

“The Imperial Logic” of the Pakistani Left. Khan is “No Anti-imperialist Hero”

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Global Research, April 28, 2022

[Countercurrents](#)

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Pakistan has been rocked by demonstrations throughout the country since the ouster of former Prime Minister Imran Khan from power. This development has been a surprise not only to Khan’s detractors, but to Khan’s supporters as well. The size of these rallies has been astonishing. What they have also demonstrated is that the Pakistanis who have been outraged by recent political developments in the country cut across class lines as well as provincial ones. Khan’s party, PTI, has proven itself to be a real national political party that – to its credit – is fairly representative of all regions of the country. This is no small feat.



In the middle of these displays of support for Khan (or just revulsion of the political lot that got rid of him), there have been some among the Pakistani Left at pains to demonstrate that Khan is no “anti-imperialist hero.” This would not be such a major issue if this canard were not repeated almost like clockwork on a weekly basis, with some Pakistani leftist rehashing the same tired arguments. The neurotic obsession to prove to a ‘Western Left’ that Khan is not an anti-imperialist is beginning to seem utterly bizarre.

To my knowledge, Khan nor any prominent member of his party has ever even used the word ‘imperialism.’ It’s possible that he doesn’t even know the meaning, and certainly not the Marxist-Leninist understanding of the word.

What Khan can legitimately take credit for is being virtually alone within the political class to have consistently opposed the ‘War on Terror’ in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the invasions,

occupations, drone attacks, military operations in the tribal areas, etc. He can take credit for speaking about Palestine in a context where the Gulf countries – egged on by Washington and Tel Aviv of course – put immense pressure on Islamabad to ‘normalize’ relations with Israel. As even the well-known progressive intellectual Dr. Ayesha Siddiqi noted, the dominant view in the military top brass was to go along with ‘normalization,’ assuming the perks for Pakistani elites would be lucrative. To his credit, Khan resisted this.

Khan can be credited with speaking about the plight of Kashmiris in an incredibly powerful way. Kashmir solidarity activists throughout the world will readily admit how much Khan’s speech at the UN in 2019 assisted the work of getting this issue onto the global radar screen. He can also be credited with being the first Pakistani leader who in no uncertain terms stated that the future of Kashmir will be determined according to Kashmiri wishes, not according to “Pakistani sentiments.” If Kashmiris want to opt for independence (an option not included in the UN resolution which only gives them the option of joining India or Pakistan), it is their right to do so, according to Khan.

Khan has also spoken about collusion between elites of the Global North and the Global South, enabling the latter to pillage their countries and launder the money to the banks of the former.

Beyond that, Khan’s diplomatic maneuvering with regards to Iran, China, and Russia – is straightforward geopolitics. Pakistan is in Asia. These are significant countries in the region, two of which (Iran and Russia) have been historical adversaries. Improving relations with them is common sense, especially if something was to be gained, particularly in the area of energy, to help ameliorate the poor economic conditions of Pakistan.

In the latest crisis, Khan has insisted that Washington has been meddling into Pakistani affairs to achieve its desired political outcomes, i.e. the removal of Khan. This would not really be so shocking if it were true. The American national security state has not really forgiven Khan for effectively being proven right about both the immorality and counter-productiveness of a military solution in Afghanistan. More than any other factor, it has been the American military-intelligence apparatus which ensured that President Biden not develop any meaningful relationship with Khan. This general antagonism towards Khan had soured even more when Khan, as opposed to some generals who thought they could make some easy money, made it absolutely clear that no American base would be on Pakistani soil. And then, of course, came the visit to Russia.

Much of Khan’s rhetoric and actions have simply to do with what Khan perceived as sensible geopolitics from his vantage point. Of course, he could be wrong in some of these domains. But these have been his positions.

Regardless whether there was American interference in Pakistan this time around, a strong message against Western hegemonic designs in the Global South is constantly needed. Whether that makes you an anti-imperialist is another question.

And if anti-imperialism is seen as something which only anti-capitalist forces can engage in, then of course Khan is no anti-imperialist.

However, by holding this criterion for being an anti-imperialist, the Pakistani Left should then realize that it is dismissing the anti-imperialist credentials of many individuals and movements which were not necessarily anti-capitalist, yet still considered – in their own

modest ways – as anti-imperialist.

Individuals like Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran or Juan Peron of Argentina were not anti-capitalists, yet certainly have been assumed to be anti-imperialists. Leftist forces in both the Palestinian occupied territories as well in Lebanon open ally with Islamist resistance forces (such as Hezbollah) because, despite not being anti-capitalist, they do deem the latter as anti-imperialist forces.

Indeed, there is nothing complicated about Khan's positions on these matters. They are the same ones he's held for the past twenty years. It boils down to asserting Pakistani sovereignty against a dominant world power which has adversely interfered in Pakistan since the days of the Cold War.

The far more important problem is not that of semantics, i.e. is anti-imperialism the proper word or not to describe Khan's political posturing towards the US? It is the curious and obsessive endeavor of the Pakistani Left to ensure no one in the Global Left dare think anything potentially positive about Khan. This is why the otherwise incredibly intelligent and gifted Pakistani Left is engaged in very childish straw man arguments against this ostensible "anti-imperialist hero" – a term I've only seen for the first time in the latest musings of the Pakistani Left.

The real question is: with massive numbers of Pakistanis out on the street, would it not be more useful at this point for the Pakistani Left to engage with these people who have real grievances, to assist in the development of a more radical understanding of the politics of resistance? Would that not be a far more useful exercise than the Pakistani Left outdoing each other on twitter in generating hip one-liners about the stupidity of these Pakistanis?

In addition, the fanatical focus on what the Western Left thinks is particularly odd. The Western Left, with no disrespect intended, can barely make a dent in their own societies. Does the Pakistani Left seriously believe that the Western Left is that important to what is going on in our country? Or is this sadly a case of a bruised ego of the former because the latter is hearing about vast mobilizations in which the Pakistani Left is conspicuously absent?

Is the fact that a few Western leftists tweeted something positive about Khan really such an important issue for the Pakistani Left, considering what's going on in the country? And shouldn't the message to the Western Left be the simple, old-fashioned one: their task is to oppose any meddling by their powerful countries into the affairs of the Global South. Period.

The Pakistani Left, strangely enough, is behaving like an imperial Godfather itself. It is policing what any self-proclaimed leftist in any attic in Kansas is saying about Khan, throwing tantrums when someone exercises their free speech in the wrong way. And sadly, the Pakistani diaspora Left, especially in the US, behaves like a regiment of the Pakistani Left, taking their marching orders and adhering strictly to them. They recycle the same tweets of no more than 5-10 Pakistani leftists in the 'Green Zone.'

Tragically, it seems like we're dealing with multiple cults and narratives with Stalinist discipline these days. Khan seems to have good company in this regard.

And then we are supposed to believe that these diaspora Pakistani leftists actually care about people's voices of resistance, of mass movements in Pakistan and the Global South.

These diaspora leftists have failed miserably this time around. The demonstrations did not obtain the stamp of approval from the Pakistani Left, so our comrades in the US could then shut their eyes to some of the biggest mobilizations in the history of Pakistan.

Pakistanis seem to have demonstrated the 'wrong agency' and would only be heard by the Pakistani (diaspora) Left if their 'agency' happened under the banner of the Communist International and its gazillion local sectarian variants.

Hence, everything works out conveniently for everyone. Diaspora leftists remain in a comfort zone of speaking to leftists in Pakistan, the two communicating in their own privileged specialized lingo, and none of them having to get their hands dirty by actually engaging and understanding (with, God forbid, empathy!) the massive mobilizations taking place.

So far, the extent of the 'engagement' (if we can call it that) of the Pakistani Left in the country and in the diaspora has been the following: all of these protestors are all hyper-nationalist, urban, middle class, buffoonish youth, etc. Can you imagine if this was the way any Left worth its salt engaged and behaved in any other country?

How fascinating it is that the Pakistani Left is obsessed with what a few irrelevant Western leftists think of Khan, but is completely indifferent and oblivious to what Kashmiris or Palestinians – some of the most oppressed peoples on the planet – think of him? Or how about all of those Pashtuns that the Pakistani Left told us despised Khan? It turns out that if there is one province where Khan has overwhelming support, it is that of the Pashtuns. Go figure.

It seems like Pakistanis, Kashmiris, Palestinians, Pashtuns, etc. only matter if they are willing to submit to the Party Line of the Pakistani Left. If not, to hell with them. They are seen as hopelessly brainwashed with a 'false consciousness' from which only the Pakistani Left can liberate them, sometimes with the assistance of NATO or the Pakistani military.

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