

Would military take over once again in Pakistan? - Imran Khan and his 'Azadi [Liberation] March'

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Opposition leader and chief of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI), Imran Khan, launched his long march on August 14 to protest against what he considers rigging in general elections held last year. He is demanding that Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif should resign to pave the way for fresh elections. PTI's *Azadi* March (Liberation March) has caught the imagination of many in Pakistan, however the expectation that 100,000 motorcyclists leading the "million march" has not been realized. It failed miserably.

A few thousand marchers who left Lahore riding expensive cars from the residence of Imran Khan at Zaman Park, spent six hours on The Mall. It was a tactic to give an impression that people would not let them move forward.

The *Azadi* March is being complimented by an '*Inqilab* March' (Revolution March) by Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT). The government allowed the 'Revolution March', led by religious scholar and chief of PAT, Tahir-ul- Qadri, only after initial bid to repress it so that people can not join it from Lahore. Tahir Qadri, a Canadian citizen, has talked about changing the system and replacing it with more progressive set up.

The PMLN government's strategy to arrest the workers at district-level and cordon off provincial capital Lahore and federal capital Islamabad with large containers worked well in containing the numbers of participants.

Awami Workers Party has termed the two marches as reactionary and appealed to the working class not to participate in the marches led by rich politicians and mullahs. Both marches have reached Islamabad separately at the time of writing these lines. The unity of the two was hit hard by the big ego of the both leaders, Imran Khan and Tahir Qadri, on the question of: "who would lead the rallies".

Meantime, Nawaz Sharif has been repeatedly asking: "why the march and what is our fault?" He asked the question in his long awaited nationally televised speech on August 12.

Imran Khan says that the May 2013 general elections were rigged and is demanding a new midterm election under a government of technocrats. He later took a U-turn on the issue of technocrats' interim government after the president of PTI, Javed Hashmi, objected and refused to be part of the long march.

The issue of rigged elections came a "little"--- 14 months--- late. During the period, Imran Khan formed provincial government in Khayber Pukhtoon Khawa province and PTI is still in power over there. He did not adopt the strategy adopted by India's Aam Admi Party (AAP) whereby AAP leader Arvind Kajriwal left the Delhi state government on principled grounds.

Imran Khan was at ease with the federal government to start negotiations with the religious fundamentalist Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). As was expected, the talks did not go very far and a military operation was launched in June this year.

Initially, Imran Khan raised questions about the launch of military operation; his main objection being that why was he not consulted? Later, it turned out that the interior minister Choudry Nisar of ruling Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) was not consulted either. However, Imran Khan endorsed the military operation reluctantly and offered all help from his PTI government in KPK.

Within a month of launching the military operation, Imran Khan announced in a public meeting that he would march to Islamabad to finish off the rule of a "corrupt royalist" government. This announcement puzzled many commentators about the real motives of the long march.

It seems that Imran Khan who always tried to please the religious fundamentalists is again on the same path. A military operation could not be opposed publically, so he started a campaign against PMLN on the issue of election rigging, thus giving a tough time internally.

It is worth noting that during the general elections of 2013, most of the political parties like Pakistan People's Party, Awami National Party, and Mutihida Qaumi Movement were attacked by suicide bombers. They were not allowed to canvass publically by the fanatics. Both PMLN and PTI were not attacked by the fanatics for a single time. The reason was simple: both were seen as sympathetic towards the extreme religious groups including TTP.

Now both the conservative right wing parties are at loggerheads on the issue of power sharing. Both are in power, one in Centre and other in KPK province. Imran Khan wants the power at the Centre just after 14 months of the general elections. It seems an untimely decision as the PMLN has not lost all the popularity it enjoyed after PPP failed miserably during its five years term 2008-13.

Earlier another stalwart Muslim religious scholar Tahir Qadri had announced that his long waited "Inqilab" (Revolution) march would also be launched on August 14. Tahir Qadri's Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) is a religious political grouping active in the field of education and health and has a worldwide network of charity.

Both PAT and PTI have presented the most serious challenge that PMLN government is facing during their last one and half year of power.

Both are using revolutionary vocabulary to attract the masses. *Azadi* (independence) and *Inqilab* (revolution) marches are an insult to the real meaning of the two slogans. Imran Khan's PTI is supported and joined by the rich of Pakistan. It has become a right wing conservative new capitalist party while the Pakistan Awami Tehreek is a counter revolutionary party using revolutionary slogans. The PAT wants religion as dominant political force to guide the state.

They are gaining popularity because the Nawaz government has failed miserably to do anything for the uplift of the poor. There is a fast implementation of neo liberal agenda. To fulfill the conditionality of IMF for a USD 5 billion loan, the PMLN government's first act was to double the prices of electricity. It has also raised the prices of gas and other services for the same purposes.

A wholesale privatization of major public sector institutions has been announced despite massive opposition by several political parties and trade unions. Pakistan economy got little breathing space after the massive loans by the IMF besides the Saudi "gift" worth USD 1.5 billion.

Still Imran Khan's *Azadi* March is badly timed and the reasons presented by PTI leadership are not convincing for many. If it was just against the rigging of general elections, why it took fourteen

months for Imran Khan to announce an all out agitation?

Issue of election rigging is just a cover for Imran Khan. The real motives include the covert opposition to military operation, PMLN insistence to try General Musharaf and to cover the worst performance of PTI's KPK provincial government during the last 14 months.

The real question is: what would happen after the *dharna* (sit in) in Islamabad? The PMLN has made it clear that it will not give in. The Lahore High Court has declared these *dharnas* as unconstitutional. Imran Khan says that he would not come back without securing resignation of the prime minister. Tall claims have been made by both Imran Khan and Tahir Qadri. It seems that both are expecting some sort of military intervention. There is no other way to remove this government. However, Military intervention seems unlikely at present:

1. The two marches lack support in Sindh and Balochistan. That is an important factor why military might not take power in hand.
2. There is a total opposition at least in words by all major political parties except the PTI, of course. Even PTI leadership is paying lip-service to the cause of democracy.
3. There is still a vibrant lawyers' movement and an activist judiciary that is totally against military take over and they are not going to validate the military coup as was the case during the past when judiciary would endorse every khaki coup.
4. Another reason would be the opposition of the social movements, organizations and peasant and trade unions to such a takeover.
5. The present civilian government is not unpopular to an extent where any military coup would be accepted and justified.

Imran Khan is in haste. His 'rigging formula' is not being accepted by the majority it seems. His appeal is still confined mainly to Punjab. He has used very dogmatic language. He has made a bad case against the PMLN government. It could have been another situation if he had launched his campaign in a year or so.

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