

Electing the Cornered Tiger: Imran Khan in Pakistani Politics

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Tariq Ali, whilst having a lunch in Knightsbridge with the Pakistani cricket colossus, Imran Khan, suggested that retirement should not be too problematic for him. (Khan had seemed gloomy, deep in thought about post-retirement prospects at the age of 30.) Consider, [posed Ali](#), film, or at the very least funding for a film institute. "You could be an enabler or you could act. A film with you in it would be a surefire hit and help fund more avant-garde productions."

Khan did not bite. He preferred politics, an area which has its fair share of thespians staking their wares. His stewardship of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Movement for Justice) has been in years in the making, a gradual yet relentless push into the limelight since its establishment in 1996. When first assuming the mantle of politician, he was a clear target of ridicule.

"Since he foreswore sport and sex for politics and piety about a decade ago," went [The Guardian](#) in August 2005, "Khan's form has been highly erratic." After his divorce from Jemima Goldsmith after a nine-year marriage "he has edged his views ever closer to the fringes of Pakistan's radicalised political spectrum."

This Pakistani election is being seen as epochal and singular. As with others, there have been deaths, disruptions and accusations, the cries of an ill patient. Some 31 perished in a suicide bombing attack in Balochistan, predictably against a polling centre. But as the night chugged and throbbed with anticipation, the PTI began to lead at the half-way mark of counting with 113 seats.

As is seemingly genetic in the nature of Pakistani elections, slow counting and technical hurdles have supplied the disgruntled grounds for grievance. Allegations of rigging have been met by promises from Khan to investigate them. In the same breath, he has essentially put them to one side, the lamentations of the rightfully defeated. "If you think there has been rigging, we will assist you in the investigation if you have any doubts. We will stand by you. I feel that this election has been the fairest in Pakistan's history."

Despite his alluring sophistication (the ease with which this is described as "modern" has marked previous assessments of his bearing), those keen to see an enlightened leader gorged with the political principles of Western value stand to be baffled. Rafia Zakaria of Pakistan's *Dawn* newspaper [contends that](#) "Khan's ascent bodes poorly for Pakistani women", given his promise in making Pakistan an Islamic state and his rejection of "Western

feminism as an impediment to motherhood.”

In one sense, he is practical, keen on pursuing matters of governance rather than issues of ideology: Do not, for instance, [remove blasphemy laws](#) because doing so would release the lynch mobs. Those misusing such statutes would be punished. The orderly function of institutions is paramount.

He is far from keen to box the Taliban from diplomatic engagement and shackle the mullahs.

“For sixteen years,” [he explained](#) to Peter Osborne in an interview last year, the United States had “been trying to use [the military] to crush the Taliban movement and it has failed. And it will fail again.”

Sentiments of sympathy have been expressed for Afghanistan, a country with which he wishes to have open borders.

In a [speech in Bani Gala](#), Khan declared victory, claiming that he had been vested with “a mandate”. It was one focused on the decay of the Pakistani state, a rotten entity that would only be healed by the vision of Madina, “where widows and the poor were taken care of”. Vast disparities between the indigent and the wealthy had to be overcome. “A country is not recognised by the lifestyle of the rich, but by the lifestyle of the poor.”

There have been bread-and-butter promises served with a populist crust. Institutions will be held accountable in an effort to fire lagging trust; farmers and the business community will be assisted; tax revenue will be “safeguarded” (always comforting); youth employment shall be encouraged, and government expenditure will be reduced.

In terms of foreign policy, Khan’s views are a bit of a mash that is bound to excite and disconcert a range of foreign capitals. To the US, he has expressed a view that drone strikes will be prohibited. Conciliatory approaches will be sought with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. “Saudi Arabia has stood by us in our toughest times. We would like to be a reconciliatory state and help them resolve their inner tensions.” Then comes the India-Pakistan relationship, one characterised by the normality of strife and discord. “The blame game that whatever goes wrong in Pakistan is because of India and vice versa bring us back to square one.”

A lingering, if crippling wisdom suggests how careful Khan will have to be. He has been – and in an era that spawns the likes of Donald Trump, this should hardly be surprising – injudicious with his opponents, berating those supporting former prime minister Nawaz Sharif as “donkeys”. A coalition will probably have to be sought; the sagacious manner displayed by him whilst cricket captain may well have to apply.

Overseeing the process of politicking and any effort at reform will be Pakistan’s meddling army, that self-proclaimed agent of stability that has done its fair to ignore elected representatives when it wanted to. That particular institution, argues Hamid Hussain in the [Defence Journal](#) (Jul 31), “views itself as a doctor that needs to administer medicine to the sick patient from time to time for the good of the patient even if he does not like the taste of medicine.” The new leader will just have to be mindful such medicine doesn’t have the effect of finishing off a patient of such ill-health. For the moment, it seems, Khan is in the good books of Dr Military.

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