

Pakistan, long viewed as an incubator of religious militancy, is gearing up for a battle over the future of the country's notorious madrassas, religious seminaries accused of breeding radicalism. Islamist-led protests also threaten to be a fight for the future of the government of prime minister Imran Khan.

The stakes for both the government and multiple Islamist and opposition parties and groups are high.

Pakistan earlier this month evaded blacklisting by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), an international anti-money laundering and terrorism finance watchdog, but only by the skin of its teeth.

Maintaining Pakistan on its grey list since June of last year, FATF warned the South Asian nation that it would be blacklisted if it failed to fully implement an agreed plan to halt the flow of funds to militant groups by February of next year when the watchdog holds its next meeting.

The warning was reinforced by a statement by FATF's Chinese president, Xiangmin Liu. China has long shielded Pakistan from blacklisting.

"Pakistan needs to do more and faster. Pakistan's failure to fulfil FATF global standards is an issue that we take very seriously. If by February 2020, Pakistan doesn't make significant progress, it will be put on the blacklist." Mr Xiangmin said.

Pakistani officials acknowledged that Mr Xiangmin's comment underlined the seriousness of their country's predicament but said it would serve as an incentive to push forward.

That is likely to energize Islamist opposition to Pakistani efforts to comply with FATF demands that would impose strict oversight on their funding and financing of social and cultural activities, including the operation of tens of thousands of religious seminaries.

A five-party Islamist coalition that demands "true Islamization" and the establishment of shariah law, led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the 66-year old head of Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam and a former member of parliament, organized a countrywide march scheduled to converge on the capital Islamabad on October 31.

Rehman said the march of up to one million people was a declaration of ["war" against PM Khan's government](#). He demanded the government's resignation. His protest is likely to secure a degree of support from other major opposition parties like the Pakistan People's

Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N).

With government efforts to engage the opposition in talks to fend off the march on Islamabad going nowhere, both Pakistani security forces and stick-wielding Islamist volunteers clad in yellow uniform-like garb have been preparing for the march. Security forces have virtually sealed off Islamabad's government district.

The government is also [considering closing roads leading to the capital and banning media coverage](#). Pakistani media reported that authorities were also contemplating [digging ditches along footpaths leading to Islamabad](#) to prevent protesters from circumventing roadblocks by foot.

The Islamists were further energized by a [controversial meeting last month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly between PM Khan and George Soros](#), the billionaire philanthropist behind the Open Society Foundation. The foundation was banned from Pakistan in late 2017 as part of a crackdown on non-governmental organizations.

Mr Soros, a Hungarian-born Jew who survived the Holocaust, and the foundation are globally in the bull's eye of populist, ultra-nationalist and militant religious opposition to what they term 'globalists' and 'cosmopolitans.'

The attacks, like in the case of the Islamist coalition in Pakistan as well as Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán and other nationalist and far-right forces, often take on anti-Semitic connotations.

Mr Orbán, who studied on a scholarship provided by Mr Soros' philanthropy, has charged the billionaire with [secretly plotting to flood Hungary with migrants and destroy it as a nation](#).



Imran Khan with George Soros/ Image: Pakistan in UN

Rehman, accusing Imran Khan of being a [“Jewish agent,”](#) was particularly irked by the fact that the prime minister was believed to have [asked Mr Soros to assist in reforming Pakistani madrassas](#) in a bid to counter radicalization and ensure that the seminaries adopt curricula approved by the ministry of education.

Greater government control of the seminaries would substantially weaken the significant street power of Islamist parties that often fare poorly in elections.

The emerging power struggle between Prime Minister Khan and the Islamists is in many ways an effort by the Islamists to force the military that long supported them to choose between them and the prime minister.

Prime Minister Khan is believed to have had [military support in the electoral campaign that brought the former cricket player to the office](#) on a promise to end corruption and improve living standards.

Instead, a persistent economic crisis forced Prime Minister Khan to agree to a US\$6 billion bailout by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that involves stark austerity measures.

The Islamists ability to march on Islamabad has some analysts suggesting that they would

not be able to do so without at least a military nod.

Whatever the case, the march could not come at a more awkward moment for PM Khan.

Rehman hopes to capitalize on popular discontent as Pakistan struggles to overcome the economic crisis and seems unable to garner substantial international and Muslim support in condemning India's abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir.

Earlier this week, police in Islamabad employed water cannons to [disperse teachers protesting the fact that they had not been paid for months](#).

Complicating affairs is the fact that solving the economic crisis, confronting India in the dispute about Kashmir and meeting FATF's demands are all intertwined.

Militants and others have degrees of financial manoeuvrability because much of the Pakistani economy remains unrecorded. In addition, despite crackdowns, various militant groups like Jamaat-ud-Dawa and Jaish-e-Mohammed remain useful proxies in [battles over Kashmir](#). All of which mitigates against full compliance with FATF's demands.

That is the murky playground in which Rehman and his Islamist alliance is seeking to stir the pot.

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Joining the global protest fray: Islamists march on the Pakistani capital



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