

Pakistan, corruption, military: The Continuity of Imran Khan

Thursday 9 August 2018, by [AHSAN Kamil](#) (Date first published: 8 August 2018).

Corruption and military might have long dominated Pakistani politics. And Imran Khan's reform-minded rhetoric is unlikely to change that.

Some time ago, a Pakistani political party gained at the expense of the Pakistan Army. The year was 1971. The army had suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of India in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). With the Army disgraced, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) — a self-proclaimed Islamic socialist party — rose to power. The state news channel telecast the surrender of Pakistani forces, further embarrassing the army.

Six years later, the PPP's leader, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, called an early election. It was a contest that the PPP was guaranteed to win — less because of the party itself, which had lost support among the urban middle and business classes (as well as leftists purged from the party), and more because the opposition seemed to pose no threat.

Bhutto was right. The PPP did win an absolute majority in the National Assembly. But he had still miscalculated. The opposition parties — a motley group of Islamist, pro-business, and Baloch nationalist forces — had allied and run under the banner of the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA), calling for an end to anti-Islamic practices and corruption. Soon after the results were announced, the PNA alleged mass rigging, rejected the elections, and called for a new contest under the supervision of the army. Protests swept the country, and the army — after some nudging from the United States — carried out another of its seamless coups.

Thus began Pakistan's longest period of military rule, which saw General Zia-ul-Haq preside over the country until his assassination in 1988. The generals were back in the saddle. In 1979, Bhutto was executed under a murder charge that, to this day, remains suspicious.

Of course, that's not the version I learned in school as a child in Pakistan, or at home. According to my middle-school history textbooks, we won the 1971 war, and Indian malfeasance and treachery was to blame for the sad loss of East Pakistan. The truth? The Pakistan Army committed genocide in East Pakistan which was firmly in the grip of secession. And on the battlefield, Pakistan lost to India so utterly and completely it can perhaps best be understood by analogy with India's famous rout of Pakistan by six wickets in the 2003 Cricket World Cup.

I write this over a week after the centrist party, Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI), captured the most parliamentary seats — though not an absolute majority — in the country's July 25 general elections. The PTI — led by the charismatic former cricketer and constant tabloid news-maker Imran Khan, who is set to be the next prime minister — is now making overtures to independent candidates to avoid entering a coalition with the other two major parties: the aforementioned PPP, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's grandson, and the PML-N, led (temporarily, it is assumed) by the brother of the imprisoned ex-prime minister, Nawaz Sharif.

I harken to the Pakistan of the 1970s not necessarily because of any direct analogs, but to note that in Pakistan, power truly lies with the Army. That the Army shifted from public pariahs to leaders of the country in less than a decade — and survived to lie about the tale decades later, in the second successful transfer of power from one civilian government to another — is a testament to the much-pilloried idea of the “deep state,” evidence that the “establishment” in Pakistan is very much something tangible.

Pakistani electoral politics is a little like the history I was taught as a child: if you make the army as scarce as possible in the story you’re telling, you might actually get people a bit excited. Following Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s execution in 1979, the New York Times said that his “ascent was swift and so was his fall.” Brought to prominence due to his closeness with one military dictator, Bhutto was brought down by another.

Following the death of Zia in 1988, the military allowed a “free and fair election.” Still, fearing an outright victory for the PPP under the leadership of Bhutto’s daughter, Benazir Bhutto, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) — essentially another arm of the army — supported a right-wing alliance dominated by the PML-N, led by the Zia loyalist Nawaz Sharif. This support provided something lasting to the PML-N: a stable base in Punjab, the most populous and arguably most important province in Pakistan.

That is, of course, until now. PTI has been in the army’s good graces for some time, and Sharif has long since fallen out. Formed in 1996, PTI vigorously protested the 2013 elections that PML-N won. The elections a couple weeks ago, however, had a substantial security presence at polling stations. The embattled Election Commission delayed announcing the results for two days. Every major party cried rigging. An EU monitoring team said, variously, that the general election featured a “lack of equality” [1] and that it was “satisfactory” and “better than 2013.” [2] PTI’s Asad Umar, most likely the country’s next finance minister, claimed that those complaining of rigging were “sympathetic to India.” Meanwhile, everyone has more or less accepted PTI’s victory. The question of whether PML-N will be allowed to rule Punjab looms — but every day, it seems more like a question for another day.

It is less a curious election than it is a curious time to be Pakistani. Much of the urban middle class supports PTI, and has supported it for some time, particularly for its anticorruption platform.

The Sharif family — featured in the Panama Papers for its links with offshore companies, its widespread patronage network, and its alleged skimming of funds — cannot credibly plead innocence. What they can contend, though, is that where corruption is concerned, their rule merely continued one of the longest-standing trends in Pakistan. After all, the president before the 2013 election was PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari, who was derided as “Mr. 10 percent” for his reputation of siphoning 10 percent of kickbacks on all arrangements. Twice he was imprisoned on charges of money laundering and misuse of public funds, with reports detailing amounts in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

What is one to make of all this? For my entire life, I have known Pakistan to be the most cynical of places: exchanging pleasantries where I grew up consisted not of conversations about the weather but inventories of people who could never be trusted, with the implication that, to be honest, there really wasn’t anybody in the honest column. Perhaps not even ourselves.

That is perhaps why progressives and leftists in Pakistan have been far more measured about PTI than their more moderate friends and family. Corruption as bogeyman is a tired tune, for if you’re elite in any way you’ve likely benefitted at some point from favors or inside jobs, and it is naïve to assume the entrenched patronage networks, even those in PTI itself, will magically disappear. In this

context, PTI — behind the garb of Khan, whose famous good looks and marriages have been the subject of gossip for over two decades and whose slogan of a *Naya* (New) *Pakistan!* has captivated the nation — begins to look just like more of the same.

What all this depends on is what you prioritize: what you are willing to put up with, what you are willing to confront. No, Imran Khan is not akin to Donald Trump or Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, both of whom have consistently promoted radical right-wing policies. Unlike India's Narendra Modi, Khan does not have mass killings to his name.

But like Modi, he has successfully run on a hyper-nationalist, anti-corruption platform. And despite the moniker "Taliban Khan," if Khan seems sympathetic to religious extremists it's because he simultaneously panders to Islamists [3] and condemns the treatment of minorities [4] — one of the oldest tricks in the book. Even Khan's support for a regressive blasphemy law — which has led to sixty-nine vigilante killings since 1990 — seems old hat given how rarely previous politicians have confronted it.

And therein lies the rub: when a party portrays itself as advancing a new vision yet largely fills its ranks with PPP and PML-N defectors, how different can we expect it to be?

Soon after the election, I, like much of the Pakistani electorate, it seemed, was venting on Facebook. A former professor of mine countered my opinion of Khan's closeness with the Pakistan Army by informing me that the "people of this country respect the Army."

I didn't disagree. I am, after all, the son of a deceased major in the Pakistan Army Aviation and have often been surrounded by extended family that responded to my words either with stoic silence or a cynical harangue about young people. But I do demand: why not ask all the Baloch separatists, Pashtun nationalists, religious minorities, or families of all those killed by militant organizations the army has covertly supported to maintain a high fever-pitch of tensions with India — if they too *respect* the army?

My mother tells me to be more optimistic. She repeats the PTI supporters' most convincing line of argumentation: "We've tried everyone else. Why not him?" To be fair, as I write this, she has good reason for some optimism. Khan's first speech after the election was a welcome surprise [5]. He praised the people of Balochistan who voted despite terrorist attacks. He decried the terrorism that has plagued the country. He called for a "humanitarian state, where we take responsibility of our weaker classes." He talked about hunger, literacy, poverty, protecting women and minorities, unemployment, the economic crisis, the plight of the Kashmiri people, diplomacy and trade with India, and even, shockingly, open borders with Afghanistan. What could I possibly complain about?

Skepticism of his sincerity, as it turns out. Khan cannot simply wipe his slate clean. His close ties to the military have often manifested themselves in rhetoric that those in opposition have ties with India [6], and have undoubtedly contributed to the pattern of harassing journalists and critics of the military, as well as the abduction and disappearance of ordinary citizens. And though Khan has spoken out on missing persons multiple times, all too often he conveniently sidesteps addressing the role of the army.

Khan also promotes himself as pro-poor, just as the PML-N has done in past elections. How much of Khan's rhetoric is performative? Can he deliver? Time will tell — but the first litmus tests will be his dealings with the leading opposition party, and his dealings with dissent going forward. Does PTI respect democratic mandates enough to concede Punjab to the PML-N? And if he falls out of favor with the military, as historical precedent tells us he very well might, what then?

The day of the election, I was pondering this uncertainty, worrying about heady things like historical inevitability. Pacing a room so far away from home, I tried to comfort myself. I told myself that sameness meant my hysteria was no more justified than my pessimism. Then I got a message from a friend who, like me, was no PTI supporter. Translated to English, her message read: "Vicious cycle. Make one. Make them fall. Make another. Repeat."

Kamil Ahsan

P.S.

- Jacobin, 08.08.2018:
<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/08/pakistan-election-imran-khan-army>
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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/pakistan-elections-2018-latest-updates-180724055555410.html>
- [2] <https://www.dawn.com/news/1422911>
- [3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fglobal-opinions%2fwp%2f2018%2f08%2f02%2fwhos-afraid-of-imran-khans-pakistan-almost-everyone%2f%3fnoredirect%3don%26utm_term%3d.53da1ecd8510&noredirect=on&utm_term=.024bfca6523e
- [4] <https://dailytimes.com.pk/276191/naya-pakistan-and-the-temptations-of-authoritarianism/>
- [5] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/imran-khan-speech-full-180726124850706.html>
- [6] https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fglobal-opinions%2fwp%2f2018%2f08%2f02%2fwhos-afraid-of-imran-khans-pakistan-almost-everyone%2f%3fnoredirect%3don%26utm_term%3d.bb489ee89f47&noredirect=on&utm_term=.8aab8e315ab1