



Comment

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**Towards a Deep state?
The Intrinsic ties between
Imran Khan and the Taliban**

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Pakistan's political development is once again on the edge. If one believes the domestic and international media, the civilian leaders are finally trying to initiate a serious transformation process towards a consolidated democracy. Celebrating themselves, the two main political parties are emphasizing the appearance and strengthening of a more or less stable 'quasi-two-party-system', the ability to form coalitions, to build consensus and the discovery of a new parliamentary spirit. Being overwhelmed by the ability to have survived a full tenure and to witness the first democratic transfer of power in the country's history, Pakistan's sedate and slow political mastodons, i.e. the Pakistan People Party (PPP) of incumbent President Asif Ali Zardari and the leading opposition party Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of the brothers Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif, seem to ignore a political phenomenon that gained increasing prominence over the last years. This was interpreted by several analysts as a laxness which might have far reaching consequences for the contemporary and future development of the country. In brief, the emergence of Imran Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), known as the Movement for Justice, developed into a force to be reckoned with and was apparently disturbing the enthusiasm of the established political stalwarts. Interestingly, this time it is not the Pakistani army but a cricketer-turned-politician that acts as the spoiler for the mood for democracy in Islamabad's political circles. Khan's so-called 'political Tsunami' not only

disturbs the 'feel good atmosphere' of the PPP and PML-N but may also induce a major restructuring of Pakistan's unstable party system. Caught by surprise with Khan's rising prominence, both parties initially remained shiftless in dealing with the PTI. Until recently, there was no pressing need to worry because with its single seat the PTI played a marginal role of importance in Pakistan's national parliament. Yet, recent polls suggest that Imran Khan may well be on his way to a 'grand electoral achievement' which would catapult the PTI into the government and him into the position of Prime Minister, or, in a less bright scenario, put him into the role of a 'king-maker'. Nevertheless, one has to realize that he has only been able to make some remarkable progress in the Punjab, and more specifically in Lahore, his only 'stronghold'. This is gaining particular momentum as it is also the 'hometown' of one of Khan's greatest political rivals, the PML-N. That party's overwhelming dominance in the national assembly (it occupies more than 50% of the seats) will make sure that the PTI will have no landslide victory this province, which is Pakistan's most important. However, at the moment it seems that Khan and Nawaz Sharif have made an arrangement about not challenging the establishment in Punjab, meaning to maintain the status quo after successful elections (including subsequent socio-economic inequalities) as well as certain electoral arrangements. This will provide Khan with a more or less valid guarantee of a certain power base in form of an amount of seats to count with, at least in

theory. The PML-N is also gaining much from such a 'political deal', since it helps to 'keep its back free' in order to challenge its major rival, the PPP, in their 'homeland' Sindh. In this context, one has to state that the PML-N has been investing a lot of time and effort in this province in order to get a stronger political foothold there. In sum, Khan's notions of 'progressive change and revolution' got victimised in Punjab in order to improve its chances in the next elections.

Similar developments are observed in other provinces too. The PTI will find it hard to rival the PPP in rural Sindh, the powerful MQM in Sindh's capital Karachi, or to take on the strong regional parties in Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK), and Federal Tribal Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It will be difficult for the PTI to break the strong influence of the established parties which are able to draw on tribal or other traditional loyalties among the rural population generating whole vote banks for them. In order to compete with them, Khan started a strategy of convincing eminent political figures from other political camps to join his party to extend the PTI's influence in other provinces. However, the reliability of these individuals remains questionable because they may be chosen to join the PTI out of opportunism rather than out of idealism. Such motives do not enhance the creation of a sustainable future of the party and the implementation of a coherent and substantial policy programme.

Analysts are wondering about the sources of Imran Khan's rise. Most of them identify the increasing unpopularity of the PPP government as the main reason for Khan's popularity. Consequently, the PTI could establish itself as a protest movement cum political party that vies for national significance. In this context one should mention that Khan's movement got sidelined early 2013 by Muhammad Tahir-ul Qadri who stole the 'electioneering show' from Imran Khan as the country's best-known populist. Even though Khan lost media attention for only a couple of weeks, the fact that Tahir-ul-Qadri was able to brush aside Khan's 'public visibility' had a significant impact on the PTI's momentum. It disenchanted the people about the sustainability of Khan's 'political Tsunami'. Furthermore, Khan lost its status of being the 'darling of the media' which marked the starting point for a whole wave of more critical reporting on Khan's statements and policies as well as the performance and activities of the PTI.

Regardless of whether Khan will achieve direct power in Islamabad or not, he will be able, if one is reading the earlier pre-election polls, to establish himself and his PTI for the next tenure as a third political force, next to the PPP and PML-N, on the national level in the country. Even though Khan still lacks a nationwide, substantial support base, the fact that the next election will have around 30 million new and young voters looking for political orientation might function as a game

changer. It could create a moment which will help Imran Khan finally to acquire a national character and his PTI to go beyond the status of a 'pressure group'. According to analysts, there are still legitimate reasons to assume that PTI can benefit from that since Khan has won the sympathies among many young voters, especially in the urban middle class which is frustrated about the social and economic conditions in the country. The latest electoral rallies in the last two years as well as the tremendous success of his internet campaign, especially his social network activities, were an impressive demonstration of his capabilities to mobilise exactly these young voters *en masse*. At his most recent rallies in Lahore and Karachi, more than 100.000 people participated; which numerically challenges the attendance of political gatherings of the PML-N and PPP. In qualitative terms too are Khans rallies, or *Jalsas*, remarkable. Despite the fact that these *Jalsas* were 'entertaining festivals' rather than serious political events -which for Imran Khan of course had the advantage of distracting his followers and sympathisers from the extraordinary limited 'political message' which basically boils down to a claim to make an end to corruption, to stop drone attacks, and to reshuffle US-Pakistani relations- Khan was able to proof two things: First, there was or still is a rally-behind-the-PTI-flag phenomenon of Pakistan (urban) youth with an remarkable percentage of the educated ones. Second, the PTI is on a good way to arrive at the national level. Imran Khan has been able to create an impressive

political dynamic by cleverly using Pakistan's contemporary political issues to his own benefits. Nevertheless, one must question if he is able to achieve more, beyond a respectable electoral result particularly regarding a successful implementation of its proposed policies. In more comprehensive terms: to gain, exercise and maintain political power!

Therefore most important is that Khan is able to stop the 'disenchantment with politics' of Pakistan's whole youth and not only the urban educated middle classes. Since they associate Khan with the hope that he will change the whole system by giving the country a political landscape a new fresh, progressive impetus, it is a *conditio sine qua non* for the PTI's success to maintain this image. However, undoubtedly this is at the moment the major problem of Khan. Being obviously driven by the ultimately pursuit of power but hampered by an insufficient electoral support base Khan is willing to join increasingly alliances of all kind of political colours. However, his attempt to line up with the radical religious right, the military and the Taliban will have the gravest consequences. This has far-reaching consequences: for Khan, his PTI, and for the country's democratic future. Especially on some of the core values of democracy and underlining ideational like liberalism, tolerance, individual freedom and well-being, equality, freedom of religion and speech, human rights including liberties of women.

To begin with, it is argued here that Khan's appeasement towards the radical religious groups and his remarkable shady approach towards the Taliban further create an atmosphere in which fundamentalism and religious extremism can grow rampantly. Through his action or indifference, Khan contributed to the raising political prominence and influence of the Taliban in Pakistan. Most noteworthy is Khan's increasingly appreciation of the Taliban for their values and principles. This finds its strongest expression in the fact that the PTI leader was publicly praising the terrorist activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a 'holy war' which in his view is justified by Islam. By doing so he implicitly also legitimizes the war crimes and atrocities like public executions of women in Taliban controlled areas. For obvious reasons Khan's elaborations on the Taliban's activities in Afghanistan have not gone down well with the Afghans.

Furthermore, Khan's expressed deep affection towards the 'Jihadists' is even more disturbing since the above mentioned statement was done after a hospital visit of Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani girl asking for female education, who was should in the head by them. The fact that he did not condemn the attackers and failed to portray the Taliban as perpetrators showed that he has a weak spot for religious extremists. It created a societal and political environment in which a federal minister could call terrorists 'his brothers' and in which politicians of the religious right can downplay the shooting of

school girls as a 'drama', and that commentators can denounce such an extraordinary atrocity as an exaggerate issue by the media. This is denouncing the legitimate outrage as a displaced and staged spectacle and one should not make a big deal out of it. In other words, this is not only a public discrediting of human rights but it also shows the weak status of fundamental rights and democratic norms and values in the country. Here one should also add that Khan's legitimization of Taliban actions in Pakistan with reference to victims of drone attacks is a deliberate distortion of facts and obviously aims to misguide the Pakistani people and international community. It seems that Khan and his sympathisers have a very weak memory when it comes to all the blown up schools in the area by Taliban, the systematic killings of tribal elders and other people willing to stand up against the repressive tactics of Taliban and associates, especially the forced introduction of Sharia law.

Of course drone attacks are against human rights and the people in the FATA have a right to live in peace. However, by blaming the US one-sidedly for growing militancy is absolute nonsense. The FATA has been struggling with militancy and its functioning as a 'black-site' for endeavours of regional actors well before the beginning of the 'war against terror'. Consequently, the increase of new and deepening of old conflicts and cleavages and the taking up of arms in the area is not a 'collateral damage' of US drone strikes. It is

rather a consequence of the disturbance of the traditional social structure and tribal notion of harmony which is mainly of domestic origin and troubling the area since decades. It was easy for the Taliban to fill this power vacuum and to get hold of FATA. In this context one should mention that Khan should first examine the indigenous social, cultural and religious flaws of the cause of militancy before blaming foreign sources. Therefore, side-lining with the extremists is not bringing peace at all to the people of the frontier region. In contrast, they feel much encouraged to continue their strategy of violence and intimidation since three of the current most significant political parties PPP, PML-N and PTI are obviously afraid of acting against them. The capitulation of these major national civilian forces towards the Taliban is best outlined by two occasions: First, Khan publicly announced that he can't condemn the Taliban for their crimes because he has to protect his own PTI officials and sympathisers. Literally, "we have local affiliates and supporters. Sure I can give big statements against the Taliban but that would make them Taliban targets". Second, PPP and PML-N were even not able to find a consensus to pass a bill in order to use force against Taliban in the affected areas. Facing upcoming election, no politician in Islamabad wants to be responsible for a major internal military operation as well as to provoke the Taliban. For the moment it seems that this strategy is working out at least for the PTI and PML-N, since Taliban are only attacking the election campaigns and candidates of secular

regional parties in FATA and KPK sparing the Punjab from its fight against democracy.

By witnessing these electioneering tactics, Khan's statements are in diametric contrast to his proclaimed goals that he wants to improve the social conditions of the Pakistani people as a whole, including women. In brief, one must state that a young school girl was able to show not only the way forward how to improve the conditions of female citizenry regarding education and their social, economic and political role in the country. It also exposed the thoughtlessness and dangerousness of Khan's black and white depictions of the issues of Taliban, militancy, US drone strikes, and Pakistan's relationship with the US. Furthermore, it also pointed indirectly out that Khan can't or does not have the political will for a substantial social change especially towards more gender equalities.

Foremost, there is a remarkable indifference, even dismissive approach, towards women rights. This finds its most significant expression in the rejection of the Protection of Women's Rights Bill in 2006 by the PTI. The bill was rejected on the basis of it being considered partial, i.e. that it served the interests of the then government. This is hypocritical, since the actual cause for Khan's rejection of the 'improvement of women rights' was partial too, because he was trying to strengthen an alliance with the religious right wing forces against former military-turned-civilian President Pervez Musharraf.

However, the condemnation of the Protection of Woman Rights Bill was not the only example of PTI's radical and strict ignorance of the need for gender equality. Also the argument that it was for the 'higher sake' to challenge the questionable legitimacy of Pervez Musharraf's rule since there were already significant indications that his rule will not last much longer. In this context, one should also mention that on paper the PTI is interested in upholding the fundamental rights of 'all citizens' regardless of caste, creed and religion. However, according to the PTI's reading gender inequalities are not included in these ideals. In this direction one has to note that the former President of the PTI Women Wing, Fauzia Kasuri, got disqualified for the internal party election on March 22th, 2013 because of her dual citizenship in Pakistan and the US. This is even more disturbing since they allow a PTI Women Wing in North America but disqualify their members for elections in case of a dual citizenship. To see this event only in the light of an internal power struggle about a certain position is too narrow because Kasuri had been a long-time follower of Imran's political path. Rather, it seems that the PTI leadership rests uncomfortable with having women in the party's influential top positions. In this context, it is also notable that Imran Khan recruited Ejaz Chaudhary a (former) member of Jamaat-e-Islami, a well-known Islamist party, as PTI Vice President. Instead of promoting progressive forces, it seems that Khan is strengthening the reactionary and conservative elements in its party in order to

gain electoral support from the religious right. For the sake of completeness in this direction, it should also be pointed out that Khan has denounced the contentious public debate about the controversial blasphemy laws by claiming that there are other more pressing issues that deserve a higher priority. With such a blatant appeasement towards the radical religious rights and fundamentalists he finally made his mark as 'thoughtless Taliban Khan'. Therefore, the story that the PTI is not interested in 'power politics' but rather in 'initiating reforms' remains a political myth.

To sum up, by evaluating Imran Khan's on-going election campaign one gets the feeling that he has a quite ambiguous relationship towards human rights, especially when it comes to the position of women. It is obvious that he is not willing or not able to understand that the respect of human rights is a fundamental constituent of any democratic regime worth carrying the name. Narrowing down the democratic process just to election as a system to recruit the (legitimate) political leadership combined with the successive rapprochement towards the Taliban and their informal induction into the political decision-making process is a further truncation of the country's political system. Therefore, if Pakistan follows Imran Khan's path, it will soon be characterised as a failed democracy and it will risk getting dragged into a transformation process that will turn the country into a 'deep state'. This basically means that the country is

controlled by a small group of influential, reactionary anti-democratic forces -a situation which is not unknown for the country. However, it is also argued that a 'deep state' is featured by several such anti-systemic groups maintaining an antagonistic relationship towards each other but still running somehow more or less collectively the core affairs of the states behind the scenes. Since the Taliban will neither be able to re-establish their Islamic theocracy in Afghanistan nor to get in power in Islamabad but are able to harm significantly the political, social and economic development of Pakistan, the country's establishment might feel tempted to arrange a certain status for the Taliban. This could look like this: most likely not to attack them in certain areas as well as not to disturb them in establishing Shariah and parallel administrative structures. Such a scenario would stage the setting of a deep state in Pakistan and Imran Khan is, deliberately or unconsciously, increasingly the harbinger of it. Additionally, with this ambiguous political manoeuvring Khan is not at all working towards a fundamental political change. Rather, he enforces the further polarisation of Pakistan's deeply divided society. This polarization is not so much about the proclaimed fragmentation between the stereotype camps of 'representatives of the western secularism who are abandoning the traditional Islamic life' and such 'people who are believing in the time-honoured Islamic norms and values', it is more about the strengthening of a split between people who

are willing to stand up against religious extremism and fundamentalism and such people who prefer some kind of appeasement with the Taliban in order to achieve a 'pseudo peace'. This will undoubtedly play into the hands of the extremists as it will grant them more and more prominence in Pakistan's political landscape which will eventually lead to increasing social acceptance of their illegitimate, extra-judicial behaviour. However, this will have tremendous impact on Imran Khan's feasibility to convince the much-needed youth to vote for him. Though Pakistan's youth in general and in particular the middle class ones nourish deep religious sentiments, this does not automatically imply that they have sympathies for the Taliban and radical right-wing religious forces. In this context, one could make a point of reference towards Hindu-Nationalism in India. The senior leadership of the political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party, foremost former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee understood clearly that the Indian middle class is more interested in economic performance of the country and subsequently an improvement of their job opportunities and living standards than in an ideology of hate and discriminatory actions against religious minorities. The case of Pakistan is likely not to be any different. Pakistan's youth is frustrated with their country's corrupt and clientelistic political system and they are desperately looking for a leader who will break these socially

entrenched patterns. Therefore, as indicated above, Khan must stage himself as a beacon for change who is ready to challenge the perceived reactionary civilian and military establishment which is either afraid of the Taliban or still think that one can talk them into a durable peace deal. Only if this works out, Khan will be able to transform the people power of his 'tsunami' into an electoral success. Until then, the PTI will be known as an upcoming but 'untested' political party. However, it does not look like this at all and instead of creating a political tsunami catching the youth in masses, Khans appearance will be nothing more than just a short dangerous episode but with long term consequences doing more harm than good.

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