PAKISTAN'S HYBRID REGIME

Growing democratization, or increased authoritarianism?

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Imran Khan presented his July 2018 election victory as ushering in a 'Naya Pakistan'. He galvanized urban youthful middle-class support around his 'modernizing agenda' to end 'dynastic politics', eliminate corruption, address environmental issues, reduce Pakistan's economic dependency, and bring back money that had been laundered overseas. Eight months later, he launched an ambitious poverty alleviation scheme which focused on the empowerment of women. On 20 July 2019, the first ever elections were held for seats for the merged tribal districts in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa assembly. Attempts to establish a 'transformative' political regime followed a decade of gradual democratic consolidation in which governments had completed terms in office and power had been transferred following competitive multi-party elections. Does this evidence suggest that democracy is advancing in Pakistan, despite the army's continuing presence in public life? Is the country bucking the trend, elsewhere in South Asia, of democratic recession, a process which forms part of what has been termed the third wave of autocratization (Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, 2019)?

Autocratization can be understood as backsliding from a liberal or elective democracy to a more authoritarian regime type, or a reduction in the limited space for freedoms provided by authoritarian rulers (Bermeo, 2015; Diamond, 2015). Pakistan has been variously described as an electoral autocracy, 'partly free', or a hybrid regime. The latter term more accurately reflects Pakistan's heterogeneous elements when used by such scholars as Katharine Adeney (2017). Pakistan exists in a 'grey zone' in which multi-party elections coexist with reserved powers in the security and foreign policy areas for the powerful military (Shah, 2014).

The growing literature on autocratization recognizes that this global process is occurring simultaneously with some instances of democratization. A renewed interest in autocratization has come about because of the contemporary decline of liberal democracy in such countries as India, Hungary, Poland, and the United States. Pertinent for the Pakistan case study is the further finding that autocratization's contemporary manifestation is marked not by ceasing elections, but rather by the undermining of such democratic rights as freedom of expression, rule of law and freedom of association.

Claims of Pakistan's democratic advance can be focused too narrowly on the question whether elections in the past decade have been fair or free. The findings of international election observers superficially support claims of democratic advancement. Their reports have pointed out some deficiencies, but they generally give the election process a clean bill of

health (EU Election Observation Report, 2013; 2018). Within Pakistan, there has been fierce debate about the issue of pre-poll rigging and ballot fixing. Imran Khan campaigned vigorously on these issues following the 2013 polls (Mulla, 2017). Evidence regarding the most recent elections, however, points to his PTI party benefiting from the election engineering by the military. It did not want to see Nawaz Sharif returned to office. Intervention took the form of campaign restrictions, intimidation of Muslim League party workers and restrictions on media outlets that supported the Muslim League (Afzal, 2018). This chapter does not seek to go over this well-trodden ground. It argues instead that the examination of everyday experiences of infringements on political and human rights provides a more important means of assessing Pakistan's direction of travel with respect to democracy, rather than concentrating on the issue of electoral malpractice.

The chapter focuses on three areas that have been discussed with respect to global trends in autocratization. These are firstly restrictions on the print and electronic media. Secondly, the extent to which there are infringements of the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary. Finally, it examines the issue of freedom of association. It thus addresses the question that while elections have occurred on a more regular basis since 2008, are the rights and institutions that make the electoral process meaningful, being maintained or compromised? The study will utilize qualitative data drawn from civil society reports and newspaper accounts in support of its assessment. Before beginning this examination, it is necessary to briefly survey the historical context of processes of democratization and autocratization in Pakistan.

The historical context

The landscape which shapes autocratization in Pakistan is complex. Pakistan's political development cannot be understood simply in terms of the binary opposites of democratization and autocratization pursued respectively by civilian and military governments. Nor can its social development be similarly reduced to a straightforward clash between secular and Islamic visions for the future. Both Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s clashed with the judiciary and sought to undermine its independence (Talbot, 2005). They also harassed political opponents and attempted to control the media. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s used the army to crush political opponents in Balochistan (Lieven, 2011). This enabled the army to restore its influence after the debacle of the 1971 Bangladesh war. Two decades later, civilian leaders conspired with the military in bids to undermine their elected rivals. These actions strengthened the influence in Pakistan's public and economic life, which the army had established during Zia-ul-Haq's rule (1977–88).

Nawaz Sharif during the 1990s also acceded to demands for Islamization to shore up his position. The linkages which the military had maintained with Islamic proxies were also maintained for strategic reasons, or even were established anew, with, for example, the creation of the Taliban in which Benazir Bhutto's interior minister Nasrullah Babar played a significant role (Talbot, 2002). Even the military's mainstreaming of militant groups in the 2018 elections is not without historical precedent, as Benazir Bhutto established ties with Islamist groups, despite her liberal pretensions.

The links between the military, Islamic groups, and political parties, further complicate the Pakistan landscape. It is well established that Islamic proxies were first used in the struggle for Kashmir shortly after independence (Swami, 2007). With the passage of time, what has been termed the mullah–military nexus came into existence (Haqqani, 2005). The Pakistan army assumed the role of the guardian of Pakistan's ideological as well as territorial integrity. The religious establishment in return lent the military legitimization. Nonetheless, this has taken

different forms. Ayub Khan, Pakistan's first military ruler, favoured modernist Islam. Pervez Musharraf sought to draw on Sufi traditions in establishing a moderate Islamic regime image for western audiences. He also emphasized the dangers of Talibanization to encourage their governments to acquiesce with his regime, which as the 'war on terror' unfolded, adopted a Janus-like position with respect to Islamic militancy (Talbot, 2012)

The outset of the Zia regime marked the peak of Islamist groups' access to state power. It is from the period of the Soviet War in Afghanistan (1979–89) that Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the military security agency, cultivated close ties with militant groups (Kiessling, 2016). These ties have survived until the contemporary era with respect to groups either committed to fighting India, or who are regarded as providing leverage in Afghanistan. Some militant groups have however outgrown their state patronage and have directed firepower against the institutions of the Pakistan state itself. Such groups sometimes loosely referred to as the 'bad Taliban' have developed links with Al Qaeda or more recently Islamic State.

Three further elements complicate the landscape for contemporary autocratization. Firstly, the so-called religious establishment, although it was promoted to exclude liberal forces from power (Waseem, 2007), does not automatically support the military-run or -guided governments. Religious parties, such as Maulana Fazlur Rahman's Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (F) have campaigned against them in the name of democracy. Secondly, the Pakistan state's long-term patronage of the religious establishment and of militant proxies has cumulatively limited the social as well as the political space for the expression of liberal and plural ideas. A social environment has emerged in parts of Pakistan that is hostile to attempts by civil society groups and political parties to address human rights issues facing religious minorities and women. Thirdly, since 1949, when the Public and Representative Office Disqualification Act (PRODA) came into existence, accountability relating to corruption and misuse of office has been open to political manipulation. Musharraf after his 1999 coup introduced tougher accountability processes that created a parallel corruption law system in the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The Chairman has the power to hold the accused in investigative custody for 90 days (compared with 14 days under the ordinary laws), strip them of the right to bail and try them in a special court with a revised burden of proof and much tougher sentences than a provincial court would impose. Since 2018 NAB has become increasingly controversial as its investigations appear to be undermining leading opponents of Imran Khan. At the same time, it appears reluctant to investigate cases of those who are close to him.

The chapter focuses on the state's limitation of freedom of association and expression. But social pressure to conform to ideal Islamic norms reinforces autocratization trends. One example is the hostility, both on- and off-line, to the recent marches to celebrate International Women's Day that have been organized by the Aurat civil society organization. Others which lie beyond the scope of this study involve the restrictions on the Ahmadi community's freedom of religious expression, the barriers to reform of the Blasphemy Ordinance which has been used maliciously against the Ahmadi and Christian communities, the persistence of so-called honour killings and the suppression of female voting in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. NGOs and social movements working to address injustices in the above areas have faced both official and societal restrictions.

In sum, Pakistan's complex political and social landscape counsels against regarding any election as a breakthrough one for democratization. The high hopes vested in the youthful Benazir Bhutto's government in 1988 were quickly dashed. Conversely, autocratization is not necessarily accelerated by military rule or even by governments close to the army. The early years of the Musharraf regime (1999–2008) were, for example, marked by liberalization of the media. Military and civilian Pakistani governments alike have displayed democratizing and

authoritarian tendencies. Pakistan's asymmetric social and political power relations and the entrenchment of the military are constant features regardless of regime type and the political affiliations of elected governments. This may explain why Pakistan's direction of travel either towards democratic consolidation or to autocratization is incremental. Pakistan's history provides evidence of its following trends elsewhere in South Asia, but usually more slowly and less obviously.

The media

The existence of more than 500 newspapers and periodicals in Pakistan points to a vibrant print media, despite the challenges of online competition. Both domestic and international analyses reveal a less favourable picture. The 2020 World Press Freedom index, produced by the Paris-based, *Reporters sans frontières* (*Reporters Without Borders*), places Pakistan 145/180 countries (RSF, 2020). The drop of three places from 2019 reflects reports from within Pakistan, produced by *The Editors for Safety* and the *Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors* that press freedom became more restricted in the lead-up to and aftermath of the July 2018 elections. Press freedom had in fact been restricted throughout the preceding decade, in the context of 'the war on terror' and ethnic insurgency in Balochistan.

Journalists' reporting was especially dangerous in Balochistan where they risked being both caught in the crossfire of insurgents and the military and of being harassed by the intelligence agencies. On 28 August 2020, the Balochistan Union of Journalists publicly observed the deaths of 45 journalists and media workers in the province since 2008 (*Dawn*, 29 August 2020). These threats have made Pakistan for some years one of the most dangerous countries for journalists to operate (Aslam, 2015). In July 2020, the outspoken journalist Matiallah Jan was kidnapped by unknown assailants in broad daylight outside the Government Girls School Islamabad. Fortunately, this was captured on CCTV footage which went viral on social media. The resulting furore led to him being released, rather than becoming one of the 'disappeared' (*Dawn*, 22 July 2020). Jan claimed that the security establishment was implicated in his abduction. Given the dangers involved, it is understandable that many journalists self-censor their work. A 2018 survey of Pakistani journalists found that 46 per cent of its respondents reported self-censoring because of fears for their safety.

The advent of the PTI Government which was on the 'same page' as the army led however to an increase in manipulation and harassment. Early in March 2020, Brad Adams, the Asia director of the *Human Rights Watch* organization, summed up the situation by declaring that, 'The space for dissent in Pakistan is shrinking fast and anyone who criticizes government actions can become a target' (*Dawn*, 14 March 2020). Media manipulation was revealed most clearly in news blackouts. There were also interruptions of the distribution of newspapers that printed anti-government and anti-military articles along with the withdrawal of government advertising. Journalists and media proprietors were arrested on anti-terrorism and accountability grounds. Finally, journalists suffered harassment from unknown assailants that were linked to the security agencies as well as to militant groups. The decades-long record of attacks, including murders being carried out with impunity, persisted with the advent of the PTI government. Seven journalists were killed in unsolved cases in 2019. In the past decade there have been sixteen unsolved murders and only three prosecutions in sixty assassinations. The Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent organization working to promote press freedom worldwide, in its 2019 Global Impunity Index ranked Pakistan as the eighth worst country for prosecuting murderers of journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019). The Ministry of Human Rights responded by introducing a draft Media Protection Bill early in 2020, but this initiative

was quickly watered down by clubbing it together with other media legislation emanating from the Ministry of Information.

In the months prior to the 2018 polls, the military instigated a news blackout of the activities of the grassroots Pashtun civil roots movement, Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). It had been founded four years earlier and had demanded an investigation into extra-judicial killings in Waziristan as well as a removal of the landmines laid by the army during its operations in the tribal areas. Despite the peaceful nature of the PTM protests, the army saw the movement as a threat to its impunity. The clamp-down was justified on the grounds of national security. In January 2020, the PTM leader Manzoor Pashteen was arrested on charges of sedition. The Urdu language website of Voice of America was temporarily blocked, when it reported about the temporary detention of another leading PTM figure Mohsin Darwar who was elected to the National Assembly in 2018.

During its second year in office, the PTI government brazenly marked its displeasure at the Herald and the Jang media groups. Imran Khan publicly accused their flagship newspapers, *Dawn* and *Jang* of printing ‘fake news’. In January 2020, the federal government withdrew all the advertisements which were traditionally placed in *Dawn*. This was a major economic blow for the paper which it attempted to overturn in legal cases in Sindh. Imran Khan’s criticisms coincided with the army’s displeasure at an interview in May 2018 between Nawaz Sharif and the paper’s assistant editor Cyril Almeida (*Dawn*, 12 May 2018). The former prime minister complained about the existence of parallel governments in Pakistan and questioned the progress of the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks trial. Almeida had written extensively for *Dawn* on civil – military relations. Indeed, earlier in October 2016, he had published an insider piece which alleged rifts between the Sharif Government and the army, which the former denied.

The army’s displeasure was revealed in an unofficial ban on the circulation of the paper in militarily controlled residential areas. The concerted campaign against Pakistan’s oldest newspaper was also marked by protests outside its Karachi and Islamabad offices following its coverage of the November 2019 London Bridge terrorist attack. There were calls for *Dawn*’s editor to be hanged and the paper to be shut down. A crowd outside the Islamabad office chanted slogans in favour of the army’s intelligence wing (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2019). In January 2019, Almeida suspended his weekly column in *Dawn*.

The owner of the Jang media group was entangled in a case in which he was claimed to have illegally acquired seven acres of land, thirty-four years previously. Like political opponents of the government, Mir Shakilur Rehman faced prolonged detention without charge, while NAB probed the case in which he was referred. *Reporters Without Borders* unequivocally stated that the case was designed to intimidate the group’s journalists who had been highly critical of the partisan actions of NAB (*Dawn*, 14 March 2020).

Rehman also owned Pakistan’s largest private TV channel, Geo, which had fallen foul of the authorities. In the run-up to the 2018 polls, the channel was temporarily taken off air. On 1 July 2019, there was a furore involving its leading presenter Hamid Mir. Five years earlier he had been wounded by an assailant that Mir claimed had links with the security services. The broadcast of his live interview on ‘Capital News’ with the leading opposition politician and former President Asif Ali Zardari abruptly ended. The Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) denied involvement. Hamid Mir in a BBC interview labelled Imran Khan’s government as a ‘civilian dictatorship’ and claimed that censorship was daily increasing (BBC News, 2019a). Shortly afterwards, an interview with Maryam Nawaz Sharif, the former Prime Minister’s daughter and vocal government critic, was also prematurely ended. These episodes became termed ‘unannounced censorship’.

Taking TV channels off-air is not a new development of the PTI Government era. Cable operators blocked channels for example in November 2017, during the protests led by the Islamist group *Tehreek-e-Labbaik* (Mulla, 2017). There was also massive blocking of social media and content-sharing websites. Religious festivals which may provoke sectarian violence form other previous occasions when access has been blocked.

The case of the journalist Nasrullah Chaudhry can be seen, as not only an injustice to the individual, but part of a more general campaign to silence criticism of the government. In December 2019, an anti-terrorism court sentenced the veteran journalist, who worked for the Urdu daily *Nai Baat*, to five years in jail for alleged possession of banned material. This was the first case in which such a charge had been made in disregard of the need for sensitive sources for purely professional reasons. The Sindh High Court accepted this line of defence and acquitted Chaudhry (*Dawn*, 3 May 2020).

Citizen journalists and bloggers have also recently faced online restrictions and dangers. They have been threatened by mysterious individuals who it is claimed have links with the security services as well as by those connected with militant Islamic and ethnic groups. There was a spike of such cases in March 2019 in the wake of the visit of the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, amidst the controversy of the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi. In extreme cases, activists and investigative journalists faced assault and assassination attempts. In June 2019, the blogger and social media activist Muhammad Bilal Khan was murdered. He had been particularly vocal about the issue of enforced disappearances.

Reports released in 2019 by the Oxford Internet Institute (2019) and Freedom House (2019) painted a dismal picture of growing surveillance of the Internet and social media, and of large-scale attempts to manipulate opinion. Surveillance is assisted by the requirement that users link their internet and mobile connections to their national identity card. Cases have been brought against social media activists because of their online comments, as for example with the PMT activist Hayat Preyhel in July 2018. The PTI Government's proposals for increased regulation of online platforms were pushed back, but it revealed a commitment to closer control of content. The existing regulatory authority for online censorship has been accused of acting in a non-transparent and arbitrary manner. The increase in requests to Google to take down content further evidenced the PTI's restrictive approach. The Government sent 214 requests to Google to remove 3,125 pieces of content between July and December; 196 requests had been made in the previous six months. Taking all these key developments into consideration, Freedom House in its 2019 Report on the Net rated Pakistan as 'unfree'.

The judiciary

There is a well-established history of the judiciary lacking independence in Pakistan. Supreme Court judges from 1958 used the 'doctrine of necessity' to legitimize military coups (McGrath, 1999). The period after 2007 was however marked by judicial activism (Waseem, 2007) with growing talk of a 'clash of institutions'. There have been recent developments that could be interpreted as an attempt to undermine the judiciary's independence. Firstly, questions have been raised about the judgements that excluded Nawaz Sharif from office in advance of the 2020 polls. The continued legal pursuit of the Sharif family orchestrated by NAB has also been troubling. Maryam Nawaz Sharif early in July 2019 released a secretly recorded video that she claimed showed that her 69-years-old father had been wrongly convicted of corruption. The video revealed a conversation between Arshad Malik, the Accountability Court Islamabad Judge, and a PML-N supporter Nasir Butt. During the conversation, Malik stated that he had been blackmailed into convicting the former prime minister in the Al-Azizia Steel Mills case.

He subsequently rebutted the claim, saying that the video clip had been cut and edited and did not reflect what he said. He also said that the Sharif family had threatened him and tried to bribe him during the case. Judge Malik was suspended for misconduct. He was dismissed the service in July 2020 following a decision taken by a seven-member committee headed by the Lahore High Court Justice Muhammad Qasim Khan. This cast further doubt on the validity of Nawaz sharif's original conviction.

Another controversial case is that of Supreme Court Justice Qazi Faez Isa. President Arif Alvi accused him of misconduct over not declaring foreign assets and recommended that action be taken under Article 209 of the Constitution. His reference to the Supreme Court Judicial Council was intentionally leaked to the press. This encouraged a media campaign against Isa that tarnished his reputation and was also damaging to the prestige of the Supreme Court itself. The procedure for bringing the case against the Justice that he had 'undeclared assets' in Britain was based on flimsy grounds. Significantly, it was orchestrated by the newly formed Asset Recovery Unit (ARU) headed by Shahzad Akbar, the Special Assistant to Imran Khan on accountability. In June 2020, the Supreme Court dismissed the reference against Isa. His wife had testified that she was of independent financial means and that the properties were her own assets. The ARU's legal authorization to conduct the case was questionable. Its involvement indicated that Imran Khan was a party to the proceedings.

Justice Qazi Isa was highly regarded as an upright judge who could be a candidate for the role of Chief Justice in September 2023. He had however upset the military establishment with some notable rulings. This has led Zahid Hussain in an opinion piece to argue that the assets case was politically motivated (*Dawn*, 24 June 2020). There were two important cases in which Justice Isa had been critical of the security establishment. The first stemmed from the time in which he was a member of the Supreme Court Commission on the 2016 terrorist bombing in Quetta. The second involved the *suo motu* case into the 2017 Faizabad Dharna. Isa had shared a two-member bench with Mushir Alam, but he had individually authored the forty-three-page judgement. Just three months after it was delivered, President Ali made his accusations. Isa's judgement that the security services should be more accountable was common to both cases. This crossed a red line in public discourse.

Isa had formed a one-man judicial commission into state institutions' response to the bombing at Quetta General Hospital in which dozens had been killed on 8 August 2016. His report published four months later was highly critical of the role of Chaudhry Nisar Ali, the Minister for the Interior in the Nawaz Sharif Government. It also criticized the powerful army intelligence agency ISI's lack of transparency. 'The ISI does not have a website, address, email or telephone number', the report remarked, 'One can but commiserate with the poor citizens who may have to interact with them. If such nebulousness serves a purpose it could only be to remain aloof and unapproachable: unquestionable and unaccountable' (*The Express Tribune*, 16 December 2016).

The Justice returned to this theme in his judgement on the Faizabad Dharna. The Islamist *Tehreek-e-Labbaik* had paralyzed public life by its sit-in in Islamabad. The protests which called for the resignation of the Law Minister Zahid Hamid had been sparked by a change in the wording of the declaration related to the finality of the Prophet Muhammad enacted through the Elections Act of 2017. Controversy over the role of the military and security establishment in the protests was fuelled by video footage shot by a *Dawn* News TV reporter on his mobile phone that showed the Director-General of the Punjab Rangers Major-General Azhar Navid handing out money and encouraging protesters (BBC, 2019b).

Justice Isa's judgement provided a detailed assessment of the context for the dharna. Its sting was, firstly in the call for intelligence agencies not to exceed their mandate. This judgement

was based on the large-scale interference with broadcasts that we have noted was designed to prevent coverage of the events. Secondly, Isa ruled that the Constitution emphatically prohibits members of the armed forces from engaging in any kind of political activity. ‘The Government of Pakistan, the Ministry of Defence and the respective chiefs of the Army, the Navy and the Air Force are directed to initiate action against the personnel under their command who are found to have violated their oath’ (*The Nation*, 10 February 2019).

Freedom of association

Autocratization has been globally associated not only with curbs on the media and the strengthening of the executive, but also limits on the freedom of association. In 2019, the Register of Trade Unions banned sixty-two labour unions in Balochistan. This action followed a judgement from the Balochistan High Court (Human Rights Commission Pakistan, *State of Human Rights in 2019*, p. 10). Labour unions are banned from mining and other activities in Balochistan, especially when the companies have non-Pakistani (i.e., Chinese) investment. From October 2015 there was also a stricter regulation of both the activities of International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and of the funding of domestic NGOs by foreign donors.

INGOs had to obtain permission from the Ministry of the Interior to be registered in Pakistan. Applications could be refused on the grounds of ‘involvement in any activity inconsistent with Pakistan’s interests, or contrary to Government policy’. These were sufficiently vague to enable the targeting of individuals and organizations deemed critical of government. All existing INGOs had to apply for registration. This was a cumbersome process. Only 74 out of 141 applications had been approved by 2019 (Human Rights Commission Pakistan, *State of Human Rights in 2019*, p. 225). Well-known organizations such as Action Aid and World Vision had to cease their activities in Pakistan. Registration went hand in hand with the requirement for No Objection Certificates from provincial governments to start relief work in specific geographical areas. Local NGOs were also restricted. They could only obtain foreign funding after a successful application for a Memorandum of Understanding with the Pakistan Government’s Economic Affairs Division.

The restrictions were most marked in the tribal areas where the Pakistan army was conducting operations and in the province of Balochistan; the scene of a long running insurgency that was becoming increasingly strategically important as a result of the Chinese–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Throughout Pakistan, however, NGO work on human rights issues is discouraged. There is scrutiny and what amounts to harassment even of those NGOs working in less contentious areas such as health and education. ‘Intelligence personnel regularly visit offices and demand to see documents on staff and ongoing projects (Human Rights Commission Pakistan, *State of Human Rights in*, p. 181). Western diplomats as well as aid workers have criticized the restrictions. In December 2019, the Sindh Provincial Government cancelled the registration of over 7,000 NGOs (70 per cent of the total number) on the grounds that they had not shared their financial records (Human Rights Commission Pakistan, *State of Human Rights in 2019*, p. 92). The Covid-19 crisis, however, severely impacted on Pakistan’s fragile public health provision. In late March 2020, Imran Khan’s government eased for six months restrictions on NGOs and INGOs that sought to respond to the developing crisis.

The authorities have not just targeted NGOs that focus on human rights issues. Environmentalist groups have also been harassed. Their activities not only threaten vested interests with respect to land grabs, but they are viewed as ‘anti-state’ if they criticize activities associated with CPEC. This project is important to the military on strategic as well as economic

grounds. The road building and power projects associated with CPEC have contributed respectively to deforestation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and pollution in the Thar desert area of Sindh. In 2016–17, ‘The Friends of Thar’ mobilized support in a campaign about the environmental impact of coal mining in the Gorano area of the desert. The authorities’ response paralleled that towards the PTM. National press coverage was discouraged, although the Sindhi print and electronic media reported on the movement. Activists were charged before anti-terrorist courts, whilst others received threatening phone calls (Sibt-ul Hassan Turi, Usman Ashraf, 2018).

Conclusion

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic threatened Pakistan’s fragile economy, it was clear that reality would not match up to the rhetoric of a Naya Pakistan. Increasingly technocrats, linked with previous military regimes, supplanted party loyalists in Imran Khan’s inner circles. The 2018 election itself had seen some ‘electables’ replace long-time PTI members as party candidates. There was a dissipation of the tension in civil–military relations which had marked the third Nawaz Sharif government. However, this was not the result of further democratic consolidation, but rather because of the similarity of government and military viewpoints. This did not end speculation about a change of leadership, at the mid-term of the Imran Khan government. Despite his portrayal as the ‘army’s man’, he remained under scrutiny with respect to poor governance and economic competence. Pakistan’s political stability was no more guaranteed than at any previous time.

If there was little sign of democratization, what about autocratization? Here, there is evidence that space for freedom of expression was becoming more restricted. This was not as dramatic a trend as in other South Asian countries which had traditionally enjoyed greater freedoms than Pakistan. Freedom of association was also restricted, although political curbs on the activities of NGOs and social movements such as PTM predated Imran Khan’s government. Societal pressures on those advocating minority rights were also the result of well-established trends. Contemporary developments thus consolidate pre-existing restrictions, injustices, and uneven power relations. Pakistan, for all its lack of freedom, thus provides incremental rather than dramatic evidence for a newly emerging third wave of autocratization in South Asia.

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