

International

Pakistan court adjourns again
on PM Khan no-confidence saga

‘If we don’t get a remedy then Pakistan will, God forbid, become a banana republic’

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan’s supreme court adjourned Tuesday without ruling on the legality of political manoeuvres that led Prime Minister Imran Khan to dissolve the national assembly and call fresh elections. The court, which will resume Wednesday, must decide if the deputy speaker of the assembly violated the constitution by refusing to allow a no-confidence vote against Khan at the weekend.

Western powers
want him removed

Had the vote taken place Khan was certain to have been booted from office, but the move allowed him to get the presidency—a largely ceremonial role held by a loyalist—to dissolve parliament and order an election, which must be held within 90 days. President Arif Alvi upped the ante Tuesday by issuing a letter to the opposition saying if they did not nominate a candidate for interim prime minister, the process would continue without them.

Shehbaz Sharif, who would have replaced Khan had Sunday’s vote taken place, said he would not participate. “The main issue is that the constitution has been abrogated,” he told reporters outside the court. “If we don’t get a remedy then Pakistan will, God forbid,

become a banana republic.” Khan has already nominated former chief justice Gulzar Ahmad for the role.

Nuclear-armed Pakistan has been wracked by political crises for much of its 75-year existence, and no prime minister has ever seen out a full term. There had been high hopes for Khan when he was elected in 2018 on a promise of sweeping away decades of entrenched corruption and cronyism, but he has struggled to maintain support with soaring inflation, a feeble rupee and crippling debt.

‘Foreign interference’

The opposition had expected to take power on Sunday after mustering enough support to oust him, but the deputy speaker refused to allow the vote to proceed because of alleged “foreign interference”. Khan said the opposition had gone too far by colluding with the United States for “regime change”.

The cricket star turned politician says Western powers want him removed because he will not stand with them against Russia and China, and the issue is sure to ignite any forthcoming election. Washington has denied any interference.

On Tuesday Khan ramped up the anti-US rhetoric, calling for protests to “send a message to America, and those traitors who are a part of it here, so they should know that we are a free country and will never let this conspiracy succeed”.

It is unclear when the court will rule on the issue—or if Khan would even accept its decision—but there is precedent. In 1988, Muhammad Khan Junejo appealed to the court after the assembly was dissolved by then president General Zia-ul-Haq, who had taken power in a military coup years earlier.



ISLAMABAD: Pakistan's opposition leader Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (L) speaks during a press conference in Islamabad. — AFP

It agreed his government had been dissolved unconstitutionally, but ruled that since elections had been announced anyway it was best to move on. In 1993, the court ruled president Ghulam Ishaq Khan had also illegally dissolved the assembly—then with Nawaz Sharif as prime minister.

Although the government resumed business, it lasted less than two months before being dissolved again. The supreme court is ostensibly independent, but rights activists say previous benches have been used

by civilian and military administrations to do their bidding throughout Pakistan’s history.

Publicly the military appears to be keeping out of the current fray, but there have been four coups since independence in 1947 and the country has spent more than three decades under army rule. On Tuesday the court said it would not “indulge in the matter of state policy or foreign policy” in making a decision. “Our concern is the legality of the ruling of the speaker,” said Chief Justice Umar Ata Bandial. — AFP

Polygamy: A stubbornly persistent practice

PARIS: The practice of polygamy, or being married to several people, is banned around most of the world, but still tolerated—and even legal—in dozens of countries. The UN’s Human Rights Commission and Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women have demanded that it be banned.

A man’s world

Polygamy is mostly, but not exclusively, a man’s world. As well as polygyny, when a man marries several women, there is the rarer polyandry, where wives have multiple husbands. There’s even sororal polygyny, where a man hitches up with several sisters, and fraternal polyandry, where the woman marries several brothers, as under an ancestral tradition in Nepal.

Sub-Saharan Africa at the centre

Only two percent of the world’s population live in polygamous families, and in most countries the proportion is under 0.5 percent, according to a 2019 study by the Washington-based Pew Research Center covering 130 countries and territories. Polygamy is banned in most of the world, including in Europe. But it is legal in parts of the Middle East and Asia, without being common.

It is in sub-Saharan Africa that it is most widespread, with 11 percent of the population living in polygamous households, according to Pew, with countries in West and Central Africa dominating. Burkina Faso has the highest proportion (36 percent), compared with 34 percent in Mali, 30 percent in Gambia and 29 percent in Niger.

Nigeria and Guinea have sizeable polygamous minori-

ties (28 percent and 26 percent respectively), despite both countries having banned the practice. Other countries where polygamy remains widespread include Guinea-Bissau (23 percent), Senegal (23 percent) and Togo (17 percent).

Two wives the norm

More common among Africa’s Muslims than Christians, polygamy is also widespread among followers of folk religions. In Nigeria, it is banned at the federal level but still practised in 12 northern states that implement sharia, or Islamic law. Most West African countries allow men to marry up to four women under certain conditions, including having the means to support multiple wives and families, according to the Paris-based Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. In practice, however, most of the men in polygamous relationships have two wives.

The president and the king

Former South African president Jacob Zuma, a Zulu traditionalist, has four wives and at least 20 children. The king of Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland), Mswati III, married 15 women, one of whom died. He has more than 25 children.

Encouraged during war

Islam allows men to have up to four wives, on the condition that they are all treated equally. The grand imam of the Cairo-based Al-Azhar, Egypt’s highest Sunni institution, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, has however criticised the practice as “an injustice towards women and children” resulting from “a misunderstanding of the Quran and of the tradition of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH)”.

Polygamy was historically encouraged in wartime, as a way of providing financial support to widows and orphans. The practice is nevertheless limited in most Muslim countries, with Tunisia the first Arab country to ban polygamy in 1956.—AFP



BUKAVU, DR Congo: Christian women of the Primitive Church of the Lord sing during the Sunday service to glorify God in Bukavu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Chirhuza Zagabe, 60, is a pastor of the “Primitive Church of the Lord” and manager of the provincial branch of an oil company. In 2012, he married three women at the same time in his church. He later divorced one for “bad behavior”. — AFP

In southern US,
an unending
water crisis

JACKSON: Every morning, 180 students at a school in Jackson, Mississippi have to board a bus to be taken to another nearby school. The reason? Their school lacks the water pressure needed to flush its own toilets. Cheryl Brown, the principal at Wilkins Elementary—where 98 percent of the 400 students are African American and most come from underprivileged backgrounds—doesn’t hide her frustration.

“It’s hard. It’s very hard,” she told AFP. “It’s taxing

on the boys and girls,” who spend much of the day at the other school before heading back to Wilkins in the afternoon. “It’s taxing on the staff members,” she said. Jackson is undergoing a severe water crisis—despite its status as a state capital in one of the richest countries in the world. Late last year, President Joe Biden signed into law a \$1 trillion package to address badly deteriorated infrastructure like Jackson’s. The city’s water system has suffered “significant deficiencies” since 2016, reports from the southern state’s health department found.

Both the causes and symptoms of the crisis are clear: water flows from old and unmaintained treatment plants—one is 100 years old—through leaking, century-old pipes. When it comes out of city taps, it’s sometimes rust-brown—and always contaminated with lead.

“The distribution lines are aging, and a master plan for pipe replacement... is not being implemented,” the US

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) wrote in a 2020 report. It said the city loses as much as 50 percent of its water—a stunning amount—through the decrepit system.

As a result, “three local hospitals have drilled their own wells... to have access to reliable sources of drinking water.”

Jackson, a city of 155,000, is not the only US city to face such a crisis. One of the worst US public health scandals in years came when the details of poor water quality management were exposed in the northern industrial city of Flint, Michigan.

A budget crisis prompted that city to change its water source, leaving thousands of residents exposed to dangerously high lead levels. Both Flint and Jackson are majority Black, which for many observers confirms the existence of “environmental racism”—with African Americans disproportionately affected by pollution.—AFP



LENS, Switzerland: Ukrainian refugee Anastasia Sheludko (L) poses with Leo Tolstoy’s great-granddaughter Marta Albertini in Lens, southern Switzerland on March 31, 2022. Under the intense gaze of Russian literary giant Leo Tolstoy, his great-granddaughter listens with concern as Anastasia Sheludko describes the horrors she experienced before fleeing Ukraine. — AFP

Tolstoy descendant
hosts Ukrainians
in Switzerland

LENS, Switzerland: Under the intense gaze of Russian literary giant Leo Tolstoy, his great-granddaughter listens with concern as Anastasia Sheludko describes the horrors she experienced before fleeing Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine by her ancestral homeland Russia nearly six weeks ago had come as a massive shock, Marta Albertini told AFP, adding that she immediately realised she needed to help refugees.

“It was instinctive,” said the 84-year-old, who is lending Sheludko and her mother an apartment in the small village of Lens, near the plush Swiss Alps ski resort of Crans-Montana. Before they arrived, Albertini removed most of the family pictures that covered the wooden walls of the apartment, but a large painting of her great-grandfather hangs in the living room.

The author of celebrated novels “War and Peace” and “Anna Karenina” would have viewed the conflict raging in Ukraine with “horror”, she said. Albertini, who last year published a book about three generations of Tolstoy women—her great-grandmother, who gave the author 13 children, her grandmother and her mother—pointed out that he was a renowned pacifist. Tolstoy, who experienced the Crimean War and the siege of Sevastopol in the 1850s, would likely have been “completely devastated” by what is happening, she said.

‘Against the horrors’

Albertini, who grew up in Italy and France before making Switzerland her permanent home a few years ago, says she is among many Tolstoy descendants who signed a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin saying the family opposed the war. “We are against the horrors that are being perpetrated now, the invasion of an innocent country,” she said, acknowledging that Putin had quite possibly looked at all the signatures “and thrown them in the trash”.

But it was important to speak up, she said. “Europe, the world, will not be the same after this war.” For Sheludko, the world she knew just a few weeks ago has already evaporated. “Sometimes I think I am dreaming,” she told AFP. “It is surreal.” The 24-year-old arrived in the spectacular mountain landscape of Lens with her mother on March 13, more than a week after they fled their home in the southern Ukrainian city of Mykolaiv. They are among more than 23,000 Ukrainians who have arrived in Switzerland, out of more than 4.2 million who have left the war-ravaged country since the February 24 invasion. Albertini, who lives in a traditional chalet outside Lens, had purchased the apartment in the village a few years ago for family visits, and with an eye to moving there herself once she no longer feels safe driving.—AFP