

Imran Khan - A twist in the tale?



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Observing the euphoric rhapsody of an 'ecstatic' private media in Pakistan regarding Imran Khan the critical mind can't help but to be somewhat suspicious. The whole story seems dodgy if one takes into account that the usually overtly critical Western Press is joining the praise.

Nonetheless, it is quite obvious that the "Khan hype" is not only exaggerated but also to some extent artificial. With its troubled history and the upcoming 'salvific' first democratic transfer of power, it does not come across as a total surprise that Mr Khan is being portrayed as someone that the Pakistanis and the international community deem fit for preventing the downward spiral of the nation. This wishful thinking, however, does not match the reality Pakistan finds itself in. For the sake of completeness, one must also state that not all analysts and commentators share the 'Khan enthusiasm'. Subsequently one can find a broad range of Khan portrayals: from national hero, beacon of hope, last savior, harbinger of change, great benefactor to less charming descriptions (for a political career) such as hardliner, right-wing, ultra-nationalist, legendary playboy, infidel, or 'slave of the west'. However, as in most of such cases, the truth can be found somewhere in the middle of such praising or slanderous depictions is adequate: they only point out and magnify a certain feature of Imran Khan's multi-faceted personality. Therefore one should take a closer look at the public figure that is Imran Khan. To begin with, he is a man who, for a long time, has been portraying himself as the symbol of an 'enlightened secular and westernized Pakistani,' breaking with an extremely Islamized and socially repressive atmosphere in Pakistan, created by military ruler Zia-ul Haque in the 1980s. He was educated at Oxford University, enjoyed London's nightlife and married Jemima Marcelle Goldsmith, the daughter of an Anglo-French billionaire and business tycoon. In addition he earned the reputation of making impossible things happen, at least on the cricket pitch. All these things made him an attractive figure for international media. Therefore, the western media was happily picking up the image of Imran Khan as the 'Pepsi man' for the Muslim cricket world - interpreted as the beacon of western and liberal progress in Pakistan but also created the view of a representative of a new generation who embodied the nostalgic feeling of the western-orientated, prosperous days of urban Pakistan in the 1960s.

But besides the obvious fact that he is an international, smart and sophisticated person, Khan's political standpoints are perceived as extremely disquieting by observers who believe in the liberal dem-

ocratic norms of tolerance and respect for the freedom of speech. It seems that before Khan made the decision to change the trajectories of Pakistan he first made a twist in his very own tale. As soon as he came back from London to Pakistan Khan seems to have re-invented himself not only as an increasingly religious person but also as the spearhead of anti-western agitation. This in itself is not very unusual for elites returning from the West to their countries of birth, but it does make him appear unpredictable. This is especially true when one considers his activity within the realm of politics. As the Chairman of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI, Pakistan Movement for Justice), he lived, until recently, a rather unremarkable political life in which he only once managed to win a seat in the national parliament. This led to his belittling by his main rivals the Pakistan People Party (PPP) of President Asaf Ali Zardari and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) of the Sharif brothers. However, in an effort to move more into Pakistan's political mainstream he turned towards a nationalist, right-wing and religious populism characterised rather by simplistic slogans than a coherent, ideological-thoughtful and pragmatic depth underpinning his political demands. At the core of his anti-intellectual populist rhetoric is his self-portrayal as the guardian of Islamic norms and values, anti-Americanism, and the struggle against corruption. But in order to be strategically flexible and to appear as a political 'all-rounder,' Khan often remains vague and finds himself entangled in numerous ambiguities and antagonisms.

Some of the most remarkable ones are his 'flip-flop' approaches towards the country's armed forces, especially towards its top brass. Analyzing comments on Khan one will quite often find indications that observers tend to reduce the critical debate on Imran Khan to the sole question to which extent he is a stooge of the military. However, it is argued here that this question is far too short-sighted because of two reasons: First, because of the virtually non-existent civilian control over the armed forces each politician in Pakistan who wants to be successful on the national level needs the goodwill of the military. Second, it distracts from a related and more important issue: Khan's actual relationship and interaction with the military. After reviewing it, one should come to the conclusion that this is an extraordinary example for his ambiguous and dubious 'turncoat tactics'. For instance, Khan and his PTI supported (like many Pakistanis) Musharraf's coups d'état in 1999. However, after Musharraf's government was under increasing pressure by the judiciary represented by the Supreme Court and a major civil soci-

ety forced him to resign, Khan quickly emphasized his oppositional role towards the military ruler. This became even more evident after the 'Musharraf-Kayani split,' where General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, in his capacity as the Chief of Army Staff, distanced himself from Musharraf and subsequently withdrew the army's support for his military-turned-civilian president. Realizing Musharraf's political decline, he immediately sided with General Kayani who had initiated the downfall of Musharraf's government. However, Khan does not only apply this political manoeuvring on the individual but also on the institutional level. When it seems opportune he does not hesitate to do so. Similarly, whenever popular support of the armed forces waned, Khan



did not hesitate to set himself up as the defender of civilian control. During the current campaign for the general elections in May of this year he joined the civilian orchestra announcing the end of the era of military rule in Pakistan. Clearly a crucial endeavour given the history of military dominance in the country's decision making processes into account. A fortiori, it is astonishing that he is demanding that the military should guarantee a smooth electoral process, which is actually classified primarily as a coercible job under the responsibility of civilian security forces like the police or Intelligence Bureau/IB. In other words, the police have the duty and the right to secure the elections. It is definitely not the business of the armed forces.

Recalling the multitude of occasions where the military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) influenced the electoral outcome and the extremely unhealthy civil-military relations, Khan's suggestions sound like 'putting the fox in charge of the henhouse'. In the recently released PTI manifesto, Khan is calling for the establishment of a 'National Counterterrorism

Authority' (NACTA) as a single authority. From a civil-military relations perspective, this is a highly critical demand because of the fact that NACTA should have a 'high-level representation' from the armed forces, paramilitary forces and ISI too, which would, in addition to the overwhelming informal influence of the soldiers, grant the military an institutional role in matters of internal security. Furthermore since NACTA is supposed to meet regularly under the Prime Minister, unfortunately there is no further clarification how this should be operationalized, it would lead to an additional sidelining of the parliament through the executive and the military. Subsequently, instead of strengthening the civilian institution it continues the process of hampering democratisation by

specifically name the armed forces or security forces when talking about massive human rights violations, target killings, kidnappings, and systematic repression of the Baloch people, especially the Baloch leaders which are banned from criticising the central government. The PTI chairman ignored the fact that these atrocities aren't just incidents of the past, but are still taking place today. The Baloch people want to hear this clearly before the option of boycotting the 2013 elections is from the table, and they want to hear this from the person to whom they may be willing to give their vote. Otherwise they will remain sceptical that the respective political leaders and their parties are really willing and able to properly address the complaints and demands of the

American feelings in the country.

Interestingly enough however, Washington does not seem to care about Khan's protest movement. There are two ways one could interpret US indifference. Either the Obama administration believes that Khan will not make it, or, if the PTI manages to fight its way through to the federal government, the basic structure of Pakistan's politics are so encrusted that Khan will be not able to enforce much of his announced changes. Especially since he has yet to publicly announce how he plans to implement his 'grand goals'. Additionally, Washington has adapted to a political landscape where potential rising political stars and starlets around the globe are trying to make a point by being anti-US. And when it comes to Pakistan, the US is most likely convinced that there is still the military that will try to redirect too ambitious forms of enthusiasm of people who think that they 'khan change' the traditional pattern of Pakistan's politics which have been serving the establishment and matching US interests in the region since decades.

In this context one should also mention that it would obviously be a remarkably brave endeavour to lead a 'peace march' into the highly dangerous 'no-go' tribal area of FATA (Federal Administered Tribal Area) at the border to Afghanistan, but there was no political imperative to organise this protest except for trying to broaden its own support bases beyond the city of Lahore in the Punjab, Imran Khans only stronghold yet. Like in the case of Khan's apologies towards the Baloch people, also regarding his anti-drone stroll, he once again tried to bandwagon with an already existing mood which found its expression in the fact that the national parliament already decided and demanded concordantly the stop of drone attacks.

Hence, like his other political activities one must state: too little, too late at an unfavourable time which makes the whole campaigning non-credible. At least it was a political signal towards the people living in the periphery, until recently the political leadership in Islamabad usually did not care much about the provinces.

Neither in post-war scenarios nor after major natural catastrophes like the 2010 flood crisis.

In sum, by assessing Imran Khan's electoral campaign and respective statements one must state that there is no fundamental change towards the already established political parties. He is driven by the usual 'office-seeking' perspective like the rest of his political rivals. Of course, this is a legitimate and globally exercised practise of political parties in all kinds of party systems. But the point under discussion is the discrepancy between 'aspiration and reality'. Or in other words, one should shed some light on what Khan

and his PTI is pretending to be and that what they are actually doing in their electoral campaign. Though Khan emphasizes that he is driven by principles which lie in the national interest like the promotion of an Islamic welfare state, he is not able to disprove Anthony Downs (1957) famous dictum that 'parties formulate policies in order to win elections, rather than win elections in order to formulate policies'. More concretely, he is solely focusing on the competitive struggle for political power. Basically the existence of a 'certain natural degree of flexibility' when it comes to bridging political principles and tactical considerations during election time is a well-known phenomenon and not an exclusive feature of Pakistan's politics. However, it is especially true in the case of Imran Khan and the PTI who are trying to come across as the national guardian of political morality and its defender of norms and values in Pakistan, which was turned into a ruinous kleptocracy by the established political parties, foremost under the Presidency of Asif Ali Zardari.

This means we are not talking about petit sanctimonious behaviour to impress potential voters; we are talking about a campaign strategy which is taking the risk of not being able to fulfil electoral pledges. This goes far beyond any 'socially accepted' electoral hypocrisy and does definitely not constitute any change in Pakistan's political landscape. Hence, Khan is promising a groundbreaking revolution but he will most likely not be able to deliver anything that has the potential to differentiate itself from business as usual in Pakistan's tumultuous political landscape.

To conclude, Khan is a stereotypical political populist. He has charisma, understands the grievances and concerns of the Pakistanis, and tells his audience what they want to hear. He bashes on the established two main political parties and capitalises on anti-US feelings. PTI's vague and ambiguous policy proposals have the advantage of being able to make promises that will often prove difficult to implement, and to put forward contradictory viewpoints whenever he can gain political benefits from it.

This all make him an attractive alternative to the established political order that have lost much of their political credibility. But, it remains to be seen if Khan's short-sighted strategy to make quick gains allow to establish himself in the political system in the long run. If he manages to achieve an electoral success on May 11th, it may well be a Pyrrhic victory for both Khan and Pakistan's democracy.

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