

Scenario 276

...PRE-POLL RIGGING 2024

'FOREIGN POLICY' ANALYSIS ON...

Referring to an essay by *Allison Meakem* in the American Magazine **FOREIGN POLICY** dated 2nd January 2024; titled as '*The Road to Power in Pakistan Runs through the Military*'.

"Pakistan had been due to hold a vote last October but has now settled on Feb. 8 as a polling date. The Pakistani Constitution stipulates that an election be held within 60 days of the parliament's dissolution on a regular schedule and within 90 days if the body is suspended before its term is up.

Then-Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif ended his term and stepped down on Aug. 9, 2023, handing control to a caretaker administration. But just before triggering the election countdown, Sharif's government unveiled new census results; these are used to determine Pakistan's voting constituencies. The country's top electoral commission said it needed more time to redraw electoral maps based on the updated figures, and the contest was pushed to February (2024)."

The writer's analysis said that "...opposition and its supporters believed the timing of the new census results was suspicious, and that it was used as a pretext to delay the elections to give the military more time to influence the electoral environment," **FP's Michael Kugelman**, the author of South Asia Brief, wrote in an email. The Pakistani military is known to be the country's main power broker. A former Pakistani Ambassador to the United States explained in *Foreign Policy* last August that: "[t]he military says it is not involved in politics, but politicians are still pursuing the generals' approval."

In April 2022, the military fell apart with then-Prime Minister Imran Khan and the later ultimately landed in jail since August 2023 and was technically barred from politics for five years. But Khan and his backers called the charges against him politically motivated. In late December 2023, Pakistan's Supreme Court approved Khan's bail in one case, and an Islamabad court stayed another trial until 11th Jan 2024, yet the ex-leader remained locked up related to other charges. **"Khan's cult-like supporters regard him as a figure who can save Pakistan from corrupt, dynastic politics,"** Hussain Haqqani wrote in an analysis of those days.

A defiant Khan was still leading his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party's list heading into next month's (8th February 2024) vote. **Authorities briefly sought to ban the PTI from printing its logo, a cricket bat**, on ballots before a Peshawar court struck down the move. (Pakistan has high illiteracy rates, and logos help voters identify the correct candidate.) The state's attempt to scrub the image raised a response to the PTI's popularity:

- ***In a Gallup Pakistan poll conducted over June and July 2023, Khan earned a 60 percent approval rating, and 42 percent of respondents expressed an intention to vote for the PTI, much higher shares than were garnered by any other politician or party; the PMLN had earned 20 percent, and the center-left Pakistan People's Party (PPP) followed with 12 percent.***

The PML and PPP were traditionally rivals but formed a marriage of convenience to oust Khan in April 2022. The brief tenure of the PML-PPP unity (PDM) government was less chaotic but the country still faced its fair share of challenges. In addition to wrestling continued agitations from Khan and his supporters, Pakistan suffered with scriptural flooding in August 2022 and found itself in economic trouble. There's also been an uptick in nationalism against Afghan migrants. During later months of 2023, the caretaker government—likely at the behest of the military—oversaw the expulsion of 1.7 million Afghans from Pakistan.

Shehbaz Sharif, apparently, was not running as the PML's top candidate in that election because his elder brother, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was also in the run. Nawaz S had recently returned to the country after spending four years in self-exile in the United Kingdom. Khan and Nawaz Sharif were bitter foes, but having one thing in common: Nawaz Sharif was also banned from politics thanks to a 14-year corruption sentence.

Pakistani authorities had declared that Nawaz Sharif would not be arrested 'until he appears in court', and the PML successfully appealed his conviction and sentences, making him eligible for next month's elections; even though Nawaz Sharif was ousted in a military-backed coup. That's bad news both for Khan and the PPP chief Bilawal Zardari. Kugelman said: '...the electoral playing field won't be level with the PML enjoying a big advantage. Pakistan's electoral commission [ECP] has already been accused of redrawing electoral maps with the new census data to favor the PMLN.

Though the public opinion was visibly tilting in the PMLN's direction due to undue punishments of Khan and its near members of PTI, the weeks ahead were likely to feature a great deal of political and legal machinations from all of Pakistan's major parties. In mid-December 2023, Pakistan's Supreme Court announced that it would form a committee to adjudicate political bans—a move that appeared to pave the way for Nawaz Sharif ... to run for PM's office fourth time; the PMLN had announced just weeks ahead that Nawaz Sharif would be its top candidate in the 8th February 2024 vote.

That election was to go ahead for all 342 seats in the National Assembly, the lower House of parliament, most of which were single-member constituencies. The remaining seats were to be awarded through a proportional, party-based allocation system.

PRE-POLL RIGGING FOR ELECTIONS-2024:

Referring to **AL-JAZEERA** dated 12th January 2024:

"— A former prime minister is in jail. Election authorities are busy stopping his party's candidates from contesting. And another ex-premier, previously imprisoned and then in exile, is now back, with the cases against him dropped.

*Less than a month before Pakistan holds its 12th general elections on 8th February (2024); concerns are mounting among analysts and sections of the political class that **the coming vote might rank near the top of the list of most manipulated votes** even in the country's chequered democratic journey."*

Why has Pakistan scrapped a lifetime ban on convicts holding office? — The question was found on most lips of country's populace as well as foreign and local media; see details below:

[8th January 2024: In a major legal development, the Supreme Court of Pakistan lifted a lifetime ban on politicians with convictions from contesting elections. That order overturned a 2018 ruling by

the Lahore High Court [LHC] which had prevented any individual convicted of an offence from running for elected or chosen office for life. The LHC had based its decision on Article 62(1)(f) of the Constitution of Pakistan, interpreting the conditions for a parliamentary member as encompassing '**sagacious, righteous, non-profligate, honest**' characteristics, and suggesting that a conviction in a court of law therefore implies dishonesty and disqualifies a person for life.

*"Article 62(1)(f) had previously empowered the parliament to prescribe qualifications for contesting elections. **A 2018 Supreme Court judgement interpreted this clause to imply lifetime disqualification for politicians deemed ineligible based on morality or integrity grounds.** This decision raised concerns about potential abuse of power and its chilling effect on democratic participation, particularly impacting high-profile figures like former Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan."*

In a 6-to-1 decision, the Supreme Court rejected this interpretation of the Constitution, stating it amounted to overruling. It held the lifetime ban to be in violation of Article 17 of the Constitution which establishes the fundamental right of citizens to contest elections and vote for a candidate of their choice. This ruling brought significant implications for major political figures. Notably, former three-time Prime Minister (PM) Nawaz Sharif, who was removed from office in 2017 because of conviction in corruption case prompted by the release of the **Panama Papers**, could contest for a fourth term as PM afresh through 8th Feb 2024 election.

Despite the lifting of the lifetime ban, timing of eligibility was the most crucial and important factor. As per Pakistan Elections Act, 2017, potential candidates were disqualified for five years following a conviction. Therefore, convicted former PM, Imran Khan, removed and convicted of corruption in 2022, was not eligible to contest until 2027. The decision marked a divide in opinions, characterised by the spokesperson for the PMLN, who termed the ruling as 'the end of a dark chapter of judicial injustice'. Contrarily, an attorney of Imran Khan labelled it as the 'death of law and constitution'].

TIME'S ANALYSIS BEFORE ELECTIONS 2024:

IMRAN KHAN was being smashed with over 180 charges ranging from rioting to terrorism, and jailed in a rotten nine-by-11-foot cell following 5th August (2023) corruption-conviction for allegedly selling state gifts. As Pakistan was approaching fresh elections on 8th February (2024), the 71-year-old's chances of a comeback appeared thin, despite retaining broad public support. Allegedly, Pakistan's kingmakers were using all cannons at their disposal to sideline the nation's most popular politician and his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. 'Elections are being held but I've got serious doubts whether real democracy or democratic principles are being followed'; said **Samina Yasmeen**, Director of the Centre for Muslim States and Societies at the University of Western Australia.

In mid-January (2024), Khan's PTI party was banned from using its iconic cricket bat logo on ballot papers, significantly hampering its chances amongst an electorate which was up to 40% illiterate. Most crucially, it effectively banned the PTI as a party; its candidates were to stand as independents using a range of symbols ranging from a rollercoaster to a goat. The election symbol was an integral component of fair elections in Pakistan; **snatching it like rendering the party toothless**. The ECP in collaboration with the then sitting caretaker government and the establishment had done a great loss to the PTI by **taking off its 'BAT'** from PTI.

- *Pakistani lawmakers are constitutionally obliged to vote along party lines for certain key matters, including the leader of the house and financial legislation. But as the PTI-backed candidates were*

officially independents, they were under no such constraints, making it much easier for the opposition to cobble together a coalition by targeting individuals with inducements.

- *Additionally, PTI would be ineligible to receive its rightful proportion of the 200-odd parliamentary 'reserved seats' for women and minorities that were allocated according to a party's proportion of the overall vote, which would instead be divvied out to the other registered parties. **AND it actually happened so – a full chapter has been added for this after-election jugglery.***

Then again, *even registering as independents was not been easy for the PTI.* Each candidate must file their nomination in the constituency where they intend to stand, but PTI's candidates frequently find their nomination papers snatched from their hands by shadowy security personnel. To avoid this, the PTI had to take to dispatching several candidates with nomination papers in the hope that one might break through the security cordon.

But even if one would manage to submit papers, each candidate required a proposer and seconder to attend the nomination in person. On many occasions, a PTI candidate presented his papers *only to find either or both had abruptly been 'kidnapped';* meaning that 90% of its candidates' nomination papers were rejected. - ***This was massive pre-poll rigging.***

The hurdles facing Khan and PTI stood in stark contrast to the lot dealt to Nawaz Sharif, who was most recently ousted for corruption in 2017 and sentenced to 10 years imprisonment. In 2018, Sharif traveled to London on bail for medical treatment but absconded and remained a fugitive in exile. But on 21st October (2023), an apparently healthy Sharif returned to Pakistan, where his corruption conviction was swiftly quashed and his lifetime ban from politics also overturned. *'The temperature was going to rise in the next few days when candidates would step out in the form of rallies – There was going to be anger on the streets.'*

It was no secret that Pakistan's military kingmakers had thrown their full, rather undue and unmerited, support behind Nawaz Sharif. Simultaneously, Khan's enduring popularity meant more heavy-handed tactics were required. Despite all PTI's headwinds, and extremely patchy governance record while in power, a Gallup OPINION POLL from December 2023 showed the imprisoned Khan's approval ratings stood at 57%, compared to 52% for Sharif. PTI remained confident that they would win if allowed to compete in a fair play. People, especially at the grass root level, were very pro-Imran Khan; Ref; **WEEKLY TIME OF 14TH JANUARY 2024.**

- *A big question remained why the international community was staying so muted in the face of such brazen irregularities—especially the US – where the stakes were high; nuclear-armed Pakistan was drowning in \$140 billion of external debt, while ordinary people were battling with Asia's highest inflation, with food prices rising 38.5% year-on-year.*
- *The truth was evident that Khan had few friends in the West after prioritizing relations with Russia and China. **'From a Washington perspective, anyone would be better than Khan'**, said Michael Kugelman, the director of the South Asia Institute at the Wilson Center in Washington, DC.*

By contrast, Nawaz Sharif was perceived as business-friendly and pro-America. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, Washington's foreign policy priorities had shifted to China, Ukraine, and the Gaza. American priorities in Pakistan were keeping a lid on terrorism and stabilizing relations with India—and Sharifs kept a better record on both. There remained 'a lot of bad blood between Nawaz and the military, even if he were to become the next Prime Minister, civil-military relations were to take the same turn for the worse – as it happened three times with Nawaz Sharif in the past.

Might be the reason why Khan had adopted a patient disposition despite the deprivations of his prison cell. *"He is cold in jail but quite happy; he's read so many books, maybe two to three every day, and he's very content to have this retreat time—spiritually, mentally, and physically, he says he feels better";* Aleema Khan told the **weekly TIME.**

Referring to Charlie Campbell's analysis in **Weekly TIME** magazine of 5th February 2024:

"Khan's trial for allegedly leaking state secrets was conducted in camera inside a makeshift courtroom within a jail complex, with public and media banned. Khan's own defense team were blocked from taking part, with the judge appointing two state-employed colleagues of the prosecution to represent the former national cricket captain instead. "When they gave the sentence, he said, 'Oh, it's only 10 years? I thought it would be....So he's laughing through the whole thing'."

The case heard one of the 180+ separate charges Khan was facing then and that rendered a return to power nearly impossible for Pakistan's most popular politician. He was back in court on 1st February 2024 on separate corruption charges related to the transfer of land for a charitable university he founded [AL-QADIR TRUST CASE]."

On 3rd February 2024; Khan was sentenced to an additional seven years for having an 'un-Islamic marriage' [IDDAT CASE]. But few in Pakistan were laughing as the nuclear-armed nation of 240 million was crawling towards general elections on 8th February 2024. The legal onslaught on Khan merged with expulsion of his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which had seen its 2000+ workers arrested, dozens of its leaders abandoned it under duress, its famed **cricket-bat logo banned**, and constituency boundary lines redrawn to allegedly benefit its opponents. Khan's name was brushed away from mainstream media and his own nomination papers were rejected. **'Of course, there is no level playing field and no way can this election be seen as free and fair'**, said Patricia Gossman, Associate Asia Director for Human Rights Watch.

'...but why America remained silent over such drastic human-rights catastrophe in Pakistan?' In truth, American silence was both personality-driven and structural. Khan retained an oddly chummy relationship with the overtly Islamophobic Donald Trump, but he proved no friend to Joe Biden, fuming over the President's failure to call him following his 2020 election victory and furious about a US-sponsored plot to oust him. [The case regarding leaking state secrets was related to allegations Khan released a confidential diplomatic cypher that he vaguely claimed as proof that Washington had pulled the strings of his ouster in an April 2022's No Confidence Vote.]

Imran Khan shamelessly had cozied up to both Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, but the bigger issue for the US was structural. Ultimately, **'it didn't much matter who holds political office in Pakistan because true power lies with its military'**. As one former top US diplomat in Islamabad told TIME: 'When we had a [crisis], we didn't call the prime minister—we called the Chief of Army Staff'. The magazine further said:

*"General Asim Munir occupies that rarefied post today, and it is he who has orchestrated Khan's downfall after the two fell out spectacularly over military appointments and other bugbears—not least the ransacking of military properties by PTI supporters on May 9. **It was also Munir's decision to bring back three-time former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from exile, quash his corruption conviction, repeal his lifetime ban from politics, and pave the way for a historic fourth stint in power.** But as no Pakistani Prime Minister has ever completed a full term, few are betting on Sharif staying around long. **Relations with Pakistan's top brass take precedence.** Tellingly, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken hosted Munir in Washington in December (2023).*

In the near term, however, from the US perspective Sharif is a safe, predictable pair of hands who won't rock the boat with India."

On another count, Tariq Amin-Khan, a politics professor at Toronto Metropolitan University, commented:

*"The State Department seems to be quite comfortable with Nawaz Sharif, but Sharif's record on the economy is poor and reputation for graft **really quite legendary**. Since the turn of the millennium, per capita GDP in Pakistan has risen by an average of just 1% annually. In 2000, the average Pakistani was some 50% richer than his Indian counterpart; today, they are 25% poorer. Headline inflation rose to 29.7% year-over-year in December (2023) owing to tax hikes and a sharp fall in the currency."*

More precisely, Gareth Leather, senior Asia economist for Capital Economics wrote in the same periodical of 5th February 2024 that:

"Having been prime minister for more time than anyone else since 1990, [Sharif] must take a fair share of blame for Pakistan's poor economic performance over this period. Despite his spotty diplomatic and security record, growth under Khan averaged at 6% for his last two years in office, despite headwinds such as the pandemic."

The PTI refused to give up and had managed to register candidates for the vast majority of constituencies. With the PTI logo banned, the party got set up an online portal to show supporters which officially independent candidate had its backing. *'Give me a free and fair election and I think we will run away with three-quarters [of seats] if not more'*, said Raoof Hasan, PTI's principal spokesman and a former special assistant to Khan.

Various opinion polls put Khan's popularity at around 60% to 80% and the threat of a strong showing from his supporters could prompt the military to take more decisive action to shamble them. *'The election as it is set up is already not free nor fair, [but] the only question, in my view, is if there is overt rigging on Election Day'*; opined one retired Pakistani General.

Street violence and any security response could, above all, make it more difficult to secure another IMF bailout—it was essential to avoid default and potential economic collapse.

Anita Weiss, a professor of international studies at the University of Oregon, floated her candid opinion that:

"My greatest fear is that this election is going to be called out for being a sham. And there will be riots all over Pakistan that it can barely endure because of the severe economic crisis. The Biden Administration may yet regret not taking a stronger stance to protect the democratic values it claims to hold so dear. It would likely not have changed the overall direction of what's happening, [But] Washington voicing concern would have given Pakistan's military establishment pause, and perhaps softened the extent of the crackdown."

CRACKDOWN ON PTI INTENSIFIED:

Most lawyers and media analysts called it as the crackdown by state authorities against Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its leader, Imran Khan, as evidence of widespread rigging that could deny the former prime minister and his party a shot at a fair contest. Khan was in jail since August 2023, facing multiple charges including corruption, revealing state secrets, and over planning for attacks on military facilities by his supporters. He had denied all the charges. Large numbers of his party's leaders had quit the PTI, seemingly under duress. Many of them went underground, seeking to avoid arrest, while others had defected and joined rival political parties.

Multiple electoral nominees from the PTI, including Khan himself had got their nomination papers rejected by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), the electoral watchdog. Khan was also deprived of his portfolio of Chairmanship of his party [PTI] due to his imprisonment. Gohar Ali Khan, a relatively unknown lawyer who joined the party less than three years ago, was named the new head. The PTI was also struggling to keep hold of its election symbol, a cricket bat, amid a legal battle with the ECP in the country's Supreme Court. 'This time around, the manner in which PTI and its cadres have been brutalised, it has not happened in the history of Pakistan'; Shayan Bashir, PTI's information secretary in Punjab, held.

- Bashir also added that: 'Snatching of nomination papers, nomination of candidates in police reports, rejection of nominations on unprecedented scale, forcing PTI candidates to abandon the party under duress, all this evidence is available to show what the party has to endure'.

Moreover, fears of election manipulation were not new in the country of 240 million people. In fact, longtime observers of Pakistani politics and elections said that historically, most elections in the country have been tainted to various degrees. In 1990, Pakistan President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismissed the elected Pakistan People's Party government of then-Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. Elections were held, and the PPP – widely popular at the time – lost to an alliance led by Nawaz Sharif. In 2012, the Pakistan Supreme Court described the 1990 vote as rigged. But the same PMLN were victims of allegedly an unfair election in 2018, after he had returned to power in 2013. Sharif was removed from his premiership again when he was disqualified for concealing his assets in April 2017, and merely days before the elections, along with his daughter Maryam, he was sentenced to jail for 10 years on corruption charges. 'Irrespective of partisan positions, the 2018 election was pretty bad, which many people don't accept'.

Khan and his PTI emerged victorious in those elections amid harsh complaints of manipulation. Many analysts and Khan's political rivals suggested that the Pakistani military was the kingmaker behind Khan's rise, providing him the platform for success at the expense of his rivals. Pakistan's powerful establishment, even when not directly in power, remained active in political affairs, an admission made by its former army chief Gen Bajwa in November 2022 during his good-bye speech.

Nawaz Sharif had returned to the country in ending 2023 after four years in self-exile. This time, most analysts believed, the military had put bet on Sharif, who returned to the country and had seen courts quickly drop legal hurdles against his candidature. Then the political environment before the polls was ridiculous; 'parties have changed, leaders have changed, but the method and madness remain the same'. It was correct to describe the run-up to 2024 polls fundamentally **'as unfair as the previous one'**- it was **pre-poll election engineering** instead of calling it **rigging**. See a media analysis then:

- "Comparing the upcoming and last elections, of 2024 vs 2018, the pre-election period showed the same pattern of manipulation. The major difference remained that those old tactics were facing stronger resistance this time, and secondly the party at the wrong end of the establishment, the PTI, was more successful in popularising its narrative of victimhood, compared to the PMLN."

That narrative propelled Khan's popularity upwards – which had dropped to 32 percent per a local survey while he was in office – past 60 percent after he was removed from the premiership in April 2022 through a parliamentary vote of no confidence. Khan had blamed a US-led conspiracy, in collusion with the Pakistani military, for removing him from power, and led demonstrations in the country demanding early elections. However, near the elections-2024, Khan was in jail and his besieged and harassed party was engaged in a battle for subsistence.

However, the intelligentsia believed that a deeper political and social shift was under way in Pakistan those days. The main issue was that the contradictions in the Pakistani state had intensified, which was giving rise to resentment in society and institutions. 'The political parties had traditionally played a negative role', by bailing out the establishment whenever opportunity arose. Earlier, the PTI was entirely on one page

with them, and that was followed by the coalition government [PDM] which came after PTI was ousted. Political parties, whenever the establishment went on the back foot, availed an opportunity to advance their own monetary goals rather than strengthen bonds with voters. That needed change, calling for political parties to hold themselves accountable.

"There are always one or more political parties which are willing to cross the Rubicon and enter some kind of presumed understanding with the establishment. It is unfortunate because the parties refuse to talk to each other. Politics here has now become a zero-sum game"; **AL-JAZEERA** dated 12th January 2024 is once more referred.

IDDAT CASE AGAINST Mr KHAN & 1st LADY:

Another case against Imran Khan was initiated in November 2023 when Bushra Bibi's former husband, Khawar Maneka, filed a complaint against both husband and wife, Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi. The complaint alleged that Bushra Bibi had married Imran Khan without completing her mandatory *Iddat* period. This case was filed almost six years after the couple's marriage.

On 3rd February 2024; a trial court sentenced Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi to seven years in prison for contracting marriage during Bushra Bibi's Iddat period. For ex-prime minister Imran Khan who was sent to jail after his conviction and subsequent disqualification in the Toshakhana Case, the sentence in the Iddat case was the third conviction in merely one week. That conviction was announced after a jail trial, senior civil judge Qudratullah sentenced the both, along with a Rs0.5 million fine each, for contracting marriage during the 'Iddat' [period of waiting as mandated in Islam] of the former first lady.

Bushra Bibi was confined at the Banigala residence of Imran Khan following her conviction in the Toshakhana reference. The judge set aside the 'nikah' of Mr Khan and Bushra Bibi solemnised on 1st January 2018, as he announced the sentence under Section 496 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) – and the court announced the maximum punishment given in the said section. As per court orders, the '*nikah*' was solemnised during the 'mandatory Iddat period' of Bushra Bibi.

- *Mr Khan and Bushra Bibi are still in a 'legitimate relationship' as the court ruled that the '*nikah*' of 14th February 2018 was legal.*

The fact remains that the ceremony held in Feb 2018 was merely a 'dua (blessings)' for public affirmation, the court ruled it as a '**valid nikah**' on the basis of testimonies of cleric Mufti Saeed and a former federal Minister Awn Chaudhry, once a close aide to Imran Khan. These prosecution witnesses testified that the first '*nikah*' was on 1st January 2018 and the second ceremony was held in Feb 2018. Mr Khan and Bushra Bibi also recorded their statements, saying they entered '*nikah*' after the '*Iddat*' had lapsed.

Imran Khan termed it a politically motivated case, instituted to hurt his dignity and repute. Bushra Bibi also claimed that her ex-husband Khawar Fareed Manika had already divorced her in April (2017), but signed the divorce deed in November 2017. The couple requested the court to allow them to produce the witnesses in their defence. However, the judge, on the other hand, termed the application seeking the same relief as delay tactics and rejected the request.

During his testimony in the court, Mr Manika claimed that Mr Khan had an affair with his wife since 2014 and he was a '*frequent visitor of his house*'. He said he had repeatedly asked Bushra Bibi to avoid meeting Mr Khan but to no avail and as a last resort he divorced her but '*with an intention of reconciliation during the Iddat*'. According to Khawar Manika, the untimely *nikah* of Mr Khan and Bushra Bibi deprived him of

availing the opportunity of reconciliation. He had also accused his ex-wife and Imran of having an adulterous relationship before their marriage.

The Judicial Magistrate Islamabad's court observed in its judgment of 51 pages that the minimum *Iddat* period as 39 days was not relevant in this particular case. The nutshell of the above discussion was that the complainant was trying to prove that the respondents [Mr Khan and Bushra Bibi] had engaged in an unlawful marriage ceremony on 1st January 2018, with dishonest and fraudulent intention. Thus both] were convicted under the provision of section 496 PPC and sentenced to simple imprisonment for a period of seven years each.

In a statement, the PTI denounced the verdict as contrary to '*Sharia*' and said it was a '*reprehensible attack*' on the marriage and family laws and unethical interference in private affairs. The party alleged that:

"The judge removed the mask of honour, modesty, shame and civilisation from the face of the state and exposed it before the [entire] world. After sentences in the Cypher and Tosha-khana references earlier that week, the elements tried to push forward the agenda of hateful political revenge by convicting Imran Khan in the Iddat case through a premeditated and shameful verdict."

RELIEF FOR KHAN IN IDDAT APPEAL:

Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi had appealed against their conviction. During the appeal hearing, Bushra Bibi's lawyer argued that the complaint was filed late [*after six years of the nikah between the two*] and was politically motivated. Moreover, the *Iddat* period had already been completed by the time the complaint was filed, making the marriage lawful.

The appellate court reserved its decision on the appeals filed by former PM Imran Khan and his wife Bushra Bibi against their conviction concerning their marriage during the *iddat* period.

During the hearing of the case in the court of Islamabad District and Sessions Judge Shah Rukh Arjumand, it came to light that initially, an unknown individual, Muhammad Hanif, had filed a complaint, accusing Imran and Bushra of marrying without the completion of Bushra's mandatory *iddat* period – but that complainant Muhammad Hanif never appeared in the trial court; thus, in May 2023, a district and sessions court in Islamabad declared Hanif's petition inadmissible. Mr Maneka later filed a similar petition through the same counsel, Raja Rizwan Abbasi Advocate.

During the trial, questions were posed to Mufti Muhammad Saeed—the cleric who solemnized Imran's marriage with Bushra on 1st January 2018—to clarify his role. Bushra Bibi, in her statement, mentioned the divorce occurred in April 2017, and she completed the *iddat* period before remarrying. On the other hand, defending the trial court's order, Deputy District Prosecutor Adnan Ali argued that Khawar Maneka and Bushra Bibi were happily married for 28 years with five children until PTI's founder interfered in their lives, leading to the divorce; AND Maneka intended to reconcile, but Bushra Bibi remarried during the *iddat* period. Prosecutor Ali also pointed out that according to Bushra Bibi's statement, the divorce occurred verbally in April (2017), but there were no witnesses to confirm this; adding that Bushra Bibi showed no remorse over the end of her 28-year marriage.

The court noted but reserved its decision to be announced on 29th May 2024.

On 29th May 2024: The appellate court announced its reserved decision on the appeals and quashed the judgment of the Judicial Magistrate Islamabad.

On 13 July 2024; the ADSJ Afzal Majoka passed the judgment for the immediate release of both Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi if they are not wanted in any other case.

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS ON IDDAT:

The PTI alleged that the delay in announcing the verdict of the case was a pre-planned strategy. Mr Khan accused Maneka of using delaying tactics and responsible for disrupting the court proceedings. During the hearing of the case, there was a disruption when complainant Khawar Maneka insisted on presenting his arguments, leading to a heated exchange with the PTI lawyers. The chaotic situation prompted Judge Shah Rukh Arjumand to request that the case be transferred to another court. The judge referred to the continued efforts of the complainant and his counsel to delay and frustrate the proceedings.

Once there was an acute disturbance in the court room and incident took place outside the court. PTI lawyers allegedly assaulted Maneka with slaps and bottles as they were leaving the court. Next day, due to this incident, a First Information Report (FIR) was also lodged against several PTI lawyers at Islamabad's Ramna police station. The charges included harsh provisions related to terrorism though it was not at all a terrorist act. Thus, The PTI rejected the registration of a '*false, fabricated and baseless*' case against members of the party's legal team. Most of the bar condemned the inclusion of terrorism charges in the case and demanded immediate action against the police officials and the PMLN activists.

In the above slapping incident, 12 policemen around were made witnesses. The names of 25 accused including PTI lawyers Naeem Panjotha, Ali Ijaz Butter, Zahid Bashir Dar, Usman Gill and Ansar Kayani were included in the FIR.

According to the FIR, as court proceedings commenced in Islamabad, PTI leaders and lawyers began gathering outside the court. The FIR said Advocate Burki then pushed Khawar Maneka and Naeem Panjotha. Advocate assaulted him with punches. PTI female workers threw bottles at Maneka and even had a scuffle with him while PTI lawyers slapped him inside the courtroom. As the Islamabad district and sessions court did not announce its already reserved verdict in the Iddat case against Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi, the complainant Khawar Maneka, the former husband of Bushra Bibi, was assaulted. The PTI vehemently condemned the inclusion of terrorism-related sections in the false case against the legal team members.