



IN SECRET MEETING, PAKISTANI MILITARY ORDERED PRESS TO STOP COVERING IMRAN KHAN

News about Khan, a former prime minister at the center of a political crisis roiling Pakistan, mostly disappeared from the country's media.

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June 2 2023, 3:49 p.m.

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Police commandos escort former Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan as he arrives at the high court in Islamabad on May 12, 2023. Photo: Aamir Qureshi/AFP via Getty Images

THE PAKISTANI MILITARY invited the owners of the country's major media organizations to Islamabad this week for a secret meeting to discuss

coverage of the ongoing political and constitutional crisis, Pakistani journalists familiar with the gathering told The Intercept. The invitation was not one that could be refused, and the message was equally direct: Cease all coverage of former Prime Minister Imran Khan amid his ongoing clash with the military.

Following the meeting, which has not been previously reported, top editors at news organizations across Pakistan issued directives to their journalists to pause coverage of Khan, said the Pakistani journalists, who requested anonymity for fear of their safety. An inspection of Pakistani media sites reveals a stark change. Earlier this week and every day for years before, Khan was a leading subject of coverage. He has effectively vanished from the news. The ban was confirmed by more than a half-dozen Pakistani journalists.

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Khan is at the center of a political crisis that has paralyzed Pakistani cities, prompted clashes and riots targeting the all-powerful military, and seen tens of thousands of his political supporters sent to prison. You wouldn't know that from reading the Pakistani press today, even as he continues a campaign against an attempt by the military to exclude him and his party from contesting upcoming elections.

The recent crisis began when Khan was hit with corruption charges, which he and supporters of his political party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or PTI, claim to be a political exercise aimed at excluding him from politics.

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Khan, a former cricket player and philanthropist, has become Pakistan's most popular politician by galvanizing public anger against the country's dynastic political parties. He served as prime minister from 2018 to 2022, when he was removed from office by a coalition of opposition parties. While his original rise to power was widely believed to have been patronized from behind the scenes by the military itself, after falling out with military leadership, Khan has become a fierce opponent of their domineering role in politics.

In Pakistan, there is no bigger story than the battle between Khan and the military, which has played out in spectacular fashion, including the extrajudicial arrest of Khan from inside a courtroom, sparking nationwide protests and, eventually, a Supreme Court order to free him. Khan is also the No. 1 driver of ratings and web traffic to news organizations – until Thursday, when he virtually disappeared from the national news media. (The Pakistani Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.)

The explicit directive from the military was not delivered in writing, said sources. A [more vaguely worded order](#) was issued by Pakistan's Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, which oversees television stations, barring coverage of “hate mongers, rioters, their facilitators and perpetrators.” The directive does not name Khan, but its meaning is clear. On May 9, following Khan's arrest, protests erupted around the country, with [some leading to arson](#). Khan has called for an independent inquiry into the cause of the arson and has suggested the military may have carried it out as to create a pretext for the resulting crackdown.

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The PTI's U.S. Twitter account condemned what it called censorship. "Trying to keep Imran Khan off the media is censorship and curtailment of media freedom by the imposed regime in Pakistan," [the party said](#).

[BBC's](#) Caroline Davies reported that sources at two different Pakistani TV stations had said they were under orders not to mention Khan, even in the ticker tape running along the bottom.

In the wake of the military's imposed blackout over Pakistani media, Khan has taken to Western press and social media platforms like Twitter to try and get his message out. Even these platforms have not escaped censorship: Many Pakistani social media users have reported being contacted by the military over their posts and asked to remove them, lest they find themselves in prison as thousands of other supporters of Khan's party have over the past several weeks.

Thousands of Khan's loyalists have been imprisoned in recent weeks, and most of his party leadership has similarly been jailed, released only on the condition they publicly resign from the party. Several high-profile former officials have recently been forced to give bizarre press conferences following their arrests in which they announce their resignation from the PTI and, often, politics in general.



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