

BOOK REVIEW

Fallout: Power, Intrigue and Political Upheaval in Pakistan

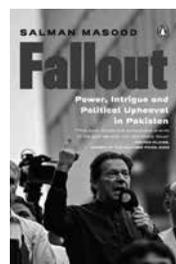
Salman Masood

Published by: Penguin Random House

India Pvt. Ltd.

ISBN: 9780143465966

2024, 237 pp.



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Imran Khan, the former prime minister of Pakistan (2018-22) and arguably the most popular leader in the country today, is incarcerated under a slew of charges in Adiala jail, from where he continues to urge his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), and its supporters to stage protests across Islamabad. Khan does so with a two-fold objective: first, to pressure the establishment for his release, and, second, to destabilise the ruling coalition government led by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Salman Masood's book *Fallout: Power, Intrigue and Political Upheaval in Pakistan* traces Khan's rise to power through similar protests, unpacks the dramatic fall of former Prime Minister Nawaz

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Sharif, and Khan's fractious relationship with the military—the very institution that once catapulted him to power—and, by corollary, highlights the unending civil-military power struggle in Pakistan that has only deepened over the years.

In the introduction, Masood writes, "Pakistani politics is a familiar tableau where the script remains the same, but the cast keeps changing". This is a befitting observation, considering that no prime minister in the annals of Pakistan's history has completed a full five-year term as a result of falling from the all-powerful military's graces. What sets Khan apart, however, is the colossal support base he boasts, especially among the youth, which has made it difficult for the military to blunt his razor sharp street power. Masood's work is not a traditional academic book, but rather one that adopts a journalistic approach, in tune with Masood's stint as a Pakistani correspondent for the *New York Times*. It does not feature a couple of chapters theorising the civil-military struggle in Pakistan, nor does it offer a comparative study of any kind, or propose prescriptions outrightly for the country's maladies. Instead, it is a carefully curated compilation of the author's op-ed pieces in the Pakistani press, mostly published in the *Nation* between 2014 to 2023. Its novel character accordingly manifests in its chronological and masterful narration of the events of the past decade, divided into three sections and 58 chapters.

The first section titled *The Build-Up: Nawaz Sharif's Tenure, Panama Papers Verdict, and Imran's Agitational Politics* consists of 23 chapters, charting out the events from March 2014 to July 2018. Despite being thrown out by a military coup in 1999, the military catapulted Nawaz Sharif back to power in 2013, but that ingrained the notion of civilian supremacy in his mind, following which the military, the final arbiter, pulled the plug and set the stage for Imran's rise. Toward that end, Khan organised revolution-like street protests amid Sharif's perverse performance, but they kept fizzling out, which Masood notes in Chapter 5 as: "From being the biggest threat that could send the government packing because of street protests, Imran and his party have been reduced to the usual trouble-makers" (p. 21). Yet, as the author also presciently writes in Chapter 7, "The problem when you become Imran Khan is that you

just cannot stay Imran Khan. You want to be even bigger ... bigger than anything and everything”.

The first section also focusses on the *Dawn* leaks controversy, where details of a sensitive national security meeting between government and military officials was exposed by a *Dawn* staffer in 2016. With the military accusing the federal government of the leak, this incident could be regarded as among the several that likely contributed to the military’s decision of dispensing with the Sharif government, for it convulsed the country’s civil-military landscape. The Panama Papers case, detailed across many chapters, proved to be the proverbial final nail in the coffin. Disqualified from office in 2017 for not accounting his overseas wealth, this case rekindled the political fortunes of Sharif’s arch-enemy, Imran Khan, who with his dogged persistence and backing from the establishment, used it to demand Sharif’s resignation. Masood questions whether ousting Sharif from power would ever wipe him and the PML-N off as political entities—a feat that even former Army Chief Pervez Musharraf, despite years in power, could not manage. The author seems to have had incisive foreknowledge, as at the time of writing, it is the PML-N (albeit under Shehbaz Sharif) that once again leads the government.

The second section titled *The Hybrid Experiment Begins and Falters: Imran Khan as Prime Minister and PTI’s Handling of the Government* contains 20 chapters, detailing events from December 2018 to January 2022. The chapters under this section open with Imran Khan’s early tenure as prime minister, during which, the author writes, Khan committed many gaffes that would have otherwise been fatal for anyone else’s political career, especially as his Cabinet appeared inexperienced amidst a major economic downturn. However, the perception of his intentions being sincere unlike the old corrupt players and his celebrity status as a cricketer shielded Khan from the cacophony of criticism that the opposition mounted against his governance. The author cites a professor in Chapter 25: “Imran is a post-colonial sports icon whose masculinity matches only that of a film star...this image overrides his political fumbles. Pakistan has had a love affair with Imran Khan for a very long time. Even at sixty-six, he is like an old flame. Like all love affairs, it is irrational”.

The subsequent chapters explore the extension given to then-Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa—a move supported by Khan to ensure his political survival—the internal discord within Khan’s Cabinet, and the signs of an establishment gradually making contact with Opposition figures. Notably, this section also contains a couple of chapters on Pakistan-US relations. For instance, Khan’s July 2019 meeting with US President Donald Trump, during which Trump offered to mediate on Kashmir, has been chronicled, with the author acutely highlighting the shared populist and nationalist appeal of both leaders. This section, in addition, considerably tends to the Afghan Taliban’s August 2021 takeover, and the accompanying concerns about a resurgence of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Finally, the penultimate section concludes with the PTI entering its twilight phase, as Opposition parties intensify their efforts, and tensions between Khan and the military reach a crescendo over the appointment of the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

The third section, titled *Imran Khan’s Bitter Falling out with Gen. Bajwa and the Military*, spans 14 chapters and covers watershed events from March 2022 to February 2024, making it arguably the most up-to-date book on Pakistani politics of recent times. It opens with the infamous Cipher Case, where Khan claimed that a U.S.-led foreign conspiracy was underway to oust him based on a ‘cipher’ or a secret diplomatic cable. The author highlights that stirring anti-American sentiment has long been “a staple of Khan’s politics”, and that Pakistan-US relations had reached a nadir under his term. The crown jewel of this section is the detailed account of General Bajwa’s dramatic fall from being Khan’s benefactor and getting encomiums in return, to becoming a target of Khan’s bitter tirades. The author uses the Khan-Bajwa acrimony to demonstrate the complex relationship between the military and politics in Pakistan. On the unprecedented public criticism against Bajwa, the author remarks, “Power, especially the one enjoyed by army chiefs in Pakistan, is intoxicating and can be equally crushing when it slips away.” Following Imran’s removal from the coveted position through a no-confidence motion in April 2022, he was arrested a year later, on May 9, 2023, after which

thousands of his supporters, many of them belonging to military families, targeted key military installations, taking the Khan versus the military battle to uncharted territory.

As the events of May 9 rankled the army's rank-and-file, many military veterans, who were erstwhile supporters of Khan, distanced themselves from him due to fear of retribution, but Khan's popularity not only endured but grew from strength to strength. This is despite the military-judiciary joint efforts to speedily convict Khan under a litany of cases, and the intense crackdown on his party's infrastructure in the run-up to the February 2024 general elections. Consequently, it was anticipated that Khan's party, whose candidates ran as independents, would secure no more than 40 seats, the author writes. Contrary to popular belief, these candidates won a majority. This electoral win, however, did not translate into a political win for Khan. Nawaz Sharif, disconcerted by the poor electoral outcome, withdrew his bid for a fourth term as prime minister, passing the mantle to his younger brother, Shehbaz Sharif. The author, in the final chapter, concludes that a rejection of the people's mandate, imbued with a strong streak of anti-establishment sentiment, will envelop the incumbent government with questions of legitimacy and credibility, especially as Pakistan grapples with mounting security and economic challenges.

In retrospect, Salman Masood's book, with its engrossing novel-like flair, offers a comprehensive view of Pakistan's political landscape, which has devolved into a tragicomic story, where, even amid uncertain times, one can expect the military's predictable *modus operandi* to shape the course of events. The author touches upon almost everything of significance—from militancy and foreign relations to incisive profiles of key political figures and their dynamics with the country's most powerful actor, i.e., the army—and situates them in the broader context of Pakistan's tenuous civil-military relations. However, while the book is a treasure trove for seasoned observers of Pakistani politics, it may present challenges for readers less familiar with the subject to connect the dots due to a lack of background information on certain events and personalities that are sometimes introduced abruptly. This, nevertheless, does little to diminish the

book's value, making it an essential read for all those seeking to understand or nuance their extant knowledge on the dramatic ebbs and flows of Pakistan's power structures.