

Scenario 265

IMRAN KHAN's AZADI MARCH; MAY 2022

In Pakistan, long marches and sit-ins in the federal capital have been in vogue for decades. The idea of a long march was initially picked up not only by politicians but also by civilians who occasionally preferred marches for various causes – but mostly insignificant ones. Until 2014, the most famous marches were led by Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif. Following this, the PTI set a precedent after holding the longest SIT-IN (*dharna*) at D-Chouk Islamabad in 2014, followed by the Faizabad Interchange SIT-IN, a spot which developed as an effective venue for many groups in later years.

Since coming to power in 2018, the then PTI government witnessed several demonstrations against it. The culmination of these marches was seen in the protests of Democratic Movement (PDM) launched in 2020 against the PTI government. The opposition rallied both in the streets and in parliament to oust Imran Khan and his government, the success of which was witnessed in April 2022, with the passing of the no-confidence motion. However, following the vote of no-confidence, the situation changed dramatically with his narrative resonating with large sections of the population that held deep-rooted anti-American sentiments, feelings and opinions.

Talking about Imran Khan's protest of 25th May 2022, unlike during the PTI rule, the PDM government launched a serious crackdown on not only the PTI's protesters but also its leaders and party's key-figures. This unprecedented crackdown could result in the march taking on a violent turn as was evident from the clashes with the police. ***The crackdown came as a surprise because until 23rd May the PDM government had decided to let Imran Khan's long march on Islamabad go ahead***, only to take a complete U-turn on the matter after a meeting held by PM Shahbaz Sharif with Nawaz Sharif. Following this, the PMLN decided that an early election would not be '*dictated*' by Imran Khan and thus, authorised Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah to 'deal' sternly with the PTI marchers.

Additionally, the PDM government had got okayed backing of the 'establishment' to help it address the situation.

FURTHER DETAILS OF AZADI MARCH...

On 25th May 2022; *Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan, along with other party workers made their way towards Islamabad and marched towards D-Chowk pushing aside containers and confronting tear gas shelling. Before entering Islamabad Imran Khan said: *'This nation does not accept this imported government'*. He called on the people to come out for what he termed as a **'jihad for true freedom'**. Further, he called the incumbent government a group of thieves, claiming that they were the most corrupt people in the country and said that they were afraid of the masses which was why they had placed containers in marchers' way. The main demands for the march to the capital were the immediate dissolution of the National Assembly and a date for the next general election.

That **2022 Azadi March** (Freedom March) was a party rally against the then PDM government headed by Khan's successor, PM Shahbaz Sharif. On 24th May 2022, Khan announced that long march towards Islamabad starting next day. Khan led the march from Peshawar, the capital of Khyber PK, where his provincial government helped him. Senior PTI members lead the march from Lahore, the capital of Punjab. Khan asked people to reach the Srinagar Highway in Islamabad to support his demands for early elections.

[Background: On 10th April 2022; Mr Khan was ousted as prime minister by a No Confidence Motion (NCM), which he called **a conspiracy of regime change** initiated by the then US government, the proof Imran Khan alleged was a 'Cypher' which after about a year was allegedly trickled by an anonymous Pakistani secret source to a US based News organization **'The Intercept'**.

In his first interview with international media following his ouster, on CNN with Becky Anderson, Imran Khan accused members of his party for Jumping Ship by being offered millions of dollars by US officials at the Embassy of the United States, Islamabad, thus weakening his Coalition Government in the National Assembly of Pakistan which mostly consisted of MNA's from Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI - Imran Khan's

*Party) and other independent candidates and allied parties. Consequently, this made the NCM successful though by only 2 votes - 174 combined votes of the then Opposition parties in the National Assembly of Pakistan in favor of the NCM; Wikipedia pages on the topic AND **Scenario 261 of this author's earlier book** are referred; for complete details see:*

**RISE & FALL OF IMRAN KHAN: 13TH VOLUME OF THE
CONTEMPORARY HISTORY OF PAKISTAN, pp456
(2024) published by GHP Surrey UK]**

The PTI declared 25th May 2022 as the darkest day in the country's political history, alleging that on that day, the state unleashed its full fury on peaceful marchers led by PTI Chairman Imran Khan, subjecting them to tear gas, rubber bullets, and batons for hours.

TEMPO OF THE AZADI MARCH:

Imran Khan had launched a ***Haqiqi Azadi*** (real freedom) movement and took out a peaceful rally, aiming to establish supremacy of the Constitution and rule of law in the country. The state's fascist tendencies peaked on 25th May 2022, when the participants of Azadi March were brutally treated and subjected to a reign of terror and torture, in clear violation of the Constitution and laws in Pakistan.

"On 24th May 2022; Imran Khan announced a long march to Islamabad, which was set to begin next day. He led the march from Peshawar, but the protesters were stopped in Attock, preventing them from reaching Islamabad, the capital. Party moved IHC against CDA's raid on its central secretariat also. Media alleged that on that day, human rights were violated nationwide, homes were raided, women and children were harassed, and PTI leaders and workers were arrested and taken away. Two PTI workers were martyred, and dozens injured; besides, their properties were destroyed and homes ransacked. The state machinery tried its best to push the country towards a civil war; however, it was Imran Khan who, despite facing and enduring all the state atrocities, held high the flag of peace and saved the country from internal turmoil and chaos;"

.... daily **DAWN** of dated 26th May 2024 is referred.

Though the formal call of Azadi March was given on 24th May 2022 but the matter remained under discussion within the party leadership for many days. On 21st May 2022, scores of tents were installed at Bani-gala near the residence of former PM Imran Khan for workers and activists of the PTI coming to the capital from different areas; however, no official security cover was demanded by the PTI nor was provided by the state. The former minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan Ali Amin Gandapur had brought over 250 people from KP to Bani-gala. They reached there in a cavalcade of cars, sports utility vehicles, including single and double cabin pickups and motorcycles. About 60 tents connected with each other were installed on Kuri Road in Bani-gala where they were staying; besides, 50 toilets were established for them.

The protestors had brought bedding and clothes with them which suggested they were to stay there long if needed. A group of Insaf Student Federation (ISF) also reached Bani-gala. Workers of PTI and ISF had mounted surveillance and put security in place in and around the area; no direction had been received for deployment of state police there. Meals were being arranged for them from a catering service at G-9. Moreover, 200 to 250 ISF activists also reached KP House Islamabad; the number of PTI workers and activists arriving in the capital was increasing gradually and they were moving to Bani-gala straightaway to get further guidance from Mr Khan.

Imran Khan's workers were to stay in Islamabad from 25th May onwards; for their only demand would be to give a date for clean and transparent general elections and to dissolve assemblies. Addressing the bureaucracy and the police, Khan said it would be illegal for them to take any action against the said **peaceful protesters**. Addressing the Pak-Army he said: **'if you are neutral then be neutral too'**. The protest-gathering involved around 2 million workers marching to Islamabad and that they were to remain there until the election was declared. The protesters, led by Imran Khan, aimed to hold a sit-in at D-Chowk, an open space in front of the parliamentary buildings, in Islamabad until the date for the dissolution of assemblies and a date for new general elections was announced.

In a video message, Imran Khan asked **all Pakistanis to take to the streets in their respective cities** and said people heading to Islamabad must reach D-Chowk. He also appealed to women and children to come out of their homes for real independence. *'Your collective presence will send a message across Pakistan that the nation has rejected this imported government,'* his message was clear.

At around 6pm, the main convoy from Khyber PK, which was being headed by Imran Khan in person, was able to enter Punjab from Attock after successfully removing barricades placed by the Punjab government at the Attock Bridge to stop marchers from entering the province. Some prominent PTI leaders, including Fawad Chaudhry and Shireen Mazari, also urged supporters to make their way to the capital's D-Chowk, saying that all containers and blockades on their way had been removed by other PTI youth workers.

{*Imran Khan had arrived at the Wali Interchange in Khyber PK by helicopter.* Later, he departed for Islamabad from the Wali Interchange, from where the PTI tweeted a photo of him waving to supporters atop a truck adorned with party colours. Khan also urged protesters to carry the Pakistani flag, calling that day's march a defining moment for Pakistan.}

Shelling at KP-Punjab border: Punjab police fired tear gas at protesters near the *Chacch* Interchange in Hazro town of Attock district. All media reports confirmed that the PTI's protesters had brought a crane and were attempting to remove the containers that were blocking the main roads. TV footage from the scene showed protesters covering their faces and running from the scene as smoke billowed in the background after police fired tear gas shells in an attempt to disperse the peacefully moving mobs. Separately, the PTI tweeted that 'the party's south KP convoy, led by Ali Amin Gandapur, is well on its way towards Islamabad after the blockades faced at the Punjab-KP border are crossed successfully'.

Before his departure, Imran Khan called on all of Pakistan to join his freedom march; he also released a video statement:

"I will lead the Azadi March caravan from there and God willing we will head to Islamabad from there. I want each and every one to leave because this is a defining moment."

On the said day of 25th May 2022, Pakistani police fired teargas fearlessly, baton-charged and detained supporters of former PM Imran Khan to stop them from reaching the capital Islamabad to demand fresh elections, officials and witnesses held. Clashes between Khan's supporters and police were reported in multiple cities. Islamabad's entry and exit routes were blocked, as well as important civic sites. Entry and exit points were also blocked to and from all major cities in Punjab province and on the Grand Trunk Road (GT Road). The

government said Khan's march was illegal and accused him of seeking to bring protesters to Islamabad *with evil intentions*.

A day earlier, Pakistan's government banned the planned protest march by former PM Imran Khan, who was demanding fresh elections on immediate basis then. The ban was announced by Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah at a news briefing hours allegedly after *a policeman was shot and killed during a crackdown on Khan's supporters* across the country. The Interior Minister held that Khan and his aides had termed it a bloody march, which could not be allowed following a sit-in that Khan held in 2014 for over four months that had paralyzed the country. At that time, Khan had rallied thousands to protest alleged rigging of an election in 2013, and his supporters had attacked police and threatened to storm the parliament and prime minister's house – *'Now, they're coming to Islamabad with evil designs again,'* the interior minister said, citing intelligence reports about the march.

Meanwhile, admin authorities in Islamabad had started putting up blockades at roads leading to important installations, and heavy contingents of police and paramilitary troops were being deployed. Khan had urged his supporters to march on Islamabad, saying: *'You try to stop us if you could - a peaceful protest was his right that could not be denied'*. Khan, instead of condemning the policeman's killing, defended the shooting by his party official, a retired army officer, asking *what someone should do if police barged into their home*.

There were reports of intense shelling in Islamabad's Blue Area, with television footage showing smoke rising from the ground and fires in the green belts adjacent to main roads. The government claimed that the PTI supporters had set the fires whereas the claim from the PTI camp was that the fires were a result of police shelling. Neither claim could be independently verified.

Khan's supporters were also blocked and beaten by security forces in other major cities, including the southern port city of Karachi and the eastern city of Lahore. A mob torched a prison van in Karachi after clashing with police, and another group of protesters set fire to several trees near and around D-Chowk in Islamabad; the political violence had compounded uncertainty in the country.

A day earlier, Section 144 was invoked in Islamabad, Punjab and Sindh. The PDM government started arresting all the key-position holders of the PTI everywhere. Punjab police attempted to arrest PTI's former minister Hammad Azhar in Lahore. Footage showed scuffles

between supporters and police as they tried to arrest Azhar. After 1:50pm, the police resumed shelling and fired tear gas near the *Aiwan-e-Adal*. Four lawyers were also arrested, while 10 to 12 cars were damaged.

Media reports confirmed that another PTI leader, Jamshed Iqbal Cheema, was arrested in Lahore and was moved to an undisclosed location. In a brief video message, he said *'they were living in a country of 220 million people and all of them would exercise their democratic rights'*. Dr Yasmeen Rashid and Andaleeb Abbas were also arrested from Ravi Road but subsequently released. One media footage emerged of police personnel charging at marchers at Lahore's Bhati Chowk; ten people were arrested. Other footage of clashes and scuffles between the protesters and the policemen as activists converged in the area to begin their march on Islamabad. The videos showed policemen stopping PTI supporters from moving forward everywhere.

According to the PTI's official Twitter account, marchers were also stopped at the *Shahdara* area in Lahore, a key point in the outskirts of Lahore to catch motorways towards Islamabad. In a later tweet, the party said the shipping container placed in Shahdara were successfully removed by the PTI workers. At the Niazi Chowk too, PTI workers removed impediments and marched forward. Another PTI caravan led by Hammad Azhar managed to get across the obstacles; it was on GT Road on his way to Islamabad.

Later in the evening, PTI's one leader shared a video of himself on Twitter with a cut on his eyebrow. He said that instead of firing tear gas shells into the air, police officials were throwing them at their faces direct. Earlier in the day, when he was in Lahore, the impediments and containers at Bhati Chowk, Ravi Bridge and Shahdara had been removed and the roads had been cleared by the general public by themselves.

At Kala Shah Kaku, an industrial town on the motorway towards Islamabad, about 11km north of Ravi Bridge, the protesters faced heavy shelling. PTI's rally had reached Muridke while the caravan led by PTI's Shafqat Mahmood had been stuck to cross the Bhati Chowk. In Lahore old-city, the police also baton-charged protesters and forced them to disperse around in the streets. Clashes between the police and protesters were also reported in other areas of Lahore such as Islampura, Karim Park, Mohni road and Badami Bagh.

Later in the night, PTI protesters, including families and children, had gathered at Lahore's Liberty Chowk for a peaceful demonstration but police fired tear gas at them; distressing footage shared on social media, showed children and ladies crying and running away from the tear gas and desperately searching for their kids and kins. It was pity as no one lady or children were going to Islamabad from there. Meanwhile, other PTI leaders departed from their respective locations **from Lahore**, while Shahid Khattak departed **from Karak**. PTI's Fayyazul Hasan Chohan was seen on television footage departing for Islamabad on a motorcycle.

In the meantime, the Lahore High Court (LHC) ordered police to release all detained people after obtaining an undertaking from them assuring they would not indulge in any illegal activity or violate the law. CJ LHC Muhammad Ameer Bhatti issued the order while hearing a petition of PTI Senator Ejaz Chaudhry and six others against the detention of party leaders; the Senator was released after the court took notice of his arrest. The CJ remarked that the release of detained people was more important than the politics; the police had been deployed for the protection of the public.

At **Gujranwala** a confrontation was reported between PTI supporters and the police when the latter tried to stop them with barricades near *Khanki Head-works*. However, the marchers forced their way through the obstructions and move ahead. The caravan, led by local PTI leadership, was on its way to Islamabad; but 150 people from the caravan were taken into custody. Simultaneously, PTI district president Ali Asjad Malhi left **Daska** with supporters in a caravan. The local police raided Malhi's house (where party leaders had also gathered) and arrested him under Section 144. Aside from Gujranwala, Sadhoke, Chenab Bridge, Khanki Headway and the city area were completely blocked by the PDM government.

In Faisalabad; PTI supporters and the police also clashed at the Kamalpur Interchange. The marchers, however, advanced after breaking through the outer wall of the Faisalabad Development Authority (FDA) premises. Police officers also tried to stop the party workers near the motorway where a scuffle broke out between both – but the marchers made their way through and left for Islamabad.

At 1:32pm, PTI leader Fawad Chaudhry tweeted that after shelling on marchers, a shot had been fired on them **in Mangla** — a village situated on the border of Kashmir and Jhelum — some 120km from Islamabad. In a video displayed at media channels, Chaudhry, who

was stuck on the Mangla Bridge, said that three PTI workers had suffered severe injuries due to shelling by the police. Several cars had suffered damage too; the Jhelum (Punjab) police entered the jurisdiction of Kashmir and shelled the PTI marchers. More people from road-side villages & towns were joining the moving processions towards Islamabad.

In **Islamabad**; Police blocked the Niazi Chowk in Bani-gala, a few kilometres away from Imran's residence. The Islamabad police established a check post while approximately 2,000 Punjab police officers were posted there.

In **Karachi**; PTI supporters started gathering near the *Numaish Chowrang*i to register their demand for immediate, free & fair elections - Karachi made its own Azadi Square as the caravan from Karachi couldn't join Imran Khan at Islamabad being at about 1500 km distance. On another place, police fired tear gas and baton-charged PTI protesters at the *Chowrang*i after hundreds of them gathered there. Scores of protesters were dispersed following police action and were forced to seek shelter in nearby lanes. However, the protest continued at its pace. Corridor 3 had been closed for traffic from the PPP Chowrang

i side; and Karachi traffic police had also blocked the MA Jinnah Road from Capri Cinema towards *Numaish Chowrang*i for security reasons.

AZADI-MARCH HANDLED WITH IRON HANDS:

With foreign reserves falling to \$10.3 billion - lower than two months of import bills - a fast-crashing Pakistani rupee and a double-digit inflation, the political turmoil had then compounded economic volatility in the country. PM Shahbaz Sharif, who had replaced Khan a month earlier, was not taking bold steps towards putting the economy back on track. Talks were going on in Doha between the government and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to resume a \$6 billion rescue package agreed in 2019, and were due to conclude those days. PM Shahbaz Sharif said his government was trying to clear up an economic mess and he blamed Khan for: *'You've handed over a sinking economy to us, and now you're planning sit-ins and protests. We are trying to energize this weak economy.'*

Coming back to the day of protest, live local TV footage showed police fighting with Khan's supporters, beating them and in some places

breaking their vehicles' windscreens and bundling them into police vans. Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah later said police had carried out a total of 4,417 raids on supporters' homes of Imran Khan, PTI offices and on protest rallies and arrested nearly 1,700 people; of those, 250 were later freed. Khan had got a rally of more than two million people in Islamabad. Rana Sana held that: *'We haven't stopped anyone from exercising their constitutional and legal right to hold a rally or take part in democratic politics, but we can't allow anyone to sow violence and chaos.'*

As per **AL-JAZEERA's report** of that day (25th May 2022), clashes were reported from big cities of Rawalpindi and Lahore after authorities blocked roads leading to Islamabad, where the former PM Imran Khan's party was planning to hold a grand rally to demand the removal of the government and immediate general elections. Police fired tear gas in several districts of Punjab as supporters of Khan's PTI party tried to remove roadblocks on highways leading to Islamabad. In the northeastern city of Lahore, police fired tear gas shells to disperse hundreds of PTI members who gathered at different points for the protest march. Angry protesters pelted stones and threw tear gas shells back at the police before scores of them were arrested. The PTI claimed that more than 1,000 PTI members were arrested in overnight raids across the northeastern Punjab province in an attempt to foil the march.

Footage aired on local news channels showed stick-wielding PTI supporters removing barbed wire to move forward with the march. Authorities had placed dozens of shipping containers on major roads leading to the capital Islamabad. They had also deployed additional police and paramilitary troops on highways and at cross-roads inside Islamabad to stop the rally, with tractor-trailers parked across both lanes of traffic in several areas. As said earlier, Khan began the march from northwestern Khyber PK province, which was being governed by his party. The former leader urged supporters, especially young people, ***to remove the barricades to reach Islamabad at any cost.*** Khan also urged everyone to carry the Pakistan flag with them; ***'this is a defining moment,'*** the 69-year-old leader tweeted which was picked up by social media to spread all over the country within seconds.

Khan had already massed PTI leaders and thousands of his supporters in Peshawar, the capital of Khyber PK, from there, his followers had to cross a bridge at the province's border that the PDM's government had blocked, before assembling on the outskirts of Islamabad. Interior

Minister Rana Sanaullah threatened that Imran Khan would be arrested if the rally came ahead. Reporting from Islamabad, Al Jazeera's Kamal Hyder confirmed:

".... he saw dozens of PTI workers being arrested just outside our office. There are reports of scuffles in many Punjab cities between the police, despite the fact that the Pakistani constitution allows for peaceful protests, which is the fundamental right of the citizens. But the government it seems has panicked and is overreacting despite the fact that there were court orders not to arrest or harass workers."

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Supreme Court was about to hear a petition to remove the blockades in and around Islamabad. Authorities said that if Khan agreed to confine himself to a public park, the government would consider lifting its ban. The cricket legend-turned-politician was demanding the dissolution of parliament and announcement of new elections, which were otherwise due in 2023. The government had rejected his demands. That day's march had raised fears of major violence between Khan's supporters and security forces in a nation already battling an economic crisis. The PDM govt alleged that Khan lost power in part due to his failure to rectify Pakistan's dire economic situation, including its mounting debt, shrinking foreign currency reserves and soaring inflation – though the later statistics proved that in PDM era, the economic graphs touched mountain-like heights.

During the then few days, the Punjab Police, under specific directions of the then Chief Minister Hamza Shahbaz (son of PM Shahbaz Sharif) initiated a crackdown on members of the PTI party and other popular figures in the country who stood by Imran Khan. Justice Nasira Iqbal's (daughter-in-law of Allama Iqbal) house was raided by 8 Punjab policemen at 02:00am. The police jumped over the walls to enter her house without any warrant to arrest her son Walid Iqbal (PTI Senator). She was quoted as saying that: ***'This happens where anarchists are in power.'***

Hundreds of potential marchers were arrested in that crackdown by the new PDM govt. To prevent protestors from reaching the Srinagar Highway, Red Zone (Islamabad) and entering the capital, hundreds of containers were given to the Islamabad Police and a ban was placed on gatherings under Section 144 of the Local Law. The entrance towards the D-Chowk (Islamabad) was blocked by hundreds of personnel from the Capital Territory Police not allowing protestors to

come close by launching tear gas shells at the protestors mostly the women, children, and families.

DAY OF POLICE BRUTALITY:

Lahore Police treatment meted out to PTI leader Dr Yasmin Rashid particularly raised strong uproar and condemnation from all walks of the society. Condemnation followed from all sections of civilized people in Pakistan on Police actions on Azadi March day to contain and impede the PTI's long march to Islamabad. Tensions in Punjab rose after police made use of tear gas and arrested several PTI marchers in cities across the province as supporters attempted to remove big shipping containers blocking routes to Islamabad. The police baton-charged protesters near Lahore's *Aiwan-e-Adal*. Clashes between the police and protesters were also reported in other areas of Lahore such as Islampura, Karim Park, Mohni road and Badami Bagh areas. See below the reactions of the civil society against the said atrocities:

Senior journalist Mazhar Abbas deplored: ***".... the (PDM) government had hurt itself through the use of force. Another sad day in the charred democratic history of Pakistan."***

- Journalist Cyril Almeida termed the day's events as an ***"ugly overreaction on the government's part."***
- Pakistan's correspondent for the *New York Times*, Salman Masood, remarked: ***"... the government had used ham-handed tactics to contain the PTI in Punjab."***
- Veteran journalist Mubashir Zaidi seemingly expressed scepticism on the Punjab government's claims of recovering weapons from the PTI earlier that day and said: ***"Our police are adept at retrieving such weapons on their own after placing them. Who knows this better than we people of Karachi?"***
- The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said: ***"... it was deeply concerned at the high-handedness displayed by law enforcement agencies; the state's overreaction had triggered more violence than it had prevented."***
- Tania Aidrus, former special adviser to the prime minister on Digital Pakistan, criticised the reports of internet services being curtailed and said: ***"Turning off the internet for a nation of 220 million people is the single worst thing a government can do."***

The treatment extended to PTI's female leader **Dr Yasmin Rashid** invited particularly strong uproar and criticism. TV clips and footage showed police stopping Rashid's vehicle in Lahore. An exchange of words could also be seen after police attempted to yank out the key of the vehicle she was travelling in. Video showed police landing blows on Yasmeen's vehicle as it tried to pass through a cordon at Bhati Chowk. A non-uniformed individual with his face covered could also be seen in the footage, hitting the vehicle forcefully. Later, the PTI tweeted a video of the vehicle with its windshield broken as Yasmeen Rashid was in the driver's seat. She faced difficulty in leaving the area, but later left for Islamabad while uttering: *'This government has lost its senses. I am an 80-year-old woman. Why are they threatened of me? How is stopping a peaceful protest democratic?'*

Lawyer and activist Jibran Nasir said Yasmeen Rashid had always been *a symbol of courage* while Interior Minister Rana Sananullah was *a symbol of tyranny and terror when in power*. He added that she was attacked in **"typical Gullu Butt fashion"** that day — alluding to Shahid Aziz, the infamous baton-wielding man who was caught vandalising property during violence in Lahore's Model Town in 2014. Dr Yasmin Rashid's car was beaten with hard iron-like sticks. Luckily, she was able to escape by rushing the car forward. The car seated 3 women and Dr Yasmin Rashid was the driver since her driver had been arrested earlier.

Dr Yasmeen Rashid, who herself has been a cancer survivor, added that despite everything, the enthusiasm of the workers was at its peak. Then her entourage had reached the Ravi Road interchange, some 362km from Islamabad. All media channels were continuously showing roadblocks in Faisalabad, Gujranwala and other cities of Punjab, with shelling on PTI supporters trying to cross the barriers and containers.

PAK-ARMY DEPLOYED IN CITIES:

PTI supporters who were awaiting party chief Imran Khan's arrival at D-Chowk in Islamabad since Wednesday (the 25th May 2022) afternoon, entered the Red Zone in early hours (mid-night) of 26th May, it was Thursday morning then. The protesters were being stopped by police, Rangers and other law enforcers with patience, the government held. Islamabad's Inspector General of Police Dr Akbar Nasir Khan was himself present at the site and protesters were being

instructed to leave the Red Zone. Media was able to confirm that the activists had entered the Red Zone, but remained peaceful. It was the next calendar-day, the 26th May 2022; the Pakistan Army had already been deployed in Islamabad for that march. Azadi March's processions from other cities had also arrived and nearly occupied the capital city – loudly raising their slogans for fresh polls. The Army had got explicit instructions from the PDM government; an order from Pakistan's Interior Minister said:

'Pursuant to the law & order situation in the Islamabad Capital Territory, the Federal Government, in the exercise of powers conferred under Article 245 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, authorizes deployment of sufficient strength of troops of Pakistan Army in Red Zone in ICT. The forces have been deployed to protect government buildings including the Supreme Court, Parliament, and Prime Minister's Office.'

Among the buildings to be protected were the Supreme Court, Parliament House, Prime Minister House, Presidency, Pakistan Secretariat premises and Diplomatic enclaves; the state-notification had said. As per police reports, eight personnel of the Islamabad police and seven of the Rangers were injured as protesters resorted to occasional stone pelting but were dispersed from the area after negotiations. Meanwhile, the PTI Chairman Imran Khan addressed the protesters at Islamabad's 9th Avenue on 26th May's early morning hours and announced a six-day deadline to the government for declaring elections and dissolving assemblies. 'No amount of state oppression and fascism by this imported govt can stop or deter our march,' Imran Khan had tweeted simultaneously.

The media held that tensions had soared across the country, with the police resorting to the use of tear gas in the various cities and towns of Punjab province. Several members of PTI were also arrested as they attempted to remove obstacles, such as containers installed by the PDM government on all key-roads to halt their steps. There were reports of intense shelling in Islamabad's Blue Area too, with television footage showing smoke rising from all around; the government claimed that the PTI supporters had set the fires at various places whereas the claim from the PTI camp was that the fires were a result of police shelling.

This came after the Pakistan Supreme Court on 25th May 2022 had restrained the incumbent PDM government from arresting Khan and

allowed PTI to hold a sit-in protest at the H-9 ground area of Islamabad. The PTI's march towards the D-Chowk and arrests and use of force by the police took place despite the Supreme Court directives. Meanwhile, internet disruptions were also reported across Pakistan in the evening, as said earlier. Imran Khan addressed the protesters at Islamabad's 9th Avenue and gave a six-day deadline to the government for announcing elections and dissolving assemblies and warned that he would return to the capital with the entire nation otherwise. 'But of what I have seen in the past 24 hours, they (govt) are taking the nation towards anarchy;' he said. (Also claiming) that the government was also trying to create a divide between the people and police and the army. Further, Khan said there was a **'huge responsibility on SC judges'**; claiming that five PTI protesters were killed in clashes after the PTI's march. Addressing the SC, he roared:

"What crime were we committing? He wants justice for the people of Pakistan from Supreme Court judges and the lawyers' community. I am again asking the judiciary to save your FIA (Federal Investigation Agency). In the future, no FIA officer will investigate the powerful if he will meet the same end as of Dr Rizwan and Mr Asghar (who were mysteriously assassinated earlier in their respective residences – terming their cause of death 'SUICIDES'). He and the entire nation is looking to the judiciary after what has happened during the past 48 hours all over the country."

Imran Khan then lauded female PTI protesters for participating in the struggle for real freedom; also the protesters for their stamina and patriotism. After speech, Khan departed for an unknown destination. Members of the PDM government, however, were quick to declare victory, with Railways Minister Kh Saad Rafique saying: **'Imran ran away after spreading disorder & confusion'**. Kh Saad later tweeted also that the government fulfilled its responsibility to prevent rebellion. Adding further that: *'The nation is watching how saboteurs and their masterminds who take undue advantage of court orders are treated? I have heard that justice is blind.'*

In Karachi, PTI protesters holding a demonstration at Karachi's *Numaish* had dispersed peacefully, following Imran's announcement. Later, the PTI lauded the bravery of marchers who stayed despite shelling and tear gas attacks. Interior Minister Mr Rana, meanwhile, said in a statement posted on PMLN's official Twitter account:

".... he had been personally monitoring the security situation. Imran Niazi entered the city after getting permission from the Supreme Court to hold a rally at a designated place in Islamabad and broke his promise by announcing plans to go to D-Chowk.

.... that metro bus stations and trees were set on fire. Under the cover of the Supreme Court's decision, the mob continued to light fires all night; throughout the night Imran Khan kept committing contempt of court from the container."

While Imran Khan's convoy, which began the journey from Swabi's Wali Interchange, was en-route to D-Chowk via the Srinagar Highway, batches of his party workers and supporters were already present at planned destinations. The PTI leader claimed that when his caravan would reach its destination, the police would come to realise that his mission was about jihad and not politics. Later, a video shared on PTI's official account showed police waving and welcoming Imran's caravan on its way to D-Chowk.

The PDM government and the ICT admin held that PTI's march towards the D-Chowk and the shelling of teargas by police took place despite the Supreme Court's directives for the former to hold its protest in Islamabad's H-9 area and orders for the government not to make arrests or use force in connection with the march. However, eight personnel of police and seven of Rangers were reportedly injured as protesters hurled stones. Imran maintained that staging a protest was the party's right, adding that he would unite the country and make it a nation. Further, he once again reiterated:

"This nation does not accept this imported government – and has come out at jihad for true freedom; all Pakistanis, women, children, families, youth, lawyers, retired army officers, everyone has to come out for real independence."

In the meantime, internet disruptions were reported across the whole country in the evening hours. After reaching Swabi, Imran Khan, holding a Pakistan flag, delivered a speech to supporters saying that we are going to D-Chowk and no one would stop us and the crowd cheered. He, once more, reiterated loudly that the incumbent government was a **group of thieves**; also the most corrupt people in the country. Addressing politicians of the ruling coalition, Imran said that the PTI government had not barred any of them from staging protests – **'why they fear the people'**.

RUMOURS ABOUT DEALS:

In the meantime, government spokesperson Mariyum Aurangzeb and Imran Khan rubbished news reports of a deal among the two parties. News of negotiations and agreement between the government and PTI were declared baseless from both sides. Khan termed the rumours as **'deliberate disinformation - Absolutely not'**, he said *'...the (PTI) party was moving towards Islamabad and would remain in the capital until dates for dissolution of assemblies and elections are given'*.

Another minor development surfaced; the PDM government formed a negotiation team in light of the Supreme Court order on a petition filed by the PTI earlier that day. The PTI had already formed its team led by Dr Babar Awan. The situation in Punjab, Balochistan and Sindh was relatively peaceful; it was just Khyber PK from where protesters were moving towards Islamabad amidst loud slogans. The govt was keen to abide by the court's order for upholding law & order situation in the city, more particularly in Red Zone. However, the fact remained that *the police had carried out a total of 4,417 swoops on PTI supporters' homes, offices and on protesting rallies and had arrested nearly 1,700 people. Of those, 250 were freed after they submitted affidavits that they had nothing to do with the protest march.*

Meanwhile, PMLN Vice President Maryam Nawaz claimed that the PTI had approached the government twice for talks; PTI leaders Pervez Khattak and Fawad Chaudhry had come up to the government yesterday and Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Asad Umar and Khattak today at 10am. Addressing a press conference in Lahore, she claimed *'the PTI had asked for an election date to save face and get a safe exit since the people hadn't responded to the march's call as per the PTI's expectations'*. Maryam claimed that the turnout for the PTI's march was low and also alleged that Imran was trying to create division and discord in the army. However, Maryam's claim of PTI approaching the government for talks was swiftly rejected by PTI's Fawad Chaudhry, who said ***'she is a liar - there will be no negotiations now, just a showdown'***.

WHY AZADI MARCH ENDED ABRUPTLY?

.....however, the end of the whole exercise, the Azadi March, the pronouncement of JIHAD, the jam-packed procession, was hopeless for many.

At dawn, on 26th May 2022, Imran Khan called off the March just 2.10 miles away from The Blue Area where the Police stood firing tear gas shells. In a later interview he said that the reason he called off the March was to avoid bloodshed since the people were ready to fight against the police, soldiers and thus the state.

After an intense build-up of the said march and repeatedly urging his supporters to reach D-Chowk in Islamabad in order to push the government towards new elections, Imran Khan had, during the initial hours of 26th May 2022 bounced a surprise by retreating and calling off the march abruptly.

Referring to daily **DAWN** dated 27th May 2022: PTI Chairman Imran Khan dispelled reports that he had struck a deal in exchange for ending the party's Azadi March, saying that he did so in order to avoid bloodshed. He expressed the views while addressing a press conference in Peshawar on 27th May 2022, adding that he would take to the streets again if early elections were not announced. He regretted how police officials attacked the participants of the march, blaming the government for hand-picking officers to target the PTI.

"Our workers asked why we did not stage a sit-in. I am the man who staged a sit-in for 126 days. It was not difficult for me, but by the time I reached I became aware of the extent of the situation [...] I knew that day that there would be bloodshed."

PTI Chairman Imran Khan, while repeatedly explaining why he ended the Azadi March of 25th May 2022, said '**... he feared that bloodshed was imminent as some of his party workers were also armed and could have retaliated in the face of the authorities' hours-long shelling and heavy-handed tactics.**'

In an interview with TV journalist Moeed Pirzada for **92News TV Channel** on 30th May 2022, once more the PTI chairman reiterated his reasoning for doing so, saying that Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif-led government could have been the ultimate beneficiary of any ensuing chaos and violence. He explained further:

"The hatred against police had already intensified and seeing me [at D-Chowk] would have further stoked the sentiments of my workers. I was 100 per cent sure that bullets will be fired. People from our side were also ready as some of them were carrying pistols. It would have led to further hatred against the police and the army and caused divisions within the country....

I was hundred per cent sure the country would have headed towards anarchy in this situation. The situation gave me the impression as if Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah and PM Shehbaz Sharif had asked the Pakistan Army to let them handle the situation so the government could teach a lesson to the protesters."

Imran said his party (PTI) would approach the Supreme Court and ask whether or not holding a 'peaceful protest was permissible in the country' - this could be the trial of the Supreme Court; he was going to opt for different strategy if marchers couldn't get SC's protection. Imran Khan, while addressing a lawyers' convention in Peshawar earlier the same day, had said that if the Supreme Court would not provide his party protection from police action for the next round of their protest, he would opt for a different strategy wherein his supporters would be prepared to deal with the situation.

However, there were contrary versions, too.

The Hindustan Times and the **Times of India** of dates 27th – 30th May 2022 perpetually wrote at news and in articles that during early hours of 26th May, THREE GENTLEMEN – one retired justice, one retired General of the Pak-Army and one big business tycoon - met Imran Khan together and assured him that if he could call off the march, the dates for elections within 90 days would be got announced through the superior courts. Khan got convinced and announced for the protesters to halt and go back. Six days warning for come-back mantra was coined immediately and March was called off.

The second version was disclosed by **Senator Faisal Wada in Nadeem Malik's live TV show** in April 2024 on which another live show was conducted by anchor Alina Farooq at **GEO NEWS TV on 26th April 2024** with three intellectual media anchors to comment on. As per Faisal Wada's disclosure (after two years of the actual event), Imran Khan had called off the protest on assurance of the two then sitting judges of the Supreme Court of Pakistan. Further, that PTI's

THREE other leaders (Asad Umar, Zulfi Bokhari & Murad Saeed) were also consulted by Imran Khan before announcement of his decision to end the protesters' further movement.

In the live program, media guru Aizaz Syed told as an eye-witness that some serving and some retired senior justices like J Amir Bhatti - the then Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court, J Ejaz ul Ahsan and J Mazahir Naqvi, the then serving judges of the Supreme Court AND retired CJP Saqib Nisar remained constantly in touch with Imran Khan in person during his premiership. They might have kept their contacts with Mr Khan even after his departure from the government in April 2022. Further, that CJ LHC Amir Bhatti used to influence certain judges of the Islamabad High Court (IHC) for decisions in favour of the PTI and Imran Khan.

Media analyst Benazir Shah divulged that '*she doesn't trust Mr Wada's words – as he has been a proven liar in the past with ref to his dual nationality*' – thus the element of TWO JUDGES influencing Imran Khan for ending the protest on that day of May 2022 couldn't be taken as authentic. However, she added that to her knowledge, ***it was the influence from the Establishment that forced Imran Khan to change his mind – they had sent a message with the indication of getting announcement of fresh elections in June 2022 (through ECP).***

Veteran media analyst Mazhar Abbas further confirmed that Imran Khan always remained tilted towards the army establishment. During his premiership, he had deep relationship with the then top brass AND after April 2022 he kept liaison with 'some 2nds in command' in high ranks of the Pak-Army. Mr Abbas further confirmed that analyst Benazir Shah could be right because Imran Khan had the tendency of taking advice from his friendly high-ranking Generals and believed them MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE.

- Mazhar Abbas's ending sentence was that '***... (even) setting on protest & March for 25th May (2022) was not Imran Khan's own decision – nor the decision to end it abruptly.***

Coming back, Imran Khan's march for *haqeeqi azadi* — true freedom — was preceded by invoking of Section 144, a police measure used to curb gatherings in Pakistan. Shipping containers were put in place on major thoroughfares to block their path; but undeterred by the moves, the marchers moved on. PTI's Azam Swati had filed a police

complaint seeking the registration of a first information report (FIR) against PM Shehbaz Sharif, Interior Minister Rana Sanaullah, Inspector General of Police Islamabad Dr Akbar Nasir and others over police brutality and unreasonable use of force against PTI supporters on 25th May 2022.

In his Peshawar address, Khan asserted that his party did not have a history of violence, pointing to the PTI's 126-day sit-in in Islamabad in 2014. He reiterated that he called of the sit-in on 25th May in an effort to avoid bloodshed. Khan held that he didn't want his country to be divided and for our enemies to benefit. Imran Khan asked the apex court to give a ruling providing an explanation why obstacles were placed to stop the PTI from holding the long march. He also questioned whether the SC would still allow such undemocratic moves when the PTI announces the date for its next march.

However, PTI's next round of Azadi March was NOT SEEN ON CARDS in the nearby days or weeks then – NOR there was any petition put in the higher courts for early elections.