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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; SPACE; India; Pakistan; South Asia

PAKISTAN'S ELECTORAL UNCERTAINTY

In what has already been a rather tumultuous year for Pakistani politics, more turbulence appears to be in store. On August 6th, highly popular former Prime Minister Imran Khan was sentenced to three years in prison after being convicted for corrupt practices involving illegally buying valuable official gifts. Khan's imprisonment bans him from politics for the next five years, including standing in the country's upcoming election. That, however, could be just the start of his legal woes; the former premier still faces almost 150 charges for things like corruption and attempted murder. However, even with Khan and many other top leaders behind bars, his party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), still has a fighting chance at the polls - provided elections happen this year.

However, they may not. On August 9th, at the completion of its five-year term, Pakistan's parliament was dissolved by President Arif Alvi. The move triggers a constitutional requirement to hold elections for a new legislature within 90 days. However, Pakistan's election oversight body is planning to delay the elections until at least February 2024, claiming it needs four months to redraw district lines in response to the new census. Whether it actually does so will depend on the country's current caretaker government, or its judiciary. (*The Guardian*, August 5, 2023; *BBS*, August 17, 2023)

INDIA'S SPACE AMBITIONS SURGE FORWARD

On July 14th, India's space agency launched a spacecraft called the Chandrayaan-3 into orbit on an ambitious lunar mission. The purpose is two-fold; the Chandrayaan-3 carried both a lander and a propulsion module. The lander module, which successfully separated from the propulsion module last week during lunar orbit, officially landed on the south pole of the moon on yesterday, August 23rd. India is now the fourth country in the world to execute a controlled lunar landing. Meanwhile, the propulsion module will set out on a mission to "search for extraterrestrial life on exo-planets beyond our solar system." It will do so by conducting a "spectroscopic study of Earth's atmosphere" that will collect data that scientists can analyze to better understand the ability of exo-planet atmospheres to support life. (Reuters, June 13, 2023; *Hindustan Times*, August 17, 2023)

TAKING PAKISTAN'S AIRPORT PRIVATE

Pakistan's aviation sector, like many others in the cash-strapped nation's economy, has accumulated major losses. Pakistan International Airlines, the country's national carrier, has taken a \$1.4 million hit, pushing Islamabad into consultations with the International Financial Corporation (IFC). As a way of generating revenue, Pakistan's Finance Ministry recently made the decision to outsource operations at the Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore airports, in order to best stay in line with industry practices and improve service delivery. The three airports will now be run through a public-private partnership, with the Islamabad airport first to undergo the change. Pakistan is hoping to attract foreign investment through the open tender process, and has been in talks with Qatar to jointly run the three major Pakistani airports, with the Qatar Investment Authority pledging to invest \$3 billion in Pakistan following Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to Doha last year. (Reuters, March 30, 2023; Reuters, July 20, 2023)

SECOND THOUGHTS ABOUT THE IRAN-PAKISTAN PIPELINE

Construction on the decade-old Iran-Pakistan natural gas pipeline has ground to a halt as a result of worries in Islamabad. The 1,742 mile long, \$7.5 billion pipeline was agreed to by Iran and Pakistan back in 2013 as a means for Pakistan to purchase Iranian energy, and while the Islamic Republic finished its share of construction some time ago, Pakistan's segment of the energy route is still in process. Now, however, officials in Islamabad appear to be worried over the potential adverse consequences of closer partnership with Iran, amid souring ties between Washington and Tehran. "Pakistan has issued a Force Majeure and Excusing Event notice to Iran under the Gas Sales and Purchase Agreement (GSPA), which resultantly suspends Pakistan's obligations under the GSPA," Pakistan's Minister of State for Petroleum, Musadik Malek, has confirmed. (*Iran International*, August 9, 2023; *WION News*, August 9, 2023)