

PTI'S *DHARNA* (SIT IN), 2014 AND PPP RESPONSE AS PARLIAMENTARY OPPOSITION: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the protest also known as Dharna of Pakistan Tehreek-e- Insaaf (PTI) under the leadership of Imran Khan against the rigging allegation of elections of 2013. The paper briefly covers PTI's Dharna (Sit in) in year 2014. The paper also presents an overview of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) response towards the protest of PTI as major opposition party in the parliament. This paper evaluates the views of major PPP leaders and legislatures about PTI's Dharna (Sit in). This study is based on both primary and secondary data collection and applied through the qualitative method. Primary data included the selective interviews of politicians conducted in 2021 and secondary data included journal articles and mostly reliable newspaper articles.

Key Words: PTI, *Dharna* (Sit in), PPP, Parliamentary Opposition, Democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Political Background of PTI's *Dharna* (Sit in), 2014

Following widespread claims of rigging in the 2013 general elections, Imran Khan's political party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), reluctantly accepted the results, requesting a probe into electoral rigging in four constituencies as a litmus test for the remainder of the election process. In response to the government's inaction, the PTI organized many *jalsas* (protests) across Punjab, putting Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a political bind. Imran Khan declared in August 2014 that the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf has attempted to bring those guilty for rigging to justice through state institutions for 14 months. The PTI published a 2100-page white paper demonstrating rigging. Regardless, nothing was done (Javed & Mamoon, 2017). Imran Khan stated that in any democracy, the Supreme Court would have declared the results null and void and ordered new elections. The Supreme Court took no action despite the evidence and leaks by Afzal Khan, the former assistant secretary of the Election Commission. However, the superior court requested information that was required by law in order to counteract all of the positions requested in the appeal. The applicant stated that he had no evidence other than Afzal Khan's assertions. These were proven to be false. The appeal was rejected because it lacked clear and convincing evidence, as required by Pakistani law. During these *jalsas*, Khan emphasized his unhappiness with the country's court system's lack of ambition and the Election Commission's treatment of his cases against election manipulation (Ullah, Ahmad, & Azim, 2020). PTI formally proclaimed the start of their anti-rigging movement on April 22, 2014. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri formally stated on August 10, 2014 that political march of his party named it as the *Inqilab March* would be run concurrently with *Azadi March* of PTI. Both Marches were planned to follow distinct paths, yet they were nearly identical. However, as time passed, it became clear that the two parties had identical goals but pursued them in different ways (Javed & Mamoon, 2017).

The declaration of two simultaneous demonstrations by opposition leaders sparked discussion about the possibility of a partnership between the PTI and the PAT. Although the leaders of the two parties never stated explicitly that they would create a formal alliance, they did reach an oral agreement

to assist one another. Both Qadri and Khan told the press on August 11, 2014 that there will be two adjacent demonstrations, informally united for the cabinet's resignation, but with no coordinated approach in advance. Since the announcement of the 2013 election results, Imran Khan and the PTI have urged the government to set up tribunals and committees to examine electoral malpractice in the four constituencies. Khan, despite being mocked by the PML (N) government and ministers, made these requests despite his unwillingness to accept the election results (Ullah, Ahmad, & Azim, 2020).

After a year, the PML (N) government had made little progress or gained traction in this sector, and was "hesitant" to investigate the alleged rigging. Khan, on the other hand, had proved election fraud in a number of seats on several occasions. The PTI leader, Imran Khan also accused Najam Sethi, the interim Punjab chief minister, and Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, the former chief judge, of assisting fraud on the direction of the PML (N) during previous elections. Khan granted the PML (N) government a month to meet his demand after the government failed to initiate an inquiry into claims of vote fraud. He claimed that he had "whacked on every doorway in the hope of finding justice," but to no avail. If Khan's deadline was not met within a month, he threatened to march a million of his supporters to the parliament (Javed & Mamoon, 2017).

PML (N) Government's Hesitation towards PTI Demands and PPP Response

Amid the situation the PPP had taken account apprehensions about the political system of the country, had primarily collaborated with the government to conserve the democratic tradition of Pakistan. However, when both parties; PPP and PML (N) coalition had aggravated PTI March on Islamabad, and then Asif Ali Zardari asked Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif that being a democratically elected Prime Minister should be acted as an elected PM, not like an emperor or a king and to stop interfering in provincial matters. The PPP had also asked PML (N) to take into account the PTI demands concerning the recounting of votes in four constituencies. And Prime Minister Nawaz Sharief should not be afraid with the recounting of the votes (*Abb Takk TV*, 2014, July 15).

Khursheed Shah, the prominent opposition leader in the National Assembly, has advised all legislative parties against adopting any action that would put their names on the list of dictators. He described the current scenario as extremely hazardous, claiming that the people were not concerned about the democratic system collapsing in the next days. He had recommended all political parties to take action to alleviate these concerns, stating that all political parties believe in the supremacy of parliament and that preserving the cause of democracy does not imply supporting the government. The PPP opposition leader recommended the government to deal with the country's current political situation politically, and said the government should not be concerned about the PTI's long march on August 14 because it was a constitutional prerogative of any political party in the country. He had informed the House that the PPP always believed in parliament's supremacy and would not take any action that would be detrimental to democracy (*Pakistan Tribune*, 2014 August 8).

Role of PPP as Mediation between PML (N) Government and PTI

PPP Punjab President Mian Manzoor Watto also requested that the PML (N) government and the PTI to seek former President Asif Ali Zardari's mediation to resolve the current political crisis of the country, said that the PPP was in a position to mediate and that the government and the PTI would accept the PPP's mediation and decision. The PPP Punjab President had begged the PML (N) government not to block the PTI and PAT's long marches, fearing that the government might be overthrown if they did. The PPP leader made it clear that his party would not participate in the PTI and PAT's long marches. (*Dawn*, 2014, August 13). During an interview, Mian Manzoor Watto said "At the time, I stated unequivocally that the PTI and PAT had the constitutional right to have demonstrations, but that no one would support them if their employees destroyed public property and took the law into their own hands'..... The authorities would be able to physically control them if they were rowdy. The situation has deteriorated due to the Punjab government's inaction. I told the administration that Zardari sahib appeared to be the most capable mediator in that situation, and that he could resolve the government-PTI issue. If democracy fails at that point, rulers were to be held responsible" (Watto, 2021).

Asif Ali Zardari, the PPP co-chairman and former president, organized a committee of PPP officials to talk with other political parties on a plan to alleviate political tensions and keep the democratic system intact. Senator Rehman Malik presided over the special committee, which also included Fateh Muhammad Hasni, Maula Bakh Chandio, Nisar Khuro, Imtiaz Safdar Waraich, Khanzada Khan, Javed Waraich, Afzal Nadeem Chan, Faisal Karim Kundi, Sabir Baloch, and Faryal

Talpur (Dawn, 2014, August 13). PPP leader Qamar Zaman Kaira stated that the PPP committee would do all possible to address the problem peacefully because the current political scenario contains components that could destabilize the democratic process. The PPP Central Executive Committee (CEC) passed a resolution in this regard, warning that any derailment of the democratic process, any constitutional abrasion, or any divergence from the constitutional path in any shape or manifestation would not be condoned or allowed (The Express Tribune, 2014, August 26).

The PPP had agreed that Imran Khan's charges of major cheating in the 2013 elections, which were confirmed by former ECP additional secretary Afzal Khan, should be probed by the superior judiciary. The PPP was the first party to voice concerns about how the elections were rigged and to cast doubt on the credibility of returning officers. A commission should be created with the approval of all parties to investigate it thoroughly. The PPP Central Executive Committee (CEC) agreed that widespread allegations of election cheating in 2013 required swift electoral reforms (Dawn, 2014, August 26).

During an interview with Qamar Zaman Kaira regarding PTI *Dharna*, PPP role as mediation and PAT and PTI demand for the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's resignation, said "Our party's vow to the Pakistani people at the time was to help defuse the situation and save democracy.....at that time, a derailment of the democratic system threatened not only the Constitution but also the federation. We had urged all three parties – the PTI, the PAT, and the PML (N) – to display caution and engage in a meaningful and result-oriented discourse, as the only way to break the deadlock in a democratic society... ..we counseled the three sides to avoid egoism, show flexibility, and work for a constitutional solution. Otherwise, PTI, PAT, and PML (N) would be held responsible for any derailment of the democratic system....we had resolved to follow the decisions made by the government" (Kaira, 2021).

Attack on PTI's Azadi March and PPP Reaction

The PML (N) government called Khan's call for a protest March "undemocratic" and a "derailment" attempt when he announced the march. The PML (N) government offended the PTI's demands and showed no care. Khan's *Azadi March* was labeled anarchy in disguise by Ahsan Iqbal, the PML (N) leader, and federal minister for planning and development, who accused Khan of fomenting unrest in North Waziristan when the government was combating terrorists in Operation Zarb-e-Azb. The PML (N) government had instructed the Islamabad police to prevent any demonstrators from entering the city during the Independence Day celebrations, effectively sabotaging any efforts at reconciliation with the PTI. The government's inactivity prompted the PTI to stage a demonstration in Punjab province (Javed and Memon 2017). Soon after, the PTI called for a Long March against election rigging, and the following year, it organized an *Azadi March* and a *Dharna* (sit-in) in Islamabad's D-Chowk (Rumi 2014).

The Azadi March began from the PTI Chief's house in Zaman Park, Lahore. The Azadi March then marched towards Islamabad, the country's capital. Meanwhile, Pervez Khattak, the Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, left Peshawar for Islamabad with a supporters' convoy. Rally of Imran Khan proceeded through several areas of Lahore, including Faisal Chowk, Mall Road, and Data Darbar. The PTI convoy, in particular party leader Imran Khan's vehicle, was bombarded with stones by PML (N) supporters on the route to Islamabad as it passed through a locality in Gujranwala where a PML (N) office was located, injuring four PTI volunteers. Local police were able to contain the ensuing conflict, although no PML (N) members were harmed or imprisoned. The PML (N) attack on the PTI's Azadi March convoy was denounced by the PPP (Javed & Mamoon 2017). Asif Ali Zardari also sharply criticized the incident, calling it an "unacceptable act of intolerance toward political opposition" that will only exacerbate the already sensitive political environment. Khursheed Shah, the PPP's National Assembly opposition Leader, called the throwing of stones at political gatherings a "condemnable precedent" and urged the Punjab government to take action against individuals who incite violence (The Express Tribune, 2014, August 16).

PTI's Decision of Resignation and PPP Response

The chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Imran Khan declared on August 17 that "the next day, he would lead the march towards the 'Red Zone'". After a meeting of the PTI core committee, the vice-president of PTI Shah Mehmood Qureshi addressed the media, saying that all PTI legislators had agreed to resign from the National Assembly. He also stated that the party has decided to withdraw its members from Sindh and Punjab legislatures. The PPP slammed the PTI's move as anti-democratic. The PTI's decision to leave assemblies, according to Asif Ali Zardari, a co-chairman of the PPP, was

not a favourable sign for the democratic process (Dawn, 2014, August 19). The meeting was arranged by PPP and PML (N) to discuss the current political scenario. Zardari and Nawaz participated in it. Zardari was accompanied by Ahsan Iqbal, Raza Rabbani, Aitzaz Hassan and Khurshid Shah. This meeting was arranged for the solving and ending all the political grievances through peaceful talks. It was held between, PTI, PML-N and PAT. In the beginning the PAT and PTI leaders; Tahir and Khan demanded the resignation of Prime Minister, which halted further negotiations. This act was criticized by PPP leaders and other authorities of Pakistan for putting the democratic system in peril (Dawn, 2014, August 23).

Decision of Army Deployment for Suppression of PTI and PPP Reaction

Mr. Nawaz Sharif the Prime Minister met with the Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif and discussed issues relating to national security. The meeting was also attended by senior civilian and military leaders too to discuss the strategy to defuse the situation arisen in the in the federal capital due to the sit-ins staged by the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT). The government and opposition leaders were urged by the Army Chief to resolve the crisis through talks and warned against the use of force to end the demonstrations (Dawn, 2014, August 19).

The mediation offers by PPP and Supreme Court was failed after rounds of talks. Tahir ul Qadri and Imran Khan had warned that they were preparing to lead their followers into the capital's "Red Zone," which includes the Supreme Court, National Assembly, diplomatic compounds and the official residence of Nawaz Sharif. It was decided by the then Government to deploy army in Islamabad on June 15, 2014 under Article 245 of the Constitution. Before sounds of an Azadi March had started to ring around the capital (The Express Tribune, 2014, August 01). The military was requested by the prime minister to take charge of securing the area. It was a surprising move by Sharif, who had an uncomfortable history with the army, including his ouster in a military coup in 1999 when he last served as Prime Minister (The Washington Post, 2014, August 19).

The opposition's party roundly criticized the government's move. However, the main opposition party in the Parliament, PPP has opted to take up the matter in the National Assembly. The decision to deploy the army in the capital was strongly opposed by PPP, citing its grave implications for political stability and civil-military relations in the country. PPP leader Qamar Zaman Kaira said that the decision to impose Article-245 in the federal capital was beyond comprehension. He also termed the move unconstitutional (The Express Tribune, 2014, August 01).

The PPP, as the largest party in the Senate, had also opposed the government's decision to deploy the army to suppress protestors in Islamabad under Article 245 because it believed it was against the democratic spirit and tried to persuade other parties to support it. The PPP member requested that the government exercise executive power through the Parliament and did everything possible to prevent the administration from doing so (Javed & Mamoon, 2017).

According to PPP spokesperson Senator Farhatullah Babar "The decision has major ramifications for the people and the nation since it indicates that the high courts' jurisdiction would be completely suspended in addition to the failure of the civil administration. Worse yet, it practically also entails the establishment of military courts, which is not acceptable". He claimed that whether it was in Karachi or other regions of the nation, the PPP has consistently resisted using Article 245 to call the Army to the help of civil power (The Express Tribune, 2014, July 25). According to him, "the situation in Islamabad is not any worse than that in any other region of the country to warrant inviting security establishment to remedy it by vesting in them powers beyond judicial scrutiny". The PPP spokesman added, "The government fails to recognize that if today it is Islamabad tomorrow Karachi, Peshawar, Quetta, Lahore, and indeed the entire country, may have to be turned over to the army under Article 245 and virtually do away with the high courts". He continued, "Bad as it now is, the country's human rights situation will get considerably worse if the doors of high courts are sealed to the people". According to him, the decision to turn over the federal capital to the Army will also convey unsettling messages to the rest of the world about the country's current security condition. It will worsen the existing flawed civil-military relationship. He brought up the Charter of Democracy (CoD) to the PML (N) government that the CoD calls for coordinated steps to rectify distortions in civil-military relations in four of its sections (articles 32 to 36). He claimed that the decision to turn Islamabad over to the army will further tilt the scale against the country's legal, political, and civil organizations, rather than redressing the enormous imbalance that already exists (The Express Tribune, 2014, July 25). However,

the PTI's leaders despite all these actions had stated that its demonstration would be continued till its demands were met (Javed & Mamoon, 2017).

PTI's Larkana Jalsa and PPP Reaction

On November 21, 2014 PTI held its Larkana Jalsa despite PPP severe opposition as Larkana was the stronghold of PPP since its inception. The party passed a resolution against Imran Khan just two days ago from Sindh Assembly. Imran Khan promised the people of Sindh in Larkana Jalsa that Sindh would not be divided and without consensus on the issue of Kala Bagh dam, would not be built. PTI also promised to be ensured of equal rights to all minorities (Voice of Journalists, 2014, November 21). PPP leaders and key members of the Sindh Cabinet called the PTI's Larkana rally (*Jalsa*) a failed political show and criticized Imran Khan for joining those known for their 'anti-education stance' in the rural parts of the province. PPP Sindh information minister Sharjeel Inam Memon, Senators Saeed Ghani, Taj Haider. Senior Sindh minister and other party leaders said that the people of Sindh had rejected the PTI slogan of 'fake change' by not participating in its rally, which was hardly attended by between 10,000 and 12,000 people (Dawn, 2014, November 23).

During an interview with Sharjeel Memon about Larkana *Jalsa*, he said, "The PTI chief was 'desperate' to become the prime minister of Pakistan but he should be known that Pakistan was no more the 'personal property of any dictator' and one would have to establish oneself as the people's choice to become their leader. Imran Khan and his aides were handpicked by the past dictators. Shah Mehmood Qureshi was one of the examples who left the PPP only when he was asked to step down as foreign minister. Before that he had never spoken against the party neither found any problem with our leadership.....It is hard to believe that the PTI was criticizing and leveling false allegations against the provincial government instead of being thankful to it for providing full support and facilities for their rally. The PTI and their leaders were consistently humiliating Sindh and they should be apologized for that" (Memon, 2021).

End of PTI's Dharna (Sit in) and PPP Response

The Dharna was held in Islamabad's D Chowk for 126 days, ending on December 16, 2014, (Alvi, 2015) after terrorists from the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan attack on APS in Peshawar and slaughtered 150 people, including 132 students (Hashim, 2018). Imran Khan announced the cancellation of the demonstration on December 17, 2014, said, "Due to the current scenario in the country, there is dire need of national unity therefore we have decided to halt our protests". The decision was reached in light of the terrorist attack on APS in Peshawar (Zaman, 2014). The Former president and co-chairperson of PPP, Asif Ali Zardari welcomed the announcement too, terming it "a step in the right direction at a time when all attention must be focused on fighting the existential threat confronting the nation" (The Express Tribune, 2014, December 17).

CONCLUSION

Conclusively, during the PTI and PAT protest, the PPP, as the opposition's largest party, was meant to back PTI, but it did not, instead opting for pragmatic politics. PPP played its role as mediation between the PML (N) Government and PTI leadership. The PTI leadership has chastised the PPP for its attitude, branding it a PML (N) government's "B team". Perhaps to dispel this idea, PPP legislators and Senators stressed their party's and leadership's positive acts, as well as their belief in democracy and the parliamentary system. The PPP was just backing the government for the sake of democracy, while opposing the PTI and PAT's demands and protests as being damaging to democracy and unlawful. Shortly, PPP had proved itself a cooperative and friendly opposition in the Parliament. However, whenever the PML (N) Government took harsh or undemocratic steps for the suppression of PTI's *Dharna (Sit in)*, the PPP as major Parliamentary opposition strongly reacted and criticized it for the sake of democracy.

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