

## Politics of Protest in Pakistan: Causes and Features of the PTI (2014) Dharna in Islamabad, Pakistan



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**Abstract** *Public protests, agitations and demonstrations are part of the democratic political process. In Pakistan's history, protest or pressure politics have played a significant role. They have been held against 'election riggings' including the recent one against 2013 general elections. This study discusses the recent protest 'popularly called Dharna' staged by Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf (PTI) under the leadership of the present Prime Minister Imran Khan in Islamabad for 126 days against the alleged rigging of elections of 2013. It explores the causes of PTI Dharna based on the primary data collected through interviews from students, lawyers and political activists in May-June 2019 in Lahore, Nowshera and Peshawar, Pakistan. We argue that the Dharna has multiple features long continued presence, participation of multiple groups, violence and media coverage. The significant reason of PTI for staging protest against Nawaz Sharif, inter alia, was the alleged rigging in the general elections of 2013.*

**Key Words:** Causes, Dharna, Features, Pakistan Tehreek e Insaaf, Protest Politics

### Introduction

Public protests, agitations and demonstrations are part of the democratic political process (Segalov 2015). It shapes the polity of a country and transforms social, political and economic aspects. Protests are considered essential for the success of democracy and democratic values in a country (Norman 2017). People use protests and demonstrations to promote and protect their political, constitutional and legal rights (History 2019). Pakistan's political history has been through different stages of political instability and disruption, either through military interference or protests (Lamba 2014). Both martial law administrators and civilian governments have faced protests and agitations throughout the political history of the country (Rizvi, 1984).

The first major protest was staged against the military dictator Ayub Khan's government in late 1960's. Various groups of people were part of this protest, including politicians, students, women and labors (Reddebrek 2018). This protest paralyzed the whole country and forced Ayub Khan to resign on March 25, 1969. The second significant demonstration was for the removal of elected government of Pakistan People Party under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, its founder. It was launched by Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) which consisted of nine anti-PPP Political Parties' alliance. PNA started this protest against rigging in 1977 general elections (Dawn 2014). The third protest aimed to remove the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq and protests started against soon in July 1977. The protest was organized under the umbrella of Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) by an alliance of various political parties (Zunes n.d.).

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Fourth major protest was staged against military dictator Pervez Musharraf. He promulgated emergency in 2007 and removed the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Chaudry Iftikhar, from his office. Country wide protests were launched under the leadership of lawyers by different political and civil rights organization to reinstate the Judiciary (Walsh 2008). This protest fulfilled its mission of restoring the judiciary in the nation and removed martial law administrator from his office (Anon 2009).

The recent wave of protests was introduced by Imran Khan (PTI's Chief) in the country (Tribune 2018). Imran Khan initiated a march against the alleged rigging in the 2013 general elections (Malik, 2013). *Azadi* March started from the residence of Chief of PTI in Zaman Park, Lahore. Later, *Azadi* March rally moved towards the capital of the country, Islamabad. The demands of PTI protest are following: The Prime Minister of Pakistan and the chief minister of Punjab should resign, Audit of the government's last 14 month expenditures should be done, those persons who were involved in the 2013 elections rigging should be punished, there should be electoral reforms for next fresh elections, All the assemblies should be resolved and there should be re-elections and before new elections there should be an impartial interim government. This *Dharna* continued for 126 days and ended after the tragic incident of Army Public School, Peshawar (Zaman 2014).

This dharna had multiple causes that provoked PTI for sit-in. Thus, the data obtained from the interviewees are analyzed. The study proposes that the immediate cause of PTI Sit-in is the alleged rigging in the 2013 general election alleged to be engineered by the then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The other factors responsible for this protest are the alleged rampant corruption and the alleged support of the establishment to the protestors for the purpose to pressurize the democratic and elected government. Moreover, the significant feature of PTI protest which the study discusses is that this Dharna is very unprecedented as it continued for long.

The other features include the extensive coverage given to it by the media, which increased the participation of youth and women in this recent Dharna. In this context the present study elaborates the causes and features of PTI *Dharna* in Islamabad. This article, thus attempts to answer the following questions *what were the causes of Pakistan Tehreek Insaf (PTI) protest? What are the features or characteristics of PTI Dharna in Islamabad?* Below we discuss the methodology utilized for this study. Followed by that is the brief discussion of PTI and the electoral history of this party. After that section is the extensive discussion of the causes of this *dharna* based primarily on the data collected from participants. The article ends with a brief conclusion.

## Collection of Data

This study is based on primary data collected through qualitative techniques. Interviews were conducted with students, lawyers and political activists. The interviews were structured though the questions were open-ended. Moreover, a random and purposeful sampling technique was utilized while contacting and selecting participants for interviews. The interviews have been conducted in May-June 2019.

The participants included students of Government College and University, Lahore, University of Peshawar and Islamia College and University, Peshawar and Lawyers and political activists from Nowshera. Moreover, the writing and analysis are descriptive in nature with themes coming mostly from the fieldwork. The writing style thus is also thematic. Most of the university's students were from the background of Political Science. Some of the interviews were conducted through internet, like Email and Skype, while others were conducted during a fieldwork. Names of the participants have been changed and Pseudonyms have been used with an aim to protect and unveil about their personal information. Similarly, the exact location has also been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

## **PTI: An Introduction and Electoral History**

PTI is a centrist and progressive party which was founded by the former Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan in 1996 (Rao 2018).

Initially Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf was founded as a socio-political movement known as Movement of Justice (Siddique 2018). Its slogan is justice, humanity and self-esteem (Mehdi 2012) & (Mufti 2016). Its aim is to establish Islamic and democratic system, promote tolerance, ensure human rights, introduce social welfare programs in the country, provision of equal education, to decrease governance at the grass root level, to reinvigorate economic system, to provide a platform for the development of youth, to strengthen health and infrastructure, to remove the curse of corruption (Michaelson 2012) & (Shaikh and Bughio 2012) and to free the country from the exploitation of poor masses by allegedly corrupt political leaders, bureaucrats both in civil and military and feudalism (Sheikh 2018). Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf is famous among the youth of Pakistan (Naqvi 2018).

PTI participated in 1997 elections but failed to achieve success (Mehdi, 2013). Its leader became famous among the people, particularly youth because of his somehow popular narrative of being against the military dictatorship, corruption and U.S. drone strikes in 2002 elections. Imran Khan secured the seat of National Assembly from the constituency of NA-95 of district Mianwali in subsequent elections. In his tenure, he was opposed to the political situation of the country and considered all politicians as corrupt, incompetent and morally lacking the founding principles of the nation. He also denounced government of military dictator, General Pervez Musharraf. When Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif of PML (N) returned to Pakistan in 2007, voice was raised by the chairman of PTI with other political groups against Musharraf (Ahmed, 2007).

In 2008, Imran Khan boycotted the general elections because these were held in the tenure of President Musharraf who was an ex-Martial Law Administrator. Thus, the pronouncement of boycott from general elections of 2008 made him somehow famous in the country. Similarly, he announced plan to boycott all future elections till reinstatement of Supreme court judges which were deposed and imprisoned by Pervez Musharraf. He also claimed that the interim government was not neutral, and the elections were being rigged.

On 11 May 2013 general elections were held with record turnout across Pakistan (Jan 2013) in which PML (N) secured a majority with 199 National seats out of 342. Resultantly, Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan for the third time (Craig 2013). According to the 2013 elections results Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf emerged as the third largest political party in the country with PPP occupying second position (Golovnina 2014). PTI secured 7.5 million votes with most of it from the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). In provinces PTI secured a majority only in KP and formed government with the collation of other political parties, including the Jamaat-i-Islami (Khan, 2013).

In this background, Imran Khan and his PTI claim the rigging of 2013 general elections. Initially, he demanded the investigation of four constituencies. The government of PML (N) was adamant to investigate it and this inaction of government compelled PTI to held protest in the province of Punjab (Javed and Mamoon 2017). Soon PTI called for a Long March against elections rigging and the next year it launched an *Azadi March* and a protest through sit-in *Dharna* in the D-Chowk of the capital Islamabad (Rumi 2014).

The *Azadi March* started from the residence of Chief of PTI in Zaman Park, Lahore. Later, *Azadi March* rally moved towards the capital of the country, Islamabad. Moreover, the then Chief Minister of KP Pervaiz Khattak moved to Islamabad along with his supporters from Peshawar to join the *Azadi March*. The rally of Imran Khan passed through different areas of Lahore i.e. Faisal Chowk, Mall Road and Data Darbar etc. On the way to Islamabad, riots occurred between the protestors and the workers of PML-N. The *Dharna* which was staged in D Chowk of Islamabad lasted for 126 days.

The chief of PTI announced that his protest will continue until the fulfillment of his demands including the resignation of Prime Minister Nawaz Shareef and chief minister of Punjab Mian Shahbaz Shareef, Audit of the government's last 14 month expenditures, punishment of those involved in the 2013 elections rigging, introduction of electoral reforms for next fresh elections, dissolution of all the assemblies, re-elections, and the formation of an impartial interim government till a re-election ([Rehman, 2016](#)). It was alleged by Imran Khan that the present government is the result of rigged election and the responsible people must be made accountable for it (Mufti 2016)& (Zaman 2014). The 126 days Dharna came to an end on December 16, 2014 when 150 innocent people dead including 132 schoolchildren students ([Alvi 2015](#)) were killed by terrorists of Tehreek e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Army Public School, Peshawar ([Hashim 2018](#)).

This protest is having remarkable similarities with the earlier protests in Pakistan but is also different in a number of ways. The time spent by the protestors in a highly red zone of Pakistan's capital was 126 days. Moreover, Media coverage was more than other protest in Pakistan with almost every media channel focusing on the protest. This has resulted in an advantage to Pakistan Tehreek I Insaaf in the general elections of 2018. In this election PTI was able to secure a majority with 1409 seats ([Shah and Sareen 2018](#)). Moreover, PTI was also able to form government in KP and Punjab and is in government in the province of Baluchistan. Imran Khan is serving as the current Prime Minister of Pakistan. The protest has multiple features, which are discussed in detail below.

### Features of PTI Protest: Long Continued Presence, Participation of Multiple Groups, Violence and Media Coverage

The Sit-in of PTI continued for one hundred and twenty six days (Javed and Mamoon 2017) The participants of protest were present there day and night. Some of them left at the night and came back on the other day. Therefore, this protest is something unprecedented which continued for long days at one position in the protest history of Pakistan. Moreover, it only ended with the horrible incident of Army Public School Attack in Peshawar (Zaman 2014). This fact was elaborated by participants as well mentioning that the dharna would have continued for more time if the incident of Army public school had not happened, Alike, it was expected that these will end due to the exhaustion of protestors. Despite this, it continued for long days and compelled to accept their demands. Participant Waqas Khan said:

"The standout features of PTI Dharna were that it lasted for many days. It ended only with the Army Public School accident either it would have continued for long ([W. Khan 2019](#)).

Along with this, the protest was not limited to a specific group or segment of people. It was open to all and invited the general masses, females, disabled people and students of different grades.

There were huge number of women, youth, children and religious students among the protestors. Participant Syed Muzakir Shah said: "*the protesting group has lot of youth and female and religious students among protestors and that is significant* (Shah, 2019)".

Despite the vow of PTI leaders that his protest will be in peaceful (Rehman, 2016). ([Report, 2015](#)). (Abrar 2014). , at times it turned violent. There were clashes between the protestors and police. The clashes caused the deaths and injuries of protestors and police personnel. Respondent Abdullah said:

"They were first peaceful but later turned violent. They were sending daily threats across the capital to the government and state officials. Blockade used as a coercive force in the capital. PTI leadership used Aggressive rhetoric against the state machinery. The used women, children and transgender as a shield. They provoked the protestors and their supporters against the ruling key figures etc. ([Abdullah 2019](#)).

Likewise, the follower of sit-in attacked the governmental premises and destroyed the equipment of the government institutions. Participant Zeeshan Ahmad said: "It was violent protest

and the protestors attacked the parliament and state institutions like Pakistan Television (PTV) (Ahmed, 2019).

Another remarkable feature of the protest was the extensive media coverage given to this protest. However, blames were there that the media reported fake news regarding the protest and the military even pressurized the media channels to give more coverage to the protest. Set-aside the protest was highly covered by media. Along with these multiple significant features, this study focuses on causes of the PTI *dharna* in the following section.

## Causes of PTI Dharna in Islamabad

### Allegations of Rigging of General Elections (2013)

On May, 11<sup>th</sup> 2013 general elections were held with record turnout across Pakistan (Jan, 2013). Resultantly, Nawaz Sharif became the Prime Minister of Pakistan for third time and won One Hundred and Ninety seats in total of Three hundred and Forty Two seats of the NA (Craig 2013). According to 2013 elections results, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf emerged as the third largest political party in the country (Golovnina 2014). It won larger votes from KP and 7.5 million people voted for it. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, PTI formed government with the collation of other political parties (Khan, 2013).

The party's supporters, comprising largely of youth and women, protested in different parts of Lahore first. A Sit-in was organized at Lalak Jan Chowk in Defence Housing Authority initially. The protesters started calling the Lalak Jan Chowk as the "Insaf Square". In this regard, sister of the Chief of PTI Aleema Khan said:

This Chowk will become the Tahrir Square of Pakistan. She referred that the massive rallies held in the Egyptian capital two years ago which finally led to the fall of Dictator Hosni Mubarak's government. The results from all over Punjab and particularly in Lahore were highly unexpected. She asked that How come 62 per cent turnout and almost 90 per cent voters casting vote for the PTI but results declaring PML-N candidates' winners. Demonstrations would continue till the ECP took action and let justice prevail (Malik, 2013).

In this background, the Head of PTI demanded the investigation of four constituencies. The government was adamant to investigate it. However, the inaction of government compelled PTI to held protest in the province of Punjab. This Dharna was the headlock for the government of Nawaz Sharif. Imran Khan told to the people that he tried to bring the culprits of the election rigging from the last fourteen months. Moreover, white paper of twenty-one hundred pages was produced by PTI as alleged evidence of rigging of the elections. Beyond that, government took no action. The Supreme Court of Pakistan also failed to take action of the Afzal Khan (Ex-Additional Secretary, Election Commission) leaks which presented the evidence regarding the rigging in elections. The allegations of Afzal Khan were rejected because there was lack of proof. Since the election results of 2013, Imran Khan continuously demanded that committees and tribunals should be constituted for the investigation of fraud in the alleged rigging in the four constituencies. However, the government of Nawaz Sharif and his ministers ridiculed his demands (Javed and Mamoon 2017).

Moreover, evidences of fraud in the elections were continuously presented by the Chairman of PTI. In this regard, it was alleged by him that Najam Sethi (the caretaker Chief Minister of Punjab) and Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhary (Ex- Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Pakistan) facilitated the fraud in the election to make PML-N successful in the election of 2013. On the night of general election May, 11 2013, Imran Khan has been frequently denouncing the Returning Officer's (RO's) for their alleged role in the rigging of election. However, PML (N) denied these allegations, PTI called for a Long March against election rigging. After a year of election PTI launched a protest through Sit -in Islamabad and named the march to Islamabad *Azadi* March (Rumi 2014).

In this Connection, on August 16, 2014 Imran Khan said and Warned the Government:

"I am not here to sit for weeks. It's better for you to listen to our demand and leave as soon as possible. Don't blame me if I can't control these people who have gathered here for real democracy. I can control them until tomorrow night, but not beyond (Raza, 2014)".

For most of the research participants, election rigging was the foremost cause of the protest. For example, one participant Tufail Babar said: *PTI also blamed the PML(N) government rigging in the 2013 general elections and demanded recounting in few constituencies* (Babar 2019).

Similarly, the failure of state to investigate the four constituencies compelled the PTI for Dharna in Islamabad. Another participant Sajjad said:

"Imran Khan claimed that there has been rigging in 2013 elections and wanted to investigate the respective constituencies, but the state's officials failed to accept his claim. So in reaction to that PTI went for sit in" (Sajjad 2019).

Another reason, followed in frequency after the alleged rigging of elections was the issue of corruption, discussed below.

### To Expose Corruption

Imran Khan accused that Government of Nawaz Shareef is responsible for the acute corruption in Pakistan and it has led the country towards destruction. Thus, it encouraged the protestors for protest in Islamabad. A participant Ahmed Yar told me during a discussion that "PTI had planned to 'lock down' Pakistan's capital before Supreme Court agreed to launch inquiry into corruption claims (Yar 2019)".

Likewise, there were number of alleged corruption scandals revealed against the government of Nawaz Sharif. It included Panama Cases and Ashyana Housing Scandal etc. Thus, these alleged scandals provided moral grounds for the protestors to protest against the Nawaz Sharif government. Among others, a research participant Muhammad Sakib said:

"Keeping in view the corruption scandals against PMLN leader Nawaz Shareef, The PTI led by Imran Khan marched towards Capital territory to dethrone the corrupt government. i.e. involved in The Panama cases, Ashyana Housing scandals, Iqama, and other illegal activities, which proved the Achilles heels of Nawaz, Shehbaz and his government later, and have honestly helped Imran Khan to put up his stance high, loud, and clear as crystal against the government. So, the protestors marched towards Islamabad against the alleged involvement of the government in the corruption" (Sakib 2019).

Similarly, others commented that *Dharna* was staged to expose the corruption and illegal income of the previous regime of Nawaz Sharif. It aimed to aware the youth regarding the corruption in the country. Niqash Nisar told that:

"To expose corruption of previous public office holders. To awake up youngsters and to aware them of the lies and false hopes of the two big defaulters of the country who sold our country and future of nation for dollars and pounds" (Nisar 2019).

### Interest of the 'Establishment' of Pakistan

Moreover, it was alleged that military has supported the *Dharna* of PTI. The army wanted to derail the democratic process which was revived after the eighteenth amendment in the constitution of Pakistan. The amendment strengthened the civilian supremacy which was not tolerable to the military. Therefore, it used its loyalist against the Nawaz government for the purpose to weaken his and PML-N position. Interviewee Muhammad Idris Khan said:

"The resurrection of democracy in 2008 proved to be very vital in changing the conventional intervention of military in politics in shape of 18th amendment, when the doors for undemocratic elements were shut down. This gave rise to civilian supremacy in the country with what military was not happy. Thus in order to take reins of power, they used the loyalist, who had mutual interests with them, for political instability to weak the position of PMLN (M. I. Khan 2019)".

Comparably, Imran Khan frequently told his protestors that the *empire* promised him to help regarding the removal of Nawaz government. Hence, it is doubted that the support of Army was provided to the *Dharna*. Participant Shah Jehan said:

“However when Imran Khan repeatedly mentioned the role of third empire the people then suspected the whole drama that was played by the army establishment to dethrone Nawaz government” (Jehan 2019).

In addition to this, the revelation of Dawn leaks, firing incident of Hamid Mir and the willingness of Nawaz government to establishment friendly relationship with Afghanistan further widened the gap between the government and establishment of the country. Moreover, the country was pressurized by the international community to halt the policy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ militants. It was not admissible to the strong establishment of the country. Thus, the army encouraged the *Dharna* to pressurize the government. Aftab Ahmed Khan said:

“This *Dharna* was motivated and supported by establishment of Pakistan. The Dawn leaks and Hamid firing incident widened the gap between establishment and the Nawaz government. However, the establishment used the *Dharna* of PTI for pressurizing the government of Nawaz for the resignation of his tenure. He added that the international community put pressure over the government and Nawaz to end the policy of good and bad which was not acceptable to the establishment of the country” (Khan 2019).

Thus, the PTI dharna had multiple causes and features which make this protest a significant and different one in the history of Pakistan.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have elaborated the protest of PTI held in Islamabad. Our main focus was the discussion of features and causes of the PTI *dharna*. However, we also elaborated some of the past protests of Pakistan in introductory section. Followed by that introduction, we elaborated briefly the electoral performance of PTI and Imran Khan. After setting this background we commented the collection of data for this study. This study is based on empirical data collected from participants in Lahore, Peshawar and Nowshera of Pakistan. In the next section we explored multiple features of the protest including the participation of citizens, media coverage and the time span of this protest.

In the last yet elaborative section, we focused on the causes of this protest by discussing the role of alleged rigging of elections of 2013, allegations of corruption of the government and the alleged role of establishment in dharna for their vested political interests.

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