

Summary

Throughout 2024, Pakistan faced escalating political unrest after former PM Imran Khan's imprisonment and his party's victory in the February elections. Delays in forming a government and the arrest of General Faiz Hameed have worsened tensions. A large Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf rally on September 8 demanding Khan's release led to major security blockades across Islamabad and Rawalpindi, causing widespread disruption. The arrest of PTI leaders and a new bill regulating public gatherings have intensified the crisis.

Recent events and developments

In late January 2024, former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan was sentenced to 10 years in prison under the state secrets act, just before the general elections. Despite his imprisonment, Khan's party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), won the February 8, 2024, elections with a significant lead over Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League. However, delays in announcing results and restrictions on PTI candidates hindered their ability to form a government. On August 13, 2024, retired General Faiz Hameed, former head of the ISI and a figure close to Khan, was arrested. The political unrest in Islamabad has intensified following the PTI rally held near the Sanjrani Toll Plaza on September 8, 2024. The authorities responded by implementing extensive security measures, closing 29 key locations across Islamabad and Rawalpindi. During this protest, the Islamabad police reported injuries among officers due to stone-pelting by protesters, while PTI alleged that police were using excessive force and shelling peaceful attendees. PTI-president, Gohar Khan (unrelated to Imran Khan), and other top party officials were arrested in multiple ongoing raids. The PTI condemned these arrests as a reaction to the large turnout at the rally. Also, the introduction of the Peaceful Assembly and Public Order Bill 2024, which aims to regulate or ban public gatherings in the capital, further highlighted the controversy over Khan's detention. The political unrest surrounding Khan's detention continues to shape the situation in Pakistan.

Impact assessment

The political unrest in Islamabad has escalated significantly, highlighted by the arrests of PTI leaders. Because of Khan's influence and the rising tensions throughout Pakistan, it is likely that the PTI party will organise more demonstrations. These demonstrations could result in similar disruptions, particularly affecting the following locations: the expressway from Rawat to Islamabad, several points on the GT Road highway, Faizabad interchange, D-Chowk, 9th Avenue, Khanna Pull Bridge, Faisal Chowk, Marriott Hotel Chowk, Nadra Chowk, Serena Hotel Chowk, and even halted metro & bus services. As the unrest continues, major cities such as Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar are likely to experience more protests, mirroring those of May 2023 and September 8, 2024. Authorities are expected to tighten security further, which may involve additional restrictions on public transport and limited access to critical areas, particularly the Red Zone in Islamabad. Concerns are mounting about the potential for violence, especially after explosives were discovered and protesters violently clashed with the police on September 8. With protests growing in frequency and scale, there is an increasing risk that the government's response could become more aggressive, potentially leading to harsher actions by law enforcement to suppress the unrest. This volatile situation could have significant consequences not only for Pakistan's political landscape but also for safety on the ground.

Advice from Forth Global

- Advise staff traveling to Pakistan to undertake a several days long HEAT training prior to travel.
- Monitor local news and media to remain updated on developing events.
- Advise staff to avoid all protests and large gatherings of people, given the potential for the outbreak of violence between demonstrators and security forces, and the possibility of indiscriminate detentions.
- Ensure that travel contingency plans are updated and delivered to all employees in Pakistan.
- Employees should refrain from sharing their opinions on the political situation in Pakistan.

Customized advice

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