the Constitution and Supreme Court orders. Initially, the ECP indicated it was ready to hold polls within 60 or 90 days, its stance shifted abruptly regarding fresh delimitations. Due to the constant changes and shifts in stance, a sense of political instability and lack of trust has been brewing among both political actors and the general public. Until it recognizes that no law or court order can exempt it from its constitutional duties, concerns persist that it may find reasons to delay elections, despite its assertions to the contrary.

Striking the right balance between speed and constitutionality

The willingness showcased by the ECP in recent days towards expediting the elections, highlights that it holds a certain sense of urgency. This is further attested to with the Supreme Court's judgement considered. Nonetheless, there are questions about balancing speed with adherence to constitutional mandates that are raised.

Given the recent (changing) decisions declared by the ECP over the course of the last month, it is vital to restore trust in the ability of the ECP to remain consistent. This is in large part due to the fact that if Pakistan wants to increase the degree of democracy and transparency in its election, a fair and timely electoral system is mandatory. As Pakistan navigates this critical juncture, all stakeholders must work together to ensure that elections are conducted in a manner that upholds both efficiency and constitutional integrity.

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The second hike. Now on Petrol, Diesel, Sugar and Pulses

By Femy Francis



Source: The News International

After the increase in electricity bills, now on Petrol, Diesel, Sugar and Pulses

On 31 August, the Ministry of Finance announced a new price hike of petrol to PKR 14.91 and high-speed diesel to PKR 18.44 per liter, which aggregates to PKR 305.36 per liter for petrol and PKR 311.84 for diesel. The Ministry of Finance attributed the hike to “the increasing trend of Petroleum prices in the international market and the exchange rate variations.”

Additionally, there has been a rise in the price of sugar, pulses and ghee/cooking oil. The current price for sugar stands at PKR 172 per kg with some retailers selling at PKR 185. Furthermore, there has been an average PKR 20 per kg rise in price for pulses as the imports stand costly owing to the depleting values of Pakistani currency. A hike in cooking oil and ghee prices is observed with the jump in palm oil rates.

What does the hike mean?

The shift in the petrol and diesel price will largely affect the transport sector with trains, trucks, buses and tractors which heavily rely on diesel and it would in turn reflect on the cost of vegetable and other foods. Whereas the hike in petrol will directly hit the middle class and lower middle classes as it would become costly to sustain and use private vehicles, rickshaws, and two-wheelers. With the rising cost of pulses and food grains can directly affect the ongoing food crisis with Pakistan already on the 99th position under Global Hunger Index, the current hike might lead to further the exasperating the condition.

What has been the government response?

On 31 August, Interim Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar stated that the people would have to pay their electricity/ utility bills as there is no way around it. He blamed the previous governments from 30 years prior for the economic crisis and that they planned to announce a relief package for the consumers. When asked about the IMF conditions he stressed that Pakistan will fulfill all conditions “at any cost” and that they refuse to deviate from it.

Additionally, Kakar explicitly blamed the severity of the issue on the unregulated contracts signed with Independent Power producers (IPPs) in the 90s to increase power production, where now they have to pay the surcharge. He stated that: “Our power structure remained dependent on fossil fuels and imported fuel. Whatever we were doing was on foreign reserves [in dollars] and that is impacting our other governance aspect.”

On the demand to remove the free electricity benefits enjoyed by the government’s legislators, judiciary and executive, Kakar said that it is not entirely true where the Army does not consume a single free unit and that they pay from their budget. With the judiciary as well he claimed, it was not the same as it was portrayed and it was only the Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) few employees that enjoyed the free units.

On 31 August, Pakistan Railways Chairman Mazhar Ali Shah announced that they plan to shift to solar power for field formations, encompassing stations and workshops. The first phase is set to include the transition of major railway stations, nine divisional headquarters and other officers which is aggregated to save PKR 1.8 billion. Additionally, owing to the energy crisis and the protest against the hiked electricity bills the Pakistan Railway’s management has decided to prohibit the usage of air conditioners before 11 am every day by the officers.

What are the social responses?

On 28 August, protests engulfed Pakistan from days prior against the hike in electricity prices. The protests kickstarted after the National Electricity Power Regulatory Authority announced that they were pushing the tariffs to PKR 4.96 units as a condition demanded by the IMF. Due to this, there has been an unrealistic hike in bills which has led to traders, businessmen and civilians taking to the streets. Several have demanded the removal of taxes from the bills and a petition was filed in the Supreme Court for the same with the removal of free electricity benefits enjoyed by the government elites. Since the protests the interim government has promised to come up with relief measures after it has been consulted with the IMF.

On 28 August, Jamaar-e-Islami (JI) staged a women's protest against electricity prices where they demanded relief from heavy taxation of the bills. Naeemur Rehman of Karachi Ji Emir Hafiz expressed that the current caretaker government is giving the people the cold shoulder due to which the mothers and sisters are compelled to take to the streets. Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) stood against the ongoing protests

stating that they support the traders and businessmen but they should follow some restraint.

Another editorial in Dawn, 'Inflation and desperation' looks into the real impact of soaring inflation, currency depreciation and the hike in prices to be faced by the lower to middle-income groups. The author found that many civilians have resorted to desperation where they are asking for help from strangers, the only difference between them and the vagrant on the street is that, they are full-time workers who are unable to make ends meet owing to exorbitant rise in prices.

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Nawaz Sharif's anticipated return: From "Will he" to "When"

By Dhriti Mukherjee



Source: Dawn

What do reports say?

On 25 August, Dawn reported that former President Shehbaz Sharif responded to speculation over Nawaz Sharif's impending return to Pakistan. He stated: "We held consultations with the senior leadership of the party and we have decided that our quaid [leader] Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif will return to Pakistan in October." However, the timeline continues to shift as it is being influenced by various factors. Party insiders have put forth the retirement of Chief Justice of Pakistan Umar Ata Bandial, Nawaz's pending appeals, and election dates, as possible developments that are playing a pivotal role in determining his return. The fear of potential incarceration upon returning, due to being declared an absconder and pending appeals, adds to the complexity of this decision.

Although it was initially speculated that he would return in mid September, recent advice from party loyalists has led to a delay until mid-October. A source reportedly told The News International that "the severity of weather" is what has led to discussions focusing on 15 October as a tentative return date.

Political implications of his return

Nawaz Sharif's return is not devoid of political implications. The PML-N leadership has accused Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial of showing "double standards" regarding the treatment of incarcerated politicians. Shehbaz Sharif openly criticized the Chief Justice for the apparent disparity in concern for Nawaz Sharif's well-being during incarceration. These allegations and statements have widened the discourse surrounding political victimization within Pakistan's legal system.

Amidst these complex circumstances, Shehbaz Sharif emphasized the party's commitment to "transparent accountability across the board for all institutions." This is in alignment with PML-N's recent calls for legal proceedings to be conducted in a fair manner, and its intention to facilitate the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) in ensuring transparency in the upcoming general elections.

Importance behind his return

Nawaz Sharif's return will have various advantages for the PML-N politically. While Shehbaz Sharif has proven to be a good administrator, most party members and supporters look at Nawaz as a more pragmatic leader. His connections with the people of the country and other international leaders have led him to be a celebrated political figure, and his return could set a more successful trajectory for the PML-N.

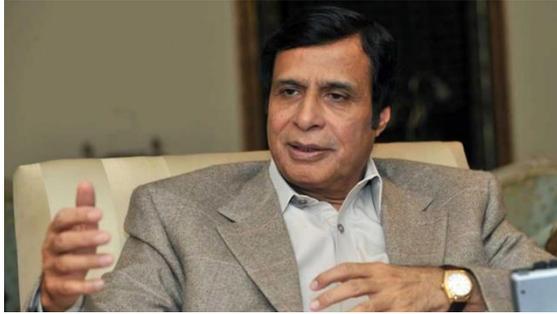
Along these lines, his return could present better chances of the PML-N securing votes in provinces other than Punjab. This would mean a spread of their support base and influence, having inevitable advantages for the party as a whole.

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POLITICS



Source: *The News International*

Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi arrested again

On 01 September, after Lahore High Court (LHC) ordered the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) to release the former chief minister of Punjab from their custody, the Islamabad police detained Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi again. The Lahore High Court explicitly forbade the Punjab Police, anti-corruption organizations, the National Accountability Bureau, and other law enforcement agencies from detaining Pervaiz Elahi in connection with any FIR, inquiry, or preventive detention-related laws. Later, Islamabad police posted on X "Parvez Elahi has been arrested under 3 MPO following a district magistrate's order." (Wajih Ahmad Sheikh, "In violation of LHC orders, Elahi captured again," *Dawn*, 02 September 2023; "Elahi rearrested under public order law after being released," *The News International*, 02 September 2023)

"It is not a very serious issue," PM Anwaarul Haq Kakar on inflated electricity bills

On 01 September, the caretaker Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar addressed prominent journalists and news anchors stating that "It is not a very serious issue, but political parties are in election mode and using it as a social cause," when asked about the country wide protest against hike electricity bills. According to Kakar, the government recently launched Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) plan is expected to attract an estimated USD 60–70 billion in foreign investment over the course of the following three to five years. He said that other investments of a comparable size had been promised and pledged to the temporary administration. (Syed Irfan Raza, "PM Kakar orders crackdown on smugglers as sugar prices go up," *Dawn*, 02 September 2023)

Civilian petitions in Supreme Court against inflated electricity bill

On 30 August, Saeeda Begum a civilian filed a petition with the Supreme Court against the inflated electricity bill, asking it to be direct the relevant authorities to remove taxes, charges, and cess from the people's bills and to recover them from Independent Power Producers (IPPs). She urged the discontinuation of the free electricity and gasoline/diesel provided to legislators, members of the executive, the judicial branch, and the electricity department personnel. The petitioner asked the Supreme Court to consider suicide cases and citizen protests and stated that the relevant authorities must be held accountable for the line losses and theft, and it was odd that the stolen electricity costs were recovered from the general population. Additionally, she expressed that Political parties, according to her, were dormant because they occasionally approached the Supreme Court for political reasons but never did so for reasons of public interest. (Nasir Iqbal, "SC moved against taxes, cess in bills," *Dawn*, 31 August)

Special Court Extends Khan's Judicial Remand in the Cipher Case

On 30 August, the special court Judge Abual Hasnat Zulqarnain under the Official Secrets Act ordered that Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan remain in custody until 13 September ruling in the case of the cipher controversy. The case was heard at the Attock District Jail with approval from the Law Ministry and over concerns about security expressed by the Interior Ministry. ("Cipher Case: Special Court Extends Khan's Judicial Remand Till Sep 13," *The Friday Times*, 30 August)

Imran Khan rearrested

On 29 August, Imran Khan was arrested again following suspension of his Toshakhana case sentence, and is set to remain in custody till 30 August for the Cipher case. The Islamabad High Court (IHC) suspended his Toshakhana case sentence, releasing him on bail and requiring him to provide a PKR 100,000 surety bond. His initial conviction had resulted in him being sentenced to three years in prison, while preventing him from contesting in the upcoming general elections. Khan's lawyers' defence against the plea on the grounds of jurisdictional errors was deflected by a lawyer for the Election Commission of Pakistan, who stated that the tax consultants brought forth by the defence as witnesses were irrelevant. A new

hearing has now been scheduled. ([“PTI Chief Imran Khan Re-Arrested After Suspension Of Toshakhana Sentence,”](#) *The Friday Times*, 29 August 2023)

ECC addresses soaring sugar prices and export quota

On 28 August, the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) of the Caretaker Cabinet convened its maiden meeting, responding to an almost 77 per cent surge in sugar prices over four months. The ECC prompted the Ministry of National Food Security to coordinate with the concerned authorities in order to minimize the smuggling and hoarding of sugar. Despite limited sugar stocks and escalating prices, the Lahore High Court's suspension of sugar price regulations has contributed to consumer stress and food inflation. The ECC, presided over by Finance Minister Dr Shamshad Akhtar, stressed that monitoring the availability, consumption, and pricing of the existing sugar stock is imperative. The ECC also urged the Ministry of National Food Security & Research to immediately provide data on wheat stocks and prices. (Zaheer Abbasi, [“ECC meeting chaired by Shamshad asks food ministry to help check smuggling, hoarding of sugar,”](#) *Business Recorder*, 29 August 2023; Khaleeq Kiani, [“ECC orders food ministry to check sugar smuggling, hoarding,”](#) *Dawn*, 29 August 2023)

PTI urges Supreme Court for timely general elections

On 28 August, the secretary general of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) filed a petition in the Supreme Court, calling upon President Dr Arif Alvi to announce the date for the general elections. They asked that this be declared within 90 days of the dissolution of the National Assembly, while simultaneously asking the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) to prepare an election schedule accordingly. This petition challenges the legality of the 5 August Council of Common Interest (CCI) decision approving the digital census and the 8 August Bureau of Statistics notification publishing the 2023 census. Additionally, the petition contests sections of the Election Act 2017, as per which the PTI sees the census as unconstitutional. (Nasir Iqbal, [“PTI seeks SC order for the president to issue poll date,”](#) *Dawn*, 29 August 2023)

COAS expresses support to the caretaker government

On 28 August, during the fourth apex committee meeting of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), the Chief of Army Staff, General Asim Munir, conveyed to the caretaker government

that it had the army's “all-out support.” This support is aimed at the country's economic regeneration and overall progress and came following a review of the SIFC initiatives that had been achieved. Aside from this, the meeting consisted of approving projects to garner investment in various fields of economic importance. This was the first SIFC meeting held under the caretaker government, which commended the council's “whole-of-government” approach. (APP, [“COAS Munir assures caretaker govt of army's support for country's economic revival,”](#) *Dawn*, 28 August 2023)

PML-N creates a blame game over the economic crisis

On 28 August, PML-N leadership renewed its criticism of “judges, generals,” and the PTI government for the ongoing economic crisis. The party is placing a two-way blame on the Imran Khan-led government, stating that they are responsible for sustained inflation and Nawaz's conviction. Former Energy Minister Khurram Dastgir Khan accused the PTI government by saying that their decisions “dealt a blow to Pakistan's economic stability and democracy.” However, this strategy is met with contradictions, as Nawaz Sharif previously praised former Army Chief Bajwa despite alleging his involvement in political interference. The PML-N believes the “fascism of the four-year period of Project Imran” can only be solved by its government. (Rizwan Shehzad, [“PML-N blames ex-judges, generals for inflation,”](#) *The Express Tribune*, 29 August 2023)

Protests against the Power bill

On 27 August, protestors gathered at Kalma Chowk with their electricity bills and placards written with anti-inflation slogans and demands against the power bill. The protestors demanded the government to withdraw the new price as they are unable to pay. With the protest being held outside, the Islamabad Electric Supply Company (Iesco) urged the authorities for the protection of staff and property. To handle the situation 250 police were deployed in the contested area. A brief meeting with the interim Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar was held as a result of the public rage against the inflated power bills. However, the government did not respond to the public regarding the issue. (Mohammad Asghar [“Security beefed up at Iesco offices in Rawalpindi amid protests,”](#) *Dawn*, 28 August 2023)

PPP on Nawaz Sharif's return

On 25 August, PPP leader Syed Khurshid Shah expressed that Nawaz Sharif would not return to

Pakistan as he did not have a plan to come and also, he is not well. This comes after the press meeting in London, where Shehbaz Sharif confirmed the arrival of PML-N supremo Nawaz Shar to Pakistan. (Nadir Guramani, [“PPP’s Khursheed Shah doesn’t see Nawaz returning to Pakistan in October,”](#) *Dawn*, 27 August 2023)

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHRISTIANS



Source: *Business Recorder*

The Inspector General of Punjab informed of “hostile agencies” involvement

On 29 August, Dr Usman Anwar, the Inspector General of Police (IGP) for Punjab, revealed that “hostile agencies” were involved in the Jaranwala incident, which involved violent attacks on numerous homes and churches belonging to the Christian minority as a result of counterfeit blasphemy claims. He noted that over 180 other persons had been apprehended and also claimed that since the Jaranwala disaster, the legislation has been in force and that victims from the Christian community are receiving assistance while the demolished churches are being restored. ([“Hostile Agencies Connected To Jaranwala Incident: Punjab Police Chief,”](#) *The Friday Times*, 29 August 2023)

PAKISTAN ELECTIONS 2023



Source: *Associated Press*

Election Commission of Pakistan prepares for upcoming polls

On 30 August, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) stated that it would closely monitor the upcoming electoral process, and would ensure a smooth transfer of power by overseeing the campaigning, expenditure, and code of conduct. Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja

stated: “We would closely watch election campaigns and electoral expenses.” The ECP expressed its willingness to bring in law enforcement agencies to ensure that the polls were peaceful. Consultative meetings were held with political parties including Tehreek-e-Labbaq Pakistan (TLP) and PML-Q, which endorsed the need to form new parties and develop transparency. TLP leadership also urged the use of media coverage and a strong union council. (Iftikhar A Khan, [“ECP to keep tabs on poll campaigns, expenses,”](#) *Dawn*, 1 September 2023)

BNP-Mengal Prioritizes “Recovery of Missing Persons” in Upcoming Elections

On 30 August, Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M) President Sardar Akhtar Mengal announced his party’s election focus: “recovery of missing persons.” This announcement was made at a seminar on the ‘International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearance,’ where Mengal expressed frustration with government inaction on the issue. He cited his family’s personal experience with his older brother being a victim of enforced disappearance. Mengal stated even after raising the matter in “national and provincial assemblies and even the Senate, no step was taken to recover them.” Despite the release of 400 individuals, 2,000 more disappeared, according to Mengal. In response, the Balochistan government “expressed disappointment” but “vehemently denied the allegations,” describing this to be a political bid to gain votes. (Saleem Shahid, [“Missing persons’ issue to be centre of BNP-M poll campaign: Mengal,”](#) *Dawn*, 1 September 2023)

ECP assures timely elections amidst delimitation concerns of ANP

On 30 August, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) guaranteed the Awami National Party (ANP) that the general elections would take place by mid-February, allaying worries about potential delays. The ECP pledged to accelerate the delimitation process and conveyed the possibility of holding elections earlier. This is in response to ANP’s emphasis on the importance of adhering to the constitutional requirement for elections within 90 days of assembly dissolution. The ECP also reassured the Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) and Balochistan National Party (BNP), who had expressed concerns regarding the elections recently. (Iftikhar A Khan, [“ECP ‘promises’ polls by mid-February, at the most,”](#) *Dawn*, 31 August 2023)

Poll date decision rests with the ECP, not the president, says the Ministry of Law and Justice

On 31 August, Dawn reported that the Ministry of Law and Justice reminded President Arif Alvi that confronting speculations might cause general elections to be delayed, Alvi who had requested the Election Commission of Pakistan set a date for the election was notified that the ECP and not the president that had the authority to announce the election's date. However, the letter from the law ministry was not made available to the media. President's House confirmed that Alvi did indeed receive the communication. This letter was written in response to Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja's letter to the president, in which he explained that under the modified law, the election watchdog alone had the authority to announce the election date. (Syed Irfan Raza, "Poll date ECP's sole prerogative, ministry tells president," *Dawn*, 31 August)

PBS provides digital census data to ECP

On 29 August, the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) supplied the digital census 2023 to the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), a pivotal step towards new electoral constituency delimitation. So far, gazette notifications of census charges, digitized maps, and block-wise census information have been provided. Sindh's maps are expected to be released on 30 August. With ECP's obligation to base upcoming general elections on the latest census, it has already initiated the process of revamping constituencies. With old constituencies now frozen, the ECP has begun its delimitation work, and has set dates for the publishing, discussions, and final release of the list of new constituencies. This process will begin on 9 October, with the final list to be announced on 14 December. ("ECP gets census data for fresh delimitation," *The Express Tribune*, 30 August 2023)

Jamaat-i-Islami approaches SC for general election dates

On 29 August, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) mirrored the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI) actions by filing a petition with the Supreme Court, asking them to release a date for general elections within 90 days of National Assembly dissolution. JI's petition calls for immediate election schedule notification by ECP, executive assistance for fair elections, and the caretaker government's support in conducting the elections. The petition filed by the PTI additionally challenges the legality of the digital census and Pakistan Bureau of Statistics' actions. (Nasir Iqbal,

"After PTI, Jamaat petitions SC for polls within 90 days," *Dawn*, 30 August 2023)

ECP considers to announce election schedule ahead of delimitation

On 30 August, Dawn reported that the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) is considering announcing the general election schedule even before the completion of constituency delimitation, a move discussed during a meeting with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP). The PPP urged the ECP to adhere to the constitutional 90-day deadline for elections, focusing on an immediate schedule announcement for economic revival and political stability. The PPP is of the opinion that holding elections as per the constitutional timeline would help in economic progress and smoothing the political landscape which has flared due to uncertainty. The ECP is set to meet the Awami National Party (ANP) and Balochistan Awami Party (BAP) to hold further discussions on the elections. (Iftikhar A Khan, "ECP may give poll schedule before delimitation ends," *Dawn*, 30 August 2023)

Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan concerned over potential election delay

On 28 August, during the 20th session of the 25th Executive Committee of the Supreme Court Bar Association of Pakistan (SCBAP), presided over by the organization's president Abid S. Zuberi expressed significant concern over the prospective extension of the 90-day deadline for holding general elections and "serious reservations" regarding matters pertaining to the rule of law, the supremacy of the constitution, and major abuses of human rights. The house stated that the All-Pakistan Lawyers Convention will be held on 7 September in Islamabad in order to address urgent concerns and strengthen the voice of the legal community as a whole, according to a press release released following the conference. ("Lawyers 'deeply concerned' by potential election delay," *The Express Tribune*, 29 August 2023)

ECP assures against the concerns of delimitation procedure being delayed

On 28 August, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) assured the delegations of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) and the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) that the procedure to redraft the constituencies of the national and provincial assemblies will be finished "as soon as possible." According to a news statement published by the ECP, the MQM delegation endorsed the ECP's decision to pursue new delimitation before

elections. Although a new census was taken, the Muttahida leaders claimed that the party had concerns about the 2017 census results as well. They claimed that new delimitation was required since Karachi's population has "substantially increased" as a result of a continuous population inflow from other parts of the country. Meanwhile, the JI leaders criticized the ECP for starting the consultative process only after the release of the delimitation timetable and stated that political parties ought to have been consulted earlier. They believed that an election calendar should have been released concurrently with the delimitation schedule. (Iftikhar A. Khan, "[ECP attempts to allay fears of delay in delimitation process](#)," Dawn, 29 August 2023)

MQM-P urges the government to conduct elections soon

On 27 August, Senior Deputy Convener Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan (MQM-P) Farooq Sattar expressed that the general elections should be held as soon as possible to resolve public demands. He said that Pakistan is facing more ethical issues than economic issues in recent times. He urged the Interim Prime Minister Kakar to look into the surging price of electricity bills and the public unrest in the region. He has also given a notice that if the government did not take any action, the MQM-P will conduct a protest against the government for the recent skyrocketed price of electricity. ("[MQM-P demands polls under new census](#)," *The News International*, 28 August 2023)

SECURITY



Source: Daily Times

Suicide attack in Bannu

On 31 August, a suicide attack by a motorcycle bomber in the district of Bannu killed nine Pakistani army troop members and injured five. With an increase in suicide attacks in this region, the number of security personnel has increased while actions are being taken to eliminate terrorists. Reacting to this incident, Prime Minister Anwaarul Haq Kakar stated that he was "heartbroken" and affirmed that "Pakistan stands resolute against such terror." ("[Nine troops martyred in Bannu suicide](#)

[attack](#)," *The News International*, 1 September 2023)

Lahore police crackdown on drug addicts

On 27 August, the Lahore Police and Punjab Safe Cities Authority (PSCA) used safe city surveillance cameras to conduct a coordinated crackdown on drug addicts and suppliers in and around Muslim Town. They successfully arrested 110 accused individuals, of which the 50 drug addicts were sent to rehabilitation centres for recuperation. Superintendent Usman Tipu stated that the campaign would eliminate the persistent issue, and called for citizens to help the police. ("[110 arrested during crackdown on drug-traffickers](#)," *The Nation*, 28 August 2023)

ECONOMY



Source: The News International

Ten main economic threats, identified by the Finance Ministry

On 01 September, according to the finance ministry report, the economy is in a precarious state. Total public debt has increased from PKR 23.02 trillion in 2017–18 to PKR 54.39 trillion by the end of March 2023, while external debt and liabilities have increased from USD 95 billion in 2017–18 to USD 126.1 billion. As per to the ministry, Pakistan's external debt accounts for 40.8 per cent of the country's total public debt, which may put the government's fiscal position at risk in the face of significant current account deficits, a lack of foreign exchange reserves, and a declining exchange rate. The entire public debt of the government has increased over the last five years and now exceeds the FRDL Act's 60 per cent of GDP ceiling. This is primarily owing to persistent fiscal deficits that, since 2010, have averaged 6 per cent of GDP and contributed to a sharp increase in debt. The Fiscal Risk Statement (FRS) for 2023–24 identified ten major sources of fiscal risk, including macroeconomic instability, mounting debt, state-owned companies (SOEs) that are losing money, and other potential threats and unclear factors. (Mehtab Haider, "[Ministry identifies 10 key risks to economy](#)," *The News International*, 02 September 2023)

Increase in train fare

On 02 September, following a dramatic spike in the cost of petroleum products, Pakistan Railways (PR) has increased train tariffs by 5 per cent, thus aggravating the plight of the average person for whom it was a reasonably affordable form of transportation. All passenger, intercity, and mail express trains now cost more thanks to its administration. 5 per cent more has been added to the fees for luggage and packages. For the second time in the previous 16 days, railway fares have gone up. As of today, Saturday, the new rates will be in effect. ("Train fares jacked up by 5%." *The Express Tribune*, 02 September 2023)

Pakistan seeks IMF permission to provide relief against inflated power bills

On 30 August, the caretaker minister for finance stated that the government remains committed to the IMF programme, and along these lines, had shared the nation's inflated electricity bills with the organisation. This was done to confirm that the IMF programme's targets would not be breached and to propose the utilisation of an emergency allocation of PKR 250 billion in the budget for 2023-24. This is being done to provide respite to consumers utilising up to 400-unit slabs; however, it is only possible with the IMF's permission. ("Pakistan shares power relief plan with IMF." *The News International*, 31 August 2023)

Prices of sugar increase to PKR 185 per kg

On 28 August, according to traders, the wholesale price of sugar has increased to PKR 164 per kg. This added pressure to the retail price, which rose to PKR 180 from PKR 170. Rising wholesale prices have given more options for various online marketplace and retail store operators to profit handsomely from their already accumulated stocks. The retail marts and online vendors charged sugar prices up to PKR 185 per kg, from PKR 170 to 175 on 29 August. In order to curb the prices, the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) directed the appropriate authorities to put a halt to accumulating and smuggling sugar to Afghanistan. Despite the sweetener's rising prices, consumers have not seen any improvement in the prices being announced by the caretaker government. (Aamir Shafaat Khan, "Sugar prices swell to Rs185 per kg." *Dawn*, 30 August 2023)

Underdeveloped infrastructure and poor governance are additional impediments, says Moody's

On 30 August, in its most recent analysis, Moody's indicated that Pakistan faces significant challenges due to its governance and infrastructure problems.

Pakistan's infrastructure quality is much inferior than that of other major Asian nations, resources allotted for capital spending have been restrained by a lack of fiscal capacity. Additionally, the analyses showed that Pakistan had very few people, regardless of gender, have completed secondary school. In the analysis, the risks associated with work and income, the gender gap in educational attainment appears to be a significant factor influencing workforce involvement. South Asia as a whole has a low percentage of women participating in the workforce compared to men, ranging from 30.4 per cent in Pakistan. (Tahir Amin, "Weak infrastructure, governance: Moody's spots extra constraints." *Business Recorder*, 30 August 2023)

CHINA AND CPEC



Source: China Dialogue Ocean

Pakistan and China discuss arms control and security

On 30 August, Pakistan and China held their 8th round of bilateral consultations on arms control, non-proliferation, and security in Beijing. The delegations were led by Mohammad Kamran Akhtar from Pakistan and Sun Xiaobo from China. Both sides emphasized enhancing strategic collaboration between think tanks and research institutions and agreed to hold the 9th round in 2024. Additionally, Pakistan's Caretaker Prime Minister Anwaar-ul-Haq Kakar praised the importance of naval war games for refining maritime security plans and safeguarding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). He stated that Pakistan was sufficiently equipped to address any threats to the CPEC and Gwadar Port. ("Security of CPEC and Gwadar Port: PM highlights enhanced responsibilities of Navy." *Business Recorder*, 31 August 2023; "Pakistan, China discuss arms control, non-proliferation." *The Express Tribune*, 31 August 2023)

EXTERNAL



Source: Business Recorder

US diplomat reaches out to Pakistan for partnership and cooperation

On 30 August, Acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland contacted Pakistan's interim Foreign Minister Jilil Abbas Jilani via call, to strengthen bilateral ties and discuss mutual concerns. She reportedly congratulated him on securing his position in office, before they engaged in talks centered around "broadening and deepening the US-Pakistan partnership on issues of mutual concern." Furthermore, the areas of economic stability, continued IMF engagement, and the importance of timely elections were highlighted in the discussions. (Ali Hussain, "[US sharpens the focus on Pakistan](#)," *Business Recorder*, 31 August 2023)

Another wheat shipment from Russia to reach Pakistan

On 30 August, The Express Tribune reposts that according to importers, the shipment of 55,000 tons of wheat from privately owned sources departed Russia for Pakistan and will arrive at Karachi Port on 8 September. So far, wheat has been bought in quantities totaling 4 lakh tonnes. On 14 September, the product's second shipment is scheduled to arrive. Over 9 lakh tonnes will be imported by the private sector, with Karachi receiving the majority of the supplies. ("[Wheat shipment from Russia to arrive on Sept 8](#)," *The Express Tribune*, 30 August 2023)

UN Peacekeeping Ministerial Preparatory Meeting to be held in Pakistan

On 29 August, according to Dawn, a two-day preparatory conference for the upcoming United Nations Peacekeeping Ministerial will be held in Pakistan starting on 30 August. The meeting's focus will be "Safety and Security of UN Peacekeepers". The meeting held at the Center for International Peace and Stability (CIPS) is co-hosted by Japan. There will be panel discussions on a variety of sub-themes to examine the need for capacity building, the safety and security of UN peacekeepers from the standpoint of international

law, improving the medical capabilities of UN peacekeeping missions, and utilizing technology and strategic communication. ("[Pakistan to host UN Peacekeeping Ministerial preparatory meeting](#)," *Dawn*, 29 August 2023)

US and European Union concerned over delayed elections

On 27 August, according to a new report in The Express Tribune quoting diplomatic sources, the United States and the European Union, have been closely monitoring the developments in Pakistan over the conduction of elections. The US and the EU consider elections were a necessary component of any advanced democracy. However, there were concerns that elections might not be held on time and that the current caretaker regime might last longer than expected. (Kamran Yousaf, "[West cautions Pakistan against delaying polls](#)," *The Express Tribune*, 28 August 2023)

ENERGY/ENVIRONMENT



Source: Tribune India

Water flows downstream, reducing the Sutlej flood

On 29 August, as the Sutlej River flowed downstream from Bahawalpur, the flood level slowly started to decline. Weaslan, Sahlan, Lal De Goth, Hasilpur, and Khairpur Tamewali in the Bahawalpur district were among the Bahawalpur localities that experienced extensive damage as a result of the water intrusion. Meanwhile, the tehsil Ahmedpur East, south of Bahawalpur, is currently in the path of the moderate flood. According to a spokesperson for the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA), the water level in areas upstream of Bahawalpur has decreased from a high- to medium-flood situation. (Imran Gabol, "[Sutlej flood recedes as water moves downstream](#)," *Dawn*, 30 August 2023)

JUDICIARY



Source: *The Friday Times*

Social media attack against Chief Justice of Islamabad High Court

On 27 August, the Federal Ministry of Law and Justice condemned political parties from participating social media attack against the Chief Justice Aamer Farooq of IHC. They said that political parties should refrain from performing such activities as it slanders the Institutions of the country. In addition, the Islamabad High Court Bar Association (IHCBA) also strongly cussed the "malicious social media campaign" tormenting the judge. ("Ministry condemns campaign against judge," *The Express Tribune*, 27 August 2023)

Pakistan Occupied Kashmir Climate change and small-scale farmers



Source: *Foreign Policy*

On 28 August, *The Nation* highlighted the adverse effects of climate change on small-scale farmers in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). Its rural population is significantly dependent on agriculture as its source of livelihood, but the timely cycle of seasons has been disrupted because its resources, glaciers, and forests remain extremely susceptible to climate change. A farmer from PoK stated that currently, they do not experience the season of spring, leading to vegetables being "scorched early on because of the unexpected heat." This heat has also significantly lowered agricultural and dairy yields. The secretary of Agriculture, Livestock, Irrigation, and Small Dams stated that a "comprehensive approach is imperative," and plans to engage "NGOs and research institutes" to develop crops and agricultural methods that can resist "environmental uncertainty." ("Climate crisis

has profound impact on AJK's small farmers," *The Nation*, 28 August 2023)

SOCIETY

Afghan poliovirus found in the sewerage of Lahore



Source: *Dawn*

On 30 August, the Pakistan Polio Laboratory at the National Institute of Health (NIH) confirmed a wild poliovirus, genetically linked to Afghanistan, had been detected in the sewage system in Lahore. It is regarded as the third positive sample recorded in the Lahore district. Pakistan's Health Minister Dr. Nadeem Jan assured that Afghanistan and Pakistan are working together to eradicate polio. The National Emergency Operations Centre's coordinator, Dr. Shahzad Baig, stated "We have adopted a proactive and robust approach to all detections, prioritizing the health and safety of every child," adding that "Our vigilant virus surveillance system has consistently been swift in identifying threats." (Ikram Junaidi, "Poliovirus linked to Afghanistan detected in Lahore sewage," *Dawn*, 31 August)



Pakistan Reader is an academic exercise at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) in the Indian Institute of Science Campus, Bangalore, India. The objective of this alert - "Pakistan Reader - Evening Brief" is to update the readers on contemporary developments within Pakistan, on a regular basis.

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We are hoping to build this initiative into a credible independent global portal with independent research and analysis on contemporary Pakistan in a real-time basis. In the process, we are also looking forward to building capacity amongst young scholars who would want to work on Pakistan.



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