

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Pakistan's Fight Against COVID-19: Analysing Delivery Deficiencies

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S*ummary*

Pakistan's fight against the COVID-19 pandemic is marred with various challenges. The Imran Khan-led government's stubbornness in not agreeing to a complete lockdown is said to be the biggest obstacle in containing the spread of the virus. On top of it, the situation is further complicated by Imran's inability to engender a constructive federal dialogue over the issue, his reflexive antipathy towards the opposition, the orthodoxy exhibited by the religious groups, and the entry of the armed force into the scene as a major actor and consensus builder. Against this backdrop, this issue brief assesses Pakistan's preparedness in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic and how various faultiness in Pakistani society, polity and power architecture affect the delivery of public goods in such a critical situation.

Pakistan currently has the second-highest number of COVID-19 positive cases in South Asia. As of April 9, there are 4,409 confirmed cases of coronavirus with 64 deaths. Punjab tops the chart with 1380 cases. The latest report by the United Nations (UN) titled, *The COVID-19 Shock to Developing Countries*, has warned that “Pakistan could be hardest-hit by the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic”.¹ This fight against the pandemic has exposed the various fault lines in Pakistan. The Army has stepped in to fight against this pandemic under ‘aid to civil’ authority provision of the constitution. In fact, the Army has appointed a National Command and Operation Centre, with a four-star General, Lt. Gen. Hamood uz Zaman, also the Commander of Army's Air Defence Command, as its Chief Coordinator to deal with COVID-19.

Relief and Packages

Prime Minister Imran Khan has been widely criticised at home by the media for handling the situation rather lackadaisically, particularly for his refusal to go for a complete lockdown. The political parties, especially the opposition and civil society groups have been arguing that a complete lockdown is necessary for the containment of the virus. Even provinces ruled by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) like Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have gone for complete lockdown, despite Imran Khan's reluctance. In both, his impromptu addresses to the nation on March 22 and 30 and an additional two online-live briefings on March 17 and 24, Khan rejected the idea of a complete lockdown claiming that it would adversely affect the poor of the country. Advancing his case in his latest address on March 30, he reiterated his earlier resolve against a complete lockdown. He emphasised that more than 25 per cent of the country's population is below the poverty line and if food supply does not reach them, no lockdown can succeed in such a scenario.²

Rather than going for a lockdown, Imran announced the formation of a Corona Relief Tiger Force (CRTF) and a Corona Relief Fund (CRF) to deal with the COVID-19 situation. It is said that CRTF, a youth-based volunteer force, will work in collaboration with the government and security agencies and distribute food to the poor and work towards creating awareness about COVID-19. The aim is to create CRTFs in all the provinces. Registration for the force started on March 31 and will continue till April 10.³ According to Special Advisor to the Prime Minister, Usman

¹ **“The Covid-19 Shock to Developing Countries: Towards a ‘whatever it takes’ programme for the two-thirds of the world’s population being left behind”**, *United Nations Conference on Trade & Development (UNCTAD)*, March 2020 (Accessed April 01, 2020).

² **“PM’s address to Nation”**, *Dunya News*, March 31, 2020 (Accessed 31 March 2020).

³ **“How to join PM’s ‘Corona Relief Tigers Force’?”**, *Aaj TV*, March 31, 2020 (Accessed, April 02, 2020).

Dar, so far, 90,000 have applied to volunteer for the CRTF.⁴ At the same time, in order to combat the economic impact of the coronavirus outbreak in the country, Imran Khan announced setting up of a Prime Minister's Relief Fund for COVID-19.⁵ He said that the money raised through this fund would be used for giving financial assistance to the poor people at their doorsteps, under *Ehsas Kifalat* Programme. Additionally, the cabinet also approved a Rs. 1,200 billion relief package and agreed to provide 20.2 million people with Rs 12,000 on a monthly basis for four months under this programme.

Critics in Pakistan are questioning the practicality of both the CRTF and the Relief Fund. Many are inquiring about the method to be used for selection of CRTF volunteers and apprehend nepotism in the process. The CRTF is, thus, being labelled as a 'politicised force' that mostly consists of PTI workers. Questions are also being raised about the effectiveness of the youth volunteer group that will be constituted for fighting the pandemic. This newly formed force will be imparted basic training after the registration date is over and will work in their respective provinces. Some have argued that sending youth volunteers in groups to affected areas under lockdown would defeat the whole purpose of the exercise.⁶ The opposition has argued that instead of forming a new force, the existing structures should be used to fight the pandemic as it will restrain the already burdened economy. Additionally, questions are also being asked about the Corona Relief Fund and the supposed transfer of cash to the 20 lakh plus labourers and farmers.

Federal Versus Provincial

With the provinces seeking help from the Army to deal with the impending health crisis and its support for a complete lockdown, there is growing discomfort in the Prime Minister's office about how to respond to the issue. As of now, Balochistan, Sindh, Punjab and KP, and Pakistan Occupied Kashmir (PoK) including the so-called 'AJK' and Gilgit and Baltistan (GB) are under lockdown, despite Imran Khan's request to roll back the decision. As stated earlier, even the PTI-ruled Punjab and KP have supported the lockdown. The lack of coordination and disagreement between the federal and provincial governments is thus quite clear. There is a huge gap between the centre and the provinces in terms of initiating policies that complement, and not contradict, each other. The 18th Amendment of the Constitution of Pakistan ensures provisional autonomy concerning various subjects including health care.

⁴ **"90, 000 have applied for 'Corona Relief Tigers Force', Usman Dar claims"**, *Geo News*, April 01, 2020 (Accessed April 03 2020).

⁵ **"Prime Minister Imran Khan urges Companies not to fire employees"**, *World Asia*, March 31, 2020 (Accessed April 02, 2020).

⁶ **MPC's reject use of 'tiger force' for relief distribution**, *Dawn*, April 06, 2020 (Accessed, April 07, 2020)

Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah invoked the power enshrined in this amendment and announced a full-fledged lockdown for 15 days, starting March 23.⁷

In spite of being a PTI-ruled state, Punjab followed Sindh's strategy and announced a partial lockdown on March 24. On April 1, it locked down the entire Raiwind city from where 27 people, mostly from Tablighi Jamaat, were tested positive. KP has declared it a health emergency and ordered a provisional lockdown. Balochistan has also announced a complete lockdown after an increase in the number of cases. The two areas of PoK are also under lockdown with the highest number of cases in GB, so far 206, mostly because of the large number of pilgrims returning from Iran. Skardu in GB is the worst affected town. There are allegations that the Imran Government is forcibly shifting COVID-19 positive patients from Punjab Province to AJK and GB and special quarantine centres have been set up in AJK to keep them there. There are reports that the Army has ordered that "no positive patient should be anywhere near where Army facilities and Army family housing is there".⁸

Amid all this, Imran Khan is still debating the idea of a lockdown. He has advised the nation to fight the war against the virus with wisdom and *imaan* (faith). Under the National Coordination Committee, he has emphasised on the need to keep the roads open for supply of goods even though all the provinces are under lockdown. However, this is not being honoured by provinces under lockdown. Special Assistant to Prime Minister on Information and Broadcasting, Firdous Ashiq Awan, took a dig at the Sindh Government for not implementing his directive in true spirit.

Critics would argue that Imran Khan was reluctant to impose a complete lockdown as he did not want to be seen as seconding the example of Sindh, which is ruled by his political opponent, People's Party of Pakistan (PPP). Moreover, the positive coverage of the Sindh story and the emergence of PPP Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah as a role model in the fight against the pandemic have further pushed Imran to take unilateral decisions without consulting or giving due credit to the provinces.

To complicate matters further for Imran Khan, the Director General, Inter Services Public Relations (DG ISPR), Maj. Gen. Babar Iftikhar, came out with an announcement, the day Sindh went for a lockdown, that the provinces have summoned the service of the military under Article 245 in aid of civilian authorities. In fact, the people of Pakistan heard about the lockdown for the first time from DG ISPR during his press conference.⁹ Army's proactive entry into the scene, marked by apparent lack of federal harmony, naturally raised concerns amongst some analysts. Ayesha Siddiqi struck a cautious note when she observed: "Although no law is

⁷ "[Sindh under lockdown for next 15 days](#)", *The News*, March 23, 2020 (Accessed March 25, 2020).

⁸ "[Pakistan army forcibly moving Covid-19 positive patients to PoK & Gilgit](#)", *ANI*, March 26, 2020 (Accessed March 28, 2020).

⁹ [DG ISPR Press Conference](#), *Naya Daur*, March 23, 2020 (Accessed March 26, 2020).

broken, this is the first time that Article 245 of the 1973 Constitution, pertaining to military's role to assist civilians, is invoked all over Pakistan. It is almost a reminder of and a variation on 1958 martial law, [when] the military came, on asking of a civil-bureaucrat-turned-politician and stayed for longer."¹⁰ Article 245 was also invoked by the Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government in July 2014 when it sought the Army's service to maintain law and order in Islamabad during Imran Khan's rally for three months. Army's help was also sought to lead and facilitate the rehabilitation of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) during and after Operation *Zarb-e-Azb*.¹¹

Iran Factor

The Taftan border crossing point is often used by the Shia community in Pakistan to travel to Iran for pilgrimage. After the rapid outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran, the Pakistani pilgrims returned to Pakistan via Taftan in February. Since then it is touted as the entry point for COVID-19 into the country due to apprehensions that pilgrims crossing over could be affected by the disease.

According to *Geo News*, the pilgrims "were not properly isolated at the quarantine camp in Taftan" and non-availability of diagnostic kits at the camp made it difficult to detect the virus affected people.¹² As reports of mismanagement and lack of proper quarantine facilities at the Taftan border poured in, it sparked outrage and concern in the rest of Pakistan.¹³

To deal with the likely spread of virus as pilgrims returned home, the Sindh Government decided to set up quarantine facilities at the provincial border, which was widely appreciated. A number of opposition leaders have criticised the federal government's failure to provide aid to the Sindh Government in this regard. At another level, senior leader and President of PML-N, Khawaja Asif, questioned the logic behind the decision of the PTI government's Special Assistant to the Prime Minister for Overseas Pakistanis, Zulfi Bukhari, not to evacuate students from China but keeping the Taftan border open. Some quarters of the media also blamed Iran for pushing the pilgrims forcefully into Pakistan. A report in Urdu newspaper, *Ummat*, accused Iran of pushing back 70,000 pilgrims to Pakistan,

¹⁰ Ayesha Siddiqa, "[Coronavirus crisis makes it clear who is calling the shots in Pakistan-Military, of course](#)", *The Print*, March 27, 2020 (Accessed March 29, 2020).

¹¹ Sumera Khan, "[Article 245 to be invoked: Army to aid civil powers in major cities](#)", *Express Tribune*, July 05, 2014 (Accessed, April 02, 2020).

¹² "[How did Coronavirus spread from Taftan? Were pilgrims properly screened, isolated?](#)", *Geo News*, March 17, 2020 (Accessed March 20, 2020).

¹³ Hannah Ellis and Shah Meer, "[Pakistan Coronavirus camp, No facilities, no humanity](#)", *The Guardian*, March 19, 2020 (Accessed March 22, 2020).

¹⁴ while “at this time of crisis, a non-Muslim country like China is taking care of Pakistani citizens as their own.”¹⁵ Pakistan finally closed the border with Iran on March 16 in view of the increasing number of affected cases among people returning through Taftan.

Pak-Afghan Border

Along with the Iran border, Pakistan also closed its borders with Afghanistan including the main crossing points at Torkham in KP and Chaman in southwest Balochistan following the outbreak of the virus in the country. However, on March 6, the border crossings at Torkham and Chaman were thrown open to facilitate Afghan nationals stuck in Pakistan to cross back into their country. The Foreign Ministry of Pakistan cited a ‘special request by the Kabul government’¹⁶ as the reason for opening the border until March 9. Meanwhile, officials in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar Province said: “they have established quarantine facility near the border with Pakistan for those returning from Pakistan.”¹⁷ However, there are no reports on whether this arrangement is also applicable for the Pakistani people stranded in Afghanistan. Official closure of the Pak-Afghan border may not have any impact on the Tehreek-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) given the border porosity and unofficial transit points they have been using for conducting operations. Pakistan has tried to strengthen the security around border crossings and also fence off certain portions, however, the non-state actors have found a way of crisscrossing the border carrying out their operations, which is unlikely to be affected by the measures being taken by the government to respond to the COVID-19 situation in the Pak-Afghan border region.

Case of Tabligh Congregation at Raiwind

A large congregation of Tablighi Jamaat at the Raiwind Markaz in Punjab, amid the scare of COVID-19 mid-March, drew a lot of blame and widespread criticism for the sudden jump in the number of cases in Pakistan.

Although Raiwind is under complete lockdown, the reported clustering of cases around Tablighi Jamaat centres around the country have unleashed criticism of the

¹⁴ **“Iran forces 70, 000 Pakistani’s into Pakistan”**, *Ummat*, March 24, 2020 (Accessed March 28, 2020).

¹⁵ **“China will take care of Pakistani students in Wuhan like own people”**, *92 News*, February 24, 2020 (Accessed April 01, 2020).

¹⁶ Ayaz Gul, **“Pakistan to reopen border for Afghan Visitors Stranded due to COVID-19 closure”**, *Voice of America*, April 04, 2020 (Accessed April 08, 2020).

¹⁷ **“Pakistan opens border crossings to allow stranded Afghans to return home”**, *Xinhua net*, April 04, 2020 (Accessed April 08, 2020).

movement for its failure to either postpone or cancel the gathering. There is a fear of conservative backlash and tensions are running high as authorities have sought to identify and isolate Tablighi members now deemed to pose a risk of spreading the virus further.¹⁸ In media channels, religious leaders are being called upon to deliberate on the issue and advocate the need for social distancing, including the need to avoid large-scale gatherings in religious places of worship. However, there is no consensus on the issue of closing down mosques and *Jumma* or Friday prayers.

The opposition has offered its full cooperation to the federal government, although the Imran Khan Government is reluctant to either seek or accept cooperation from them. During the first meeting of the Parliamentary Committee (formed to oversee the government's effort to deal with the pandemic) via video link on March 25, Imran Khan reportedly logged out of the video conference after expressing his thoughts and did not wait to listen to the views of the heads of two major parties, Shehbaz Sharif (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto (PPP). This prompted both the opposition leaders to leave the multiparty conference in protest. They questioned the government's interest and intention to develop an understanding with the opposition over the coronavirus pandemic. Nevertheless, the committee is set to meet again through video conferencing to review the situation.

Luke Warm Towards SAARC Initiative

The Imran Khan Government has also not shown any enthusiasm for the initiative taken by the Indian Prime Minister to hold a video conference with leaders of the member states of South Asian Association of Regional Countries (SAARC) on combating COVID-19 on March 15. While most countries participated at the level of head of the government, Pakistan was represented by Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Health Zafar Mirza. Responding to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's proposal for an emergency fund, all countries, except Pakistan, announced their pledges for the fund, which stands at US\$ 18.8 million. On March 25, Pakistan raised the issue of finalisation of the principles for the administration of the fund and modalities for its utilisation and proposed a video conference of SAARC Health Ministers to discuss the issue. The Pakistan Foreign Minister has, so far, spoken to his counterparts in the SAARC countries, except to his Indian and Afghan counterparts. Pakistan is emphasising on the modalities for the utilisation of the fund and demanding that it should be placed at the disposal of the SAARC Secretary General.

¹⁸ Suddaf Chaudry, "[Coronavirus: Pakistan quarantines Tablighi Jamaat missionaries](#)", *Middle East Eye*, April 04, 2020 (Accessed April 06, 2020).

Conclusion

Both at home and outside, the Imran Khan Government is not showing the maturity and sagacity that the situation warrants at a moment when a pandemic has struck the world necessitating joint action at all levels. His decision to form the 'Tiger Force' and Corona Relief Fund does not seem innovative enough to deal with the crisis. It is feared that Imran Khan's move to sideline the already alienated opposition and continuous bickering between the federal and provisional governments would undermine the national effort against COVID-19. In extraordinary times like this, it is argued that the PTI Government has to respect the autonomy of the provinces and cannot forsake its role of giving a positive direction to the national effort against COVID-19, which requires cohesion and coordination.

Always on the look-out for point-scoring, the Pakistan Prime Minister has perhaps allowed his political ego to come in the way of responding to the situation with the seriousness it demands. His inability, or rather unwillingness, to take the opposition with him as also his unwise move to stay away from the SAARC leaders' video conference smack of poor leadership and narrowmindedness, unbecoming of a leader in a democracy. The result of such deliberate abdication of responsibility to engender a national consensus could be politically risky. It is likely to create a vacuum that other powerful constituencies or actors (read Army) would be happy to fill up and use as an opportunity, conceded by yet another civilian government, to enhance their acceptability and legitimacy in Pakistan.

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