

Pakistan rallies around military, but political unity remains elusive

After ceasefire with India, some ask why generals can't reach a truce with the opposition at home

BY RICK NOACK

ISLAMABAD, PAKISTAN — Pakistanis were jubilant this week, viewing the ceasefire with India as a resounding military victory. Amid the celebrations, the country's opposition leaders posed a pointed question: If Pakistan's generals can reach a truce with their archrivals, then why not with them?

The 2023 arrest of former prime minister Imran Khan sparked riots by his supporters, who blamed his ouster and subsequent imprisonment on the military. It was the most direct challenge in decades to the authority of the army, which has long been more powerful, and often more popular, than the country's civilian government. Surging inflation and militant violence in the years since had further fueled public discontent.

But in the wake of last week's fighting with India — with each nation claiming to have inflicted serious damage on the other — Pakistan's generals find themselves in an unexpectedly comfortable position, boosted by nationalistic fervor. Posters showing the face of Pakistani Army Chief Asim Munir now line the streets of the capital.

"We love you," read some of the banners in Islamabad, paid for by businesses and local politicians. The government has declared May 10 — the day of the ceasefire — a national day of commemoration.

"This operation by India has united Pakistan," said Masood Khan, a former Pakistani ambassador to the United States. "It was a blessing in disguise."

It's less clear whether Pakistan's military and political leaders will be able to turn this momentum into a lasting moment of unity. Khan remains in prison, and his party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or PTI — described at one point as a "terrorist organization" by members of the current governing party — remains ostracized.

"If you're willing to talk to [Indian Prime Minister Narendra] Modi, who tried to damage and destroy Pakistan, why not talk to your own people?" said Mushahid Hussain Sayed, a former chairman of Pakistan's Senate Defense Committee and a member of the ruling party.

"The big picture demands that the government reach out to the political opposition and release political prisoners, including Mr. Imran Khan," he said. "We have to turn the corner."

Khan has been convicted of corruption and faces numerous other charges, which his supporters say are fabricated and politically motivated. But his party still enjoys significant public support. Last year, authorities in Islamabad were stunned by the PTI's strong performance in general elections, even though it ultimately fell short of an absolute majority.

As Pakistani military leaders declared their operation against India a success last weekend, they made a point of praising the country's youth for their support — a reference understood by some as a nod to Khan's predominantly young support base.

Khurram Bashir, a 19-year-old student from Pakistan-administered Kashmir, said he has long admired the army and was surprised by the open resentment against it when he moved to Islamabad two years ago. He said that his family back home had endured Indian shelling last week and that he is now eager to enlist in the military. "It feels like people's opinions are changing everywhere now," said Bashir.

By targeting Pakistan at a perceived moment of weakness, "one of the miscalculations . . . the Indians have made is that there is some problem between the people and the armed forces," Lt. Gen. Ahmed Sharif Chaudhry, Pakistan's chief military spokesman, said in an interview Wednesday. "The armed forces of Pakistan, they come from the people — we are the people."

The Pakistani military denies meddling in domestic politics. And its rising standing may not lead to the national dialogue many are hoping for, analysts cautioned. "Much of the pressure on the army is gone," said Ayaz Amir, a former Pakistani officer. "In their eyes, I think, Imran Khan and the PTI have been diminished."

Analysts say the opposition might now see no other option than to seek reconciliation on the military's terms. Pakistan's economy is rebounding, and even some of the former prime minister's closest allies are rallying around



NADEEM KHAWAR/EPA-EFE/SHUTTERSTOCK

the flag.

Zulfi Bukhari, an adviser to Khan, said the "PTI was at the forefront" of supporting the military during the conflict with India.

Party activists "regarded as traitors, disrupters and social media terrorists . . . were the ones that were defending the army and the country the most," Bukhari argued. He said he hopes this "can be taken in a positive light" and ease "some of the tension between everyone."

But the PTI's main rivals seem unwilling to pursue a détente. The leader of the Pakistan People's Party, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, often seen as a potential future prime minister, said now is not the time

ABOVE: People toss flower petals on soldiers Thursday in Hyderabad, Pakistan, to show solidarity with Pakistan's military following the ceasefire agreement with India. BELOW: Commuters pass a billboard featuring Pakistani Army Chief Asim Munir and other military leaders in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, on Wednesday.

to reconcile.

Bhutto Zardari acknowledged that "political polarization and partisanship have really challenged our fragile democracy and put it to a test." But, he added, "during this conflict, while I would say a large majority of PTI supporters and workers stood with Pakistan, there's a few PTI members who at every opportunity — no matter what's under discussion — go back to freeing Imran Khan."

Some PTI members are equally skeptical of their opponents, seeing the current moment as just a fleeting reprieve from the country's political divisions.

Irfan Saleem, a regional PTI

leader in Peshawar, in northwestern Pakistan, said that while Khan's party backed the military in recent weeks, "we will consider it our adversary if it commits unlawful and unconstitutional acts."

At a phone repair shop in Islamabad, Waqar Abbasi, a 24-year-old employee, said he feels sorry for Khan and would still like to see him freed. But, for now, he's willing to give the generals the benefit of the doubt.

"Finally, they're back to doing what an army should be doing," he said, sitting next to a Pakistani flag. "That's all we ever wanted."

Shaiq Hussain and Haq Nawaz Khan contributed to this report.



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