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Pakistan

Anti-imperialism of fools: The case of Imran Khan

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Ever since Imran Khan's dismissal as Pakistan's prime minister, through a vote of no-confidence in April 2022, a section of leftist media outlets in the West have been busy unearthing a CIA plot behind the 'regime change' in Pakistan.

Of late, *Intercept* has joined the fray. In less than two months, Intercept issued two 'exclusive' reports. On 9 August it was 'revealed' that the USA maneuvered to topple Khan. [1] On Sept 17, another juicy story was broken with a 'progressive' twist: Washington helped Pakistan get an IMF bailout on the condition of secretly supplying weapons to Ukraine. The latter *Intercept* report again linked Khan's ouster with Empire's meddling in Pakistani politics. [2]

Seizing upon *Intercept's* 9 August expose, *Jacobin's* staffer Branko Marcetic penned an emotional essay anchored in an anti-imperial outrage the American left most likely expressed last time during the Vietnam days. [3] Marcetic placed Khan in this essay next to Salvador Allende to indict the Great Satan for imperial machinations in the periphery countries.

Long before *Intercept* and *Jacobin*, *Democracy Now* a day after Khan's removal, flagged the possibility of White House intrigues to bring change in Islamabad, the scenic capital of Pakistan perched in the Himalayan foothills. The *Democracy Now* segment on Khan's removal featured Tariq Ali who strongly hinted at the US involvement. [4] Such conspiracy theories were in fact set in motion by Khan himself days before his removal. At a public rally, he waved a cypher sent home by Pakistani ambassador in Washington, reporting a meeting with a US diplomat. In this meeting, Donald Lu, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs, expressed displeasure over Khan's tacit support for Putin. Ironically, Putin received Khan precisely the day Russian invaded Ukraine.

While there have been counter-narratives absolving Washington of any unfair play in Khan's affair, the purpose of this article is neither to substantiate nor to deny the US role in Khan's dismissal (though I will return to the topic at the end of this essay). This article aims at deconstructing the above-mentioned efforts in radical Western media outlets to portray Khan as 'anti-imperial', on the one hand, and to demonstrate that the 'regime change' in Pakistan would have occurred regardless of US whims because the Pakistani generals wanted a 'regime change', on the other hand.

Before discussing Khan's imagined 'anti-imperialism', let it be clear that Khan's dismissal was evident to any keen observer of the Pakistani politics. Here is a proof: on 6 November 2021 *Daily Jeddoh*, posted an analysis that explicitly claimed Imran Khan would be removed from power. [5] *Jeddoh* (Struggle) is a Marxist online daily. [6] Below is a brief background to Khan's ouster from the corridors of power.

Khan launched his Pakistan Justice Movement (PTI) in 1997 banking on his cult-like status as a former cricket star. Cricket is the opiate of the masses in South Asia. He was flanked by retired military general Hamid Gul and ultra-right ideologues while the main discourse was anti-corruption. It is rumoured in Pakistan that Khan was launched in Pakistani politics to counter Benazir Bhutto. In 1999, General Musharraf imposed the fourth military dictatorship and Khan was quick to support Musharraf in the hope of becoming next prime minister. Khan was embarrassingly lacking popular base, hence, Gen Musharraf did not find him useful. Gen Musharraf in a tv interview acknowledged that the military had to rig elections to help Khan win his own constituency when general elections were held in 2002. The elections in Pakistan are conducted in the British fashion: constituency-wise and first-past-the-poll system.

Bitter and frustrated, Khan with a huge ego and a deep-seated narcissism, joined the opposition when a mass movement emerged against the Musharraf dictatorship in 2007. Benazir Bhutto (BB) was assassinated in December 2007. Fingers were pointed out at the Musharraf dictatorship for the suicide attack that claimed BB's life. Fresh

elections brought BB's centre-left party Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to power while her key rival Nawaz Sharif emerged as the key opposition leader. Until then, Pakistani politics was dominated by two political dynasties: Bhuttos and Sharifs.

The PPP was launched by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, BB's father, as an Islamic socialist project in 1967. When elections were held for the first time in the country, since its independence in 1947, Bhutto managed to win. As country's first elected prime minister he introduced (half-hearted) land reforms and a massive nationalization. Like most of his third world radical contemporaries, he was removed from power and sent to gallows in 1979 after General Zia overthrew him in 1977. To counter the PPP, the Zia dictatorship patronized Nawaz Sharif, an industrialist from the dominant province of Punjab. When Gen Zia's died in a plane crash in 1988, fresh elections were held. BB won the elections and triumphantly arrived at the Prime Minister secretariat.

However, all-powerful military maneuvered to remove her and heavily rigged the 1990 snap elections to bring Mr Sharif to power. From 1988 to 1999, BB and Sharif managed to come to power twice. Once in power, Sharif developed differences with the military but also managed to build himself a popular base in the Punjab province owing to some of his mega infrastructural projects such as motorways besides a lavish politics of patronage. Bhuttos hail from the Sindh province.

During the Musharraf dictatorship, Bhuttos and Sharifs joined hands finally for the restoration of civilian rule. While the general elections in 2008 brought the PPP to power (BB's widower, Asif Zardari became the president) at the federal level and Sindh, Sharif's party, the Muslim League, built the provincial government in Punjab with his younger brother, Shabaz Sharif, as the chief minister. In 2013, fresh elections were held and roles were reversed. The PPP emerged as the opposition (retaining its government in Sindh) while Sharif took oath as the prime minister for the third time.

Though Bhuttos and Sharifs have never really challenged the military hegemony yet neither of the dynasties is fully trusted by the military command. Hence, a malicious and machinating generals decided to build Khan as an alternative to Bhuttos and Sharifs 2011 onwards. Besides promising an end to corruption (mother of all Pakistan's problems, according to Khan's discourse which remains very popular in Pakistan), Khan also promised to end dynastic politics (more below on his actual political programme).

While the PPP discredited itself owing to poor performance 2008 to 2013, Sharif was able to gain popularity by 'reviving' economy (he lavishly borrowed from imperial donors) and introducing yet more mega infrastructural projects. Most importantly, he was able to eliminate huge electricity outages (by introducing disastrous climate projects including coal energy). The power cuts, sometimes extending to 12 hours a day, had eroded the previous PPP government's credibility and popularity. To replace Sharif with Khan, Sharif was disqualified from politics through Kangaroo courts besides rigging 2018 general elections. However, meantime, Khan was able to build a popular base among the urban middle classes including military's rank and file.

In particular, the professional classes (doctors, engineers, IT workers, academics, media men and women) finally found in Khan a long-awaited messiah. The critics in Pakistan call Khan's cult like following Youthias (a corruption of English word 'youth' but with anti-gay connotations) or 'fan club' of celebrity Khan. Pakistani diaspora in the West converted to Khanism like the fanatic Donald Trump followers in the USA. It seems some self-styled leftish diasporic Pakistanis have also jumped on this bandwagon.

Pakistan's mini-Trump

When Imran Khan assumed the title of prime minister, noted American comedian, Trevor Noah, in his broadcast 'The Daily Show' humorously drew parallels between Trump and Khan. [7] Khan's 'fan club' was incensed on the analogy oblivious to the fact that *International Viewpoint* had correctly labelled Khan as Pakistan's mini-Trump before 'The Daily Show'. [8]

Once in power, Khan and his PTI proved inefficient even from the viewpoint of its Khaki patrons. Economy nosedived. Inflation and debt spiral snowballed. Ironically, the anti-corruption discourse lost all the relevance since Transparency International (which in turn is very questionable organization, objectively serving imperial interests) ranked Pakistan as more corrupt than it was under Sharif.

It is important to foreground Khan's political and economic programme at this stage. While Bhuttos and Sharifs have driven forth neoliberal policies, Khan and his PTI offer the most militant neo-liberal agenda. Ultra neoliberalism economically and social conservatism (with a strong touch of religion) define his politics. Conservatism in Pakistan is not complete without incorporating highly toxic misogyny. An example: Khan repeatedly ridiculed Bilawal Bhutto (BB's son and PPP's present CEO) for being 'womanly'. "One can not say whether Bilawal is a He or a She", he would tell the large rallies of his supporters. The rape, he thought, was women's own fault since they dressed provocatively. The more he lost popularity as the prime minister, the rigorous became the exploitation of religion. He tried to cast himself as the crusader against growing Islamophobia in the West. Ridiculed as 'Taliban Khan' by his critics, he declared ben-Laden a 'martyr' and glorified the Taliban despite unspeakable barbarities they were committing in neighbouring Afghanistan.

Most importantly, he returned to the IMF for yet another bailout package but simply refused to address the two fundamental problems afflicting Pakistani economy: foreign debt and the military budget. Owing to foreign debt, Pakistan is fast becoming another Sri Lanka. Bankruptcy is around the corner. Ironically, to postpone bankruptcy caused by foreign debt, the managers of Pakistani state resort to more loans. Khan did exactly the same. It is obvious to any elementary student of Pakistani economy that economic revival is impossible unless Pakistan refuses to shed imperial loans. Intercept's newly-found anti-imperial hero ruthlessly incurred global debt as country's prime minister.

Next big drain on Pakistani economy is the military budget devouring 30 to 40 percent of the federal budget. The Khan government kept on increasing the military budget at a time when economic growth went negative, second time in country's 75-year long history.

As millions more fell below the scary line of poverty, Khan was busy conspiring with a section of military command (notably General Faiz Hameed, heading the Inter Services Intelligence) to consolidate his grip on power through appointments of cronies on key military positions. The stronger faction in the military edged Khan and his crony-military men out with the help of Sharifs and Bhuttos. They all connived because their interests converged.

Meantime, his rule was proving indeed authoritarian. Even when the media was highly supportive, left-over critical voices were silenced. Disappearances of political activists and their torture reached new heights. Among the victims included Ali Wazir, only Marxist in the National Assembly. The five-year term of the parliament expired last August. Ali Wazir spent three of the five years behind the bar. He justifiably voted in favour of no-confidence motion against Khan in April 2022. Workers demonstrations were ruthlessly attacked. In one instance, expired tear gas was fired on a peasant demonstration in Lahore. Khan's interior minister mockingly defended the inhuman act.

Once in opposition, Khan began to criticize top military generals. The coalition government consisting of Bhuttos and Sharifs (Sharif's younger brother Shahbaz Sharif became the prime minister, Bilawal bagged the slot of foreign minister) proved more incapable than that of Khan's outgoing regime. The price hike doubled in one year. The growing unpopularity of Sharifs helped revive Khan's popularity. Miscalculating his support in the military

top-echelons and urban middle classes, his party synchronized attacks on military installations on May 9, earlier this year, to agitate against Khan's arrest. This adventurism provided military with a pretext to crackdown on the PTI. Presently, Khan himself is in prison while over four thousand PTI activists and leaders have also been imprisoned. Fresh elections by law should have been held November. However, the Election Commission has postponed the process till January on phony pretexts. Khan and his PTI are least likely to win the next election. The way the PTI 'won' the 2018 election, it will lose at the next polling day in the similar fashion. The PTI since Khan's arrest is positioning itself as anti-military and projecting Khan as anti-establishment. Is Imran Khan anti-military establishment?

Khan's 'anti-establishment and anti-imperialism'

The military in Pakistan has built itself a social base (which shrinks and expands periodically) with an ideological super-structure. The ideological planks that help sustain this super-structure consist of anti-India paranoia, Islam (perpetually threatened by the Christian West and Jewish Israel), and a 'fifth column' consisting of ethnic minorities (particularly Baluch and Pashtoons).

Nota bene: the Pakistan military is numerically and politically dominated by the Punjab province, the largest of four major ethnicities. Like national chauvinisms in rest of the world, Pakistani chauvinism, with the central aim of justifying phenomenal military budgets propelling the country to bankruptcy, pivots around fantastic conspiracy theories.

Imran Khan while in power proved himself the most rabidly anti-India politician. He turned the exploitation of religion into an art. Though he was not in control of anything substantial (military was/is) yet his stint in power undermined whatever democratic development had occurred in the country since Gen Musharraf's exit. Certain instable but substantial gains were made to establish civilian supremacy in relation to military. With Khan at the helm, Pakistan embraced what many in the country called 'hybrid regime': a civilian façade whereby military steers in disguise. Even when in opposition ever since April 2022, Khan or his party has not questioned either the military budget and the associated privileges that accrue to top brass or the ideological super-structure.

The PTI remains ultra-neoliberal, anti-women, anti-working class, conservative project that counts on the support of rightwing middle classes. Discursively, like Trumpism, it thrives on the victimhood of the oppressors. It is a politics of anti-politics. Consequently, Khan's anti-imperialism is as hollow as his anti-establishment. He flaunted his trip to White House, when Trump was inhibiting it, as a big success. Once the Biden administration replaced the Trump gang, Khan was given a cold shoulder. This became a public embarrassment for Khan. Not merely every foreign correspondent interviewing him, local media(wo)men would also question him about President Biden not receiving his phone calls. Beyond such symbolisms, it is his politics that deserve sober analysis by anybody seriously engaged in anti-imperialism.

Long before Intercept et al pouched up Khan in their list of anti-imperialists, the left in Pakistan faced a similar situation post 9/11. On the one hand, there were certain Trotskyist trends in Latin America and Europe urging the Pakistani left to support the Taliban, on the hand, the global corporate media were drawing irritating analogies between Che and ben Laden.

The left in Pakistan proved principled and nuanced post 9/11. Despite many mutual ideological and political differences, none of the organized groups lent support to the Taliban. The left opposed the Taliban as well as the US occupation. Time vindicated this principled position even if the left, owing to its marginality, could not play any

Anti-imperialism of fools: The case of Imran Khan

decisive role in the outcome. Likewise, the left developed no illusion either in ben Laden or Khan later on. At the time, this author penned an op-ed for a Pakistani broadsheet. It is copied in entirety below for its contemporary relevance even beyond Pakistan:

The dangerously beautiful Che Guevara is trivialized when some myopic columnist compares him to Osama bin Laden. Not because Che's cap is more fascinating than bin Laden's turban. The symbol of respectability in many Asian and African societies, a turban is as fascinating as a cap, hat or whatever one wears in different cultures. Capitalism sells images, and it is the corporate media that identifies a turban, beard or the Osama-brand fundamentalism with Islam. No, it is not the headwear or beard that trivialises Che when he is compared with Osama. It is Osama's quasi anti-imperialism that is far removed from that of Che.

Guevara's anti-imperialism stands for "as anti-imperialism should" national liberation, women's emancipation, democratisation, political and economic empowerment, respect for the religious minorities, self-determination for oppressed nationalities. Anti-imperialism is freedom, for all oppressed, from all oppression.

In contrast, an Osama bin Laden or Ayatollah Khomeini for that matter offer an anti-imperialism that does not tolerate these values. Theirs is an anti-imperialism that chokes minorities and strangles small nationalities.

Anti-imperialism represents liberation. One cannot be a liberator and an oppressor at the same time. The anti-imperialism that upholds Osama as its poster boy does not solve this contradiction. We have seen this anti-imperialism in action in Pakistan's neighbourhood, exemplified by Iran, or Afghanistan under the Taliban where it was reduced to burqa and massacre of minorities. Al-Qaeda is the non-state portrayal of this brand of anti-imperialism: bombings, kidnappings, hijackings.

The anti-imperialism currently on display in the Muslim world is symbol rather than substance, signifying a new phase in the relations between two estranged lovers, fundamentalism and imperialism. It symbolises the outcome of the process run by imperialism in collaboration with fundamentalism, to eliminate genuine anti-imperialism in the Muslim world.

In the Muslim world, it used to be radical nationalists, socialists and communists "until they were eliminated" who epitomised anti-imperialism. Nasser of Egypt, Saekarno of Indonesia, Mossadeq of Iran and Kassem of Iraq, PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and Bhutto of Pakistan: all these names embodied anti-imperialism in the Muslim world for four decades.

These towering personalities of the Muslim world did not fall from the skies. They were products of a radicalised period. Indonesia had the largest communist party (PKI) outside the then communist world. With PKI backing him, Saekarno dared host the Bandung Conference. Kassem in Iraq opted out of the Baghdad Pact because he knew the Iraqi Communist Party, the largest communist party in Arab world, was with him. Mossadeq dared nationalise oil, certain of the support of Iran's most organised party, one of its largest (Tudah). Having humbled pro-US military dictator Ayub Khan, the Pakistani masses voted the 'socialist' Bhutto to power. It was this confidence that enabled Bhutto to run a relatively independent foreign policy, introduce land reforms and nationalisation.

This cream of the crop of the Muslim world, in a polarised cold war era, endangered the structures that imperialism had carefully built and ruthlessly maintained. This secular nationalist leadership and its communist backers had to be eliminated.

Mossadeq met a bloody end in 1953. The CIA removed this Iranian aristocrat, a direct descendant of Qajar dynasty, in collaboration with Iranian religious elements. The CIA spent five million dollars to help the pro-West mullahs rent a mob, and restored the Shah of Iran to the throne. Tudah was silenced, sidelined.

Indonesia and Iraq underwent bloodbaths almost simultaneously. A military-mullah-CIA troika massacred a million people in Indonesia, with lists provided by the CIA. Soldiers in collaboration with young Nahdlatul Ulema volunteers unleashed a 'jihad' against 'red devils' across the archipelago. In Iraq, the Baath party did the dirty work (in 1963, and then 1967-68), since the religious elements commanded almost no support in a country striving for a socialist revolution. A decade later, an example was made out of Bhutto. A khaki-green mullah-military alliance, backed of course by the CIA, sent him to the gallows. Meanwhile, Anwar Sadaat effectively rolled back the Nasser-era process in Egypt by granting full freedom to the Muslim brotherhood and Islamic jihad.

The case of Afghanistan is too fresh for memory to need much jogging: Osama was brought from Saudi Arabia to oust Dr Najib's secular government. In all these cases, there is a clear connivance between fundamentalism and imperialism. With radical nationalist leaders dead and communist or socialist parties eliminated, the political arena was wide open for the neo-anti imperialists: Imam Khomeini, Osama bin Laden, Mulla Muhammad Omar and the Qazi-Fazal duo .

And what does this quasi anti-imperialist crop have on offer: occupation of a US embassy, an attack on the World Trade Centre, blasts in Madrid and elsewhere, the razing of Buddha's statues. [9] These acts of 'anti-imperialism' might cause a temporary headache for the residents of White House and Empire's satraps in London, Paris and Berlin. But this headache is nothing compared to the frustration of the basileus in Washington caused by Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, Mossadeq's nationalisation of oil, Saekarno's Bandung summit or Bhutto's nuclear policy. Incidentally, this is true not just for the Muslim world. Castro, Dr Allende, Sandinistas, and now Hugo Chavez in Latin America caused similar disappointments.

An anti-imperialism that does not threaten to nationalise oil (Osama declares that oil is an asset owned by Arabs but opposes its common ownership), stand for land distribution or allow the working classes to organise trade unions – such anti-imperialism does not bother Empire. It is an anti-imperialism based on the repression of women, religious minorities, small nationalities, trade unions, peasant organisations, and political parties. Thus it actually performs a function imperialism wants: repression of the masses.

It is countries that oppress their masses and lack trade unions and workers' parties that best suit multinationals. The anti-imperialism of these religious forces thus actually serves imperialism in the current global scenario. It is the anti-imperialism of fools.

Acknowledging the huge differences between the politics of al-Qaida and the PTI steerheaded by Khan, the purpose of reproducing the above text was to contextualize the debate on Khan's imagined anti-imperialism.

The politics of Khan have not benefitted anti-imperialism by an iota in Pakistan. On the contrary, his politics have gravely undermined, for the years to come, the gains made by the women's movement, democracy activism and the trade union struggles. Domestically, he sided with military by facilitating the hybrid regime. Globally, he sided with the IMF by providing practical and ideological support through his neoliberal policies. Military and the IMF are the key instruments to facilitate imperial interventions in Pakistan.

Anti-imperialism of fools: The case of Imran Khan

It is possible that the Biden administration actively or passively sanctioned Khan's removal from power. Even if the White House or Foggy Bottom effected a 'regime change' in Islamabad April 2022, they removed one of their own. Hosni Mubarrak comes to mind. The Egyptian Pharaoh also blamed Uncle Sam after the Arab Spring humbled him. [10] At least Saudi monarchs bought the story. [11]

PS:

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[1] <https://theintercept.com/2023/08/09/imran-khan-pakistan-cypher-ukraine-russia/>

[2] <https://theintercept.com/2023/09/17/pakistan-ukraine-arms-imf/>

[3] <https://jacobin.com/2023/08/imran-khan-pakistan-ouster-us-power-media-propaganda>

[4] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azx5_ey_5bl

[5] <https://jeddojehad.com/archives/26655>

[6] This author is Jeddojehad's co-editor

[7] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08tpoXB3NoM>

[8] See "[Pakistan elects mini-Trump in military-rigged elections](#)".

[9] The late Qazi Hussain Ahmed was chief of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami and Mualana Fazl-ur-Rehman heads another large fundamentalist party in Pakistan, Jamiat Ulema Islam.

[10] <https://world.time.com/2013/09/23/egypts-mubarak-blames-u-s-for-his-downfall/>

[11] <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabia-blames-america-for-the-turmoil-in-egypt/>