



Mass protests in Pakistan as ousted PM accuses US of regime change

This transcript may not be 100% accurate due to audio quality or other factors.

Aaron Maté (AM): Welcome to Pushback, I'm Aaron Maté. Joining me is Junaid Ahmad. He is a professor of religion and world politics at the University of Lahore in Pakistan. Junaid, welcome.

Junaid Ahmad (JA): Great to be with you, Aaron.

AM: So talk to us about what's going on. The Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has been ousted by parliament in a no confidence vote, millions of people have been taking to the streets in protest. Khan says that this is basically US-backed regime change. What is happening?

JA: Well, there's truth to what Khan says, we don't know the extent of it, but we should also know that often we don't know the exact details of American meddling anywhere in the world until later on, either it is declassified or through WikiLeaks. So we have some evidence of what Khan has said in terms of an American pressure on the Pakistani ambassador in D.C., its contacts with various opposition members and now perhaps becoming clear, also contacts with the army and specifically the chief of Staff, Army Staff General Bajwa- that basically said that if a vote of no confidence against Khan succeeds, we will forgive Pakistan. Now forgive them for what I don't know, but if it does not succeed, then there will be horrible and rough consequences for Pakistan. Now, that was the kind of background that Khan ultimately revealed before this vote of no confidence took place. But basically, what we now know is virtually the entire political class, the two dominant parties, the Pakistan People's Party and the Pakistan Muslim League, these two parties have dominated Pakistani political life for the past three decades. And it was basically to remove their dominance of political life. It's in that context that Imran Khan's PTI party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, which translates into the movement of justice, it filled that vacuum of the desires of the people. So we know that these political opposition parties, all of the media and now crucially, the Chief of Army Staff -

anyone who knows a little bit about Pakistan, they would know that the army, the military has this overwhelming political influence in the political life of the country- so all of them by this point wanted Khan out and they were able to then manipulate members of Khan's own political party, as well as his coalition parties to vote against him. And so that happened on Saturday night, Sunday morning, Pakistan time. And in response, and we can get into that as well, we've had some of the biggest demonstrations in the history of the country.

AM: That message you referenced that reportedly came from the US, that if Khan receives a no confidence vote, then we will forgive Pakistan for some unstated infraction. What do we know about that message? Khan said that it was conveyed in a letter. Did he give any details and has any sort of document been publicly released?

JA: Yes. So this is interesting right now. I mean, we don't know the full extent of it, but we do know that this is basically the minutes of a meeting between one assistant Secretary of State in the US, now been named Donald Lu, with the Pakistani ambassador. Now that's one part of it that we know about. And it was perceived that this Pakistani ambassador and this is by the way not the first time, was quite close to people in Washington to this Mr. Donald Lu, and that he would not directly convey this. This was supposed to be kind of a very private thing. Now again, this may seem very odd, but we have a history of ambassadors to the United States, which tend to be more loyal to the US than to Pakistan. Very ironic. So this only leaked out later on when there was some pressure from some embassy staff within the Pakistan Embassy and then not only Imran Khan, but the National Security Council of Pakistan confirmed this as a recorded meeting. And of course, that's one part of it. We still don't know the extent of the communication with members of the opposition and of course, now the army as well. But the important thing about that is there was then a congressional hearing. They basically asked Mr. Donald Lu what was going on here, and he said that, you know, well, we were calling the Pakistanis and this was about the vote, the UN vote on the Russian invasion of Ukraine to come along with us and condemn. So we were calling them, we pressure, and they asked them, Did you try reaching out to the Pakistani government? And he kind of avoids the question. So we're getting more and more evidence on this. We don't have it fully right now, but it's very clear that a lot of Imran Khan's posturing of trying to pursue an independent foreign policy had a lot to do with the slowly, slowly and then culminating in this American antagonism towards him and desire to get him out.

AM: Well, let me ask you more about that. If there was a direct US role here and again, as you said earlier, it's the kind of thing where the US, if the US does have a major role, we often hear about it many, many years later, especially via leaks from WikiLeaks. But if there was a US role here, what motives would the US have to oust the Prime Minister of Pakistan?

JA: Oh, plenty. I mean, so at this point, the motives part is easy to answer. And like you said, you know, it's not like the US leaves paper trails of its regime change operations throughout the world. So, you know, that may take time. In terms of the motivations, well, there's plenty

from the get go. Even before he came to power, Khan was condescendingly pejoratively called Taliban Khan. Now, the reason for that was because he opposed, right from 2001, the American so-called War on Terror and particularly its AfPak. The, if you will, the theatre of that war on terror, its occupation and invasion of Afghanistan, and its spill-over effects into Pakistan, which ultimately led to pressure on Pakistan to conduct its own military operations in its own country, and which led to massive debts and a civilian displacement and so on. So Khan's point was simple, which many of us also share that this is both immoral, and it's counterproductive. It's going to fuel more militancy in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and he was basically proven right. But of course, the United States doesn't like to be proven wrong on these things, so I don't think they ever forgave him for being this consistent critic of that policy. I mean, he led many of the demonstrations, I mean stood alone as a politician in Pakistan, opposing drone strikes, leading mass rallies all the way to the areas in the northwest of the country, many activists from the West came and joined him, Medea Benjamin, Kathy Kelly and so on. So that was, of course, the one major infraction, if you will, on his part from the get go, even before he became prime minister. Becoming prime minister- so many things, where to begin- his unequivocal support for the Palestinian and the Palestinian struggle. I mean, this got him into trouble not only with the United States, obviously with Israel, which obviously it's not a great relationship anyway, but especially the Gulf countries, which of course, have this very close relationship on Pakistan and perhaps overbearing relationship, who were in the process, as many of us know of normalising the relations with Israel publicly, in fact asserting what we've known privately, and it's pressure on Pakistan to normalise as well. So whether it's Palestine, whether it's strengthening the relationship with China and of course, the last straw that broke the Western gallows back was improving the relationship with Russia, with which Pakistan has historically been an adversary. And so this was kind of right at the moment when Imran Khan was invited by Putin. And when he landed in Russia, it was the day when the Russian invasion of Ukraine happened. Now of course, he didn't know that this was going to happen. So from that point, they wanted him to strongly condemn, which he refused to do. Of course, he's always advocated, from that point, a diplomatic resolution, in fact encouraging the Chinese to take up that role. So there's a lot of these different things, I could actually add some more as well, but all of these combined right from the get go to make him a persona non grata to the United States.

AM: And so tell us about these protests. We've seen the images. A lot of people there obviously, estimates of in the millions coming out to protest. I heard a member of a leftist group in Pakistan say today that the bulk of Imran Khan's supporters are middle and upper class Pakistanis. Is that true? And, you know, just talk to us about how these protests have gone.

JA: No, it's not true. And with all due respect to my leftist comrades and friends in Pakistan, I think that it's difficult to admit that Khan, who should be certainly criticised along many lines in terms of his stint in power, in terms of political and economic governance of the country, this type of thing, that he still maintains so much support. I mean this is, I mean I

know this for a fact, obviously you see left and right, the vast majority of these people are not middle or upper class, they are ordinary people. In fact, I, all of us were surprised. I mean, I think even Khan supporters, Khan himself was probably surprised at this massive outpouring in not just urban areas and towns, in the countryside, of people who one would think, wow, I mean, these people have been suffering the same way under Khan in terms of the economic pressures of inflation and so on, why would they still come out to support Khan? I think that part of it is, which people don't understand, is deep fear and contempt of what the young leader of the Pakistan People's Party Bilawal Bhutto Zardari called, return-now we can welcome the return to Purana Pakistan, the old Pakistan. And as soon as he said that people were saying, Wow, we really, really dread that moment. These dominant political parties have looted and plundered the countries over the past three decades, which is why, otherwise, you know, Aaron this is not something easy for a third party to emerge in a context where there's been a monopoly by two political parties. So I think many people fail to understand that yes, part of it is still some hope from Khan to deliver what he perhaps has not been able to deliver, part of it being that he brought on board many electables in order to get himself in power, which he himself acknowledges now. Well, one of the blessings in disguise of this whole process is we know who to get rid of in our party. So people need to realise that these people are not just robots that they're portrayed as, as canisters or robots, these are critically thinking people. They've been critical of Khan, but they have far more contempt of these opposition political parties, and they certainly don't want to return to that rule. And they realise that at this particular point, when Khan is being opposed by all of the political parties and these political parties hate each other, but somehow they allied against Khan, he's being opposed by the entire media- I mean, all of the media in Pakistan- by the Chief of Army Staff, the military, as well as by Washington. I mean, there must be something going on behind this. So I think that some of our leftist friends need to give more credit to ordinary Pakistanis to be able to kind of think about these things in critical ways.

AM: And the new Pakistani Prime Minister, Shahbaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted a few years ago after revelations of corruption in the Panama Papers. Who is he and who are his supporters in parliament?

JA: Well, Shahbaz Sharif, the younger brother of Nawaz Sharif, of the former prime minister, I mean, who's had many rounds at being the prime minister of Pakistan since the early 1990s. And now this, I mean, it's ironic. Well, perhaps it shouldn't be surprising the two dominant political parties, the Pakistan Muslim League of the Sharif brothers and the Pakistan People's Party, these are the two kind of richest families in the country. And so politics became a way, I mean, very openly, there's not even any intention to kind of hide this, but it became a way to just personal financial aggrandisement. So the prime minister who's just been voted in today by the National Assembly, Shahbaz Sharif, he is the younger brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. He himself has been chief minister of the province of Punjab, the largest province in the country. So perhaps not as bad of a reputation, not as discredited as the elder brother, but he himself has so many corruption cases against him. And it seems like the

motivation for all of these parties right now to get together against Khan is to prevent some of these corruption cases from going forward. We have a National Accountability Bureau that has been investigating all of these things. And obviously, this has made all of them incredibly nervous. So one of the motivations for all of them to come together right now against Khan is to prevent those corruption cases from proceeding. But you know, these are discredited political parties. Right now they've come together and they have a majority in parliament and Shahbaz Sharif is leading it now.

AM: You've written about a phenomenon that you call Imranophobia. And you say this: "Liberal fundamentalists detest Imran [Khan] because he does not fit the bill regarding these core values and dispositions. He is the beardless internal 'other' who is not quite as easily dismissible as the body of the bearded religious brown man. Liberal fundamentalists want Imran to be like them but he is not, hence the visceral reactions of contempt". Talk to us more about that.

JA: Look, Aaron, right when he came to power, in fact even before that, like I said, this kind of rhetoric of Taliban Khan, it's very sad that so many of our own liberals and progressives within Pakistan somehow adopted the profound philosophical worldview of George W. Bush: that you're either with us, means the War on Terror and the Pakistani military operations in the northwest and basically perceiving any bearded guy of the principally the Pashtun population in the northwest as a militant or terrorist, or you're with them. You're with the Taliban, you're with al-Qaida, et cetera, et cetera. So they have this menacing worldview, a very unfortunate, right from the get go. And so Khan was lumped into that. Now, Khan, yes, he is certainly, I mean, he himself is religious and you know, lo and behold, the language that he uses with regard to issues of social justice and so on have inspiration from Islam. He talks about an Islamic welfare state along the lines of what he believed that the Prophet Muhammad established in Medina. He talks about compassion, mercy from an Islamic language. Now, the problem is, the mere fact that this man speaks in this Islamic language automatically makes the simple minded a right wing, fundamentalist, etc., you just have to do a, you know, five seconds of research to see why is it that all of the religious right, including the Pakistani Taliban, hate this guy, despise him, want to kill him, the Pakistani Taliban. So, you know, he is a catch-22 for him. On the liberal left, they claim he's just this right wing Islamic fundamentalist. The right wing fundamentalists in Pakistan claim that he's a Jewish agent, he had a wife who was Jewish, Jemima Goldsmith, etc.. So it's a catch-22 within. But the fundamental problem captured in what I said there was their inability to see some nuance in people, right? And Imran Khan coming as a person who lived in the West, etc. experienced and lived in England for most of his life, played international cricket and so on, there is at least one element of discomfort with them that if he's speaking about these issues, progressive issues of social justice, why is he not doing it, acting, behaving, speaking like us in England, looking like us in doing so?! Why is he wearing, you know, this may sound like really trivial, but why is he wearing local dress in Pakistan? Why does he invoke Islam into these things? It's something which is sadly, not all of the left, but sections of it, they just cannot handle,

they can't digest that. And there's sadly Islamophobia within our ranks as well. And of course, some of it is understandable. Pakistan has gone through some experiences, certainly during the Zia-ul-Haq period and the kind of militant forces that were produced, certainly not by Khan, but by these same Sharif brothers in the Punjab. So they've gone through an experience in which there's an understandable disgust with the very fundamentalist and sectarian forces unleashed, but they're projecting all of this onto Khan, who has nothing to do with that.

AM: So going forward, what do you see happening? Imran Khan's not going away. He's again forcefully accusing the US of being behind his ouster, and he's encouraging these massive demonstrations in support of him and against his overthrow. So what do you see happening in the coming period?

JA: Yeah, well, I mean, even for the Sunday evening's protests, I mean, Khan had just said, you know, people just come out and rally. I mean, it barely seemed like a call, just kind of an encouragement. And I can tell you for sure, that he was certainly himself surprised at the level, the magnitude of these protests throughout the country. So it's a strong indicator that certainly the political career of Khan and his PTI is not over. It's a strong indicator of that. Today, they offered mass resignations of the PTI party, so there's a serious political crisis ongoing at this, even at the parliamentary level. Now this is also, as I was saying, as time has proceeded throughout these weeks, we also know kind of who are the forces supportive of this. It's not just these opposition parties. It is the very influential important Pakistani military- or at least the top brass of the high command of it. It's also very clear that the majority of the Office of Poor and ordinary soldiers are with Khan. So it's perhaps the first time in the history of the country in which, you know, people talk about how unified and disciplined the Pakistani military has been, and that's true. It's the first time we've got serious divisions in which I don't think the military or General Bajwa, Chief of Army Staff, can order, for example, the military to start repressing this. I think many of them will just disobey these orders. So it's a very, very interesting situation right now in which we probably will see the momentum, the sustained momentum of this demonstration of support for Imran Khan continue. And that may lead to what obviously the opposition did not want, which was early elections. We'll just have to wait and see what happens there.

AM: And for people who might say, Look, this is routine for Pakistan, no prime minister ever finishes their full term. This always happens. How would you respond to that?

JA: The difference is, and I keep reminding some of our friends, is that when most of the prime ministers were removed from power, including our most popular prime minister, that Imran Khan often refers to, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, in the 1970s, a populist, spoke about Islamic socialism and so on- very popular when he came in. By the end, no one came to save him. People were not on the streets to save him when he was judicially executed by the right wing military dictator Zia-ul-Haq. The difference is that all of those overthrows and ousting of the civilian governments were not accompanied by a kind of mass demonstrations to support

them. People were also fed up with them and really did not see a difference between civilian rule and military rule. This is the first time in which you've seen massive protests throughout the country in support of him. So this is the crucial difference. We'll see how long this can sustain itself. But yeah, this is the big difference there.

AM: Junaid Ahmad, professor of religion and world politics at the University of Lahore in Pakistan. Thanks very much.

JA: Great to be with you Aaron.

END