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Pakistan

# Opportunism behind Imran Khan's anti-Americanism

- IV Online magazine - 2022 - IV567 - April 2022 -

Publication date: Friday 15 April 2022

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**Suddenly, Imran Khan has become “Anti American”. Former prime minister of Pakistan and head of his Pakistan Justice Party (PTI), Mr Khan is holding mass rallies after losing his majority in the national parliament. In his speeches before he was voted out as prime minister but particularly after the no-confidence in the parliament, he is accusing the USA of hatching a conspiracy to oust him from power. He has started a campaign terming it “real independence”. His supporters are running “no to imported government” as a top trend on Twitter since 3rd April when he lost power.**

Since 17th August 2018, when elected as prime minister, Imran Khan had been friendly with the USA and its financial institutions. However, he was unhappy that Jo Biden never gave him a direct telephone call. Previously, he had a very cordial meeting with President Donald Trump in September 2019. On arriving in Pakistan after meeting President Trump, he declared his meeting as winning the second World Cup for Pakistan. Pakistan had won a one-day cricket World Cup in 1992 under his captaincy. He was jubilant when Pakistan got USD 6 billion loan from IMF just after he took power in August 2018, with harsh conditionalities.

All that changed once a vote of no confidence against him was tabled at the National Assembly on 8th March 2022. He initially challenged his opponents to bring together 172 votes, needed for change of the government at the National Assembly. He did not realize that over 30 of his PTI parliamentarians had defected already. These defectors were hiding at a place provided by the Sindh government. Sindh, one of the four provinces is not ruled by PTI. Sindh is ruled by Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto, assassinated by religious fanatics in December 2007. Now her son Bilawal Bhutto and her husband Asif Zardari are leading the PPP.

Once Mr Khan got wind of defections, he alleged that millions of rupees were paid to buy the political loyalties of PTI defectors. He accused the United Opposition, which brought together arch rivals the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the PPP together, of removing him from power through bribes and conspiracies. The PTI government had become very unpopular because of its bad governance and the unheard of inflation due to the implementations of the IMF-mandated conditionalities. This was the real reason for the defection of PTI parliamentarians who were of the view, and rightly so, that the PTI had lost popularity and they would not win the upcoming elections on PTI platform. The next general elections due in 2023.

In the meantime, the coalition government of Imran Khan also showed cracks in their ranks and several important allies publicly broke with the ruling coalition. As a result Imran Khan lost his majority in the parliament.

In absolute desperation, Imran Khan announced that his PTI would hold a historic sit-in against these political moves and gave a religious touch to his rhetoric. At that juncture, he was using threats to disqualify his parliamentarians who had defected from PTI.

On 27th March, his so-called million march was attended by less than 20,000 in front of the federal parliament where he waved a letter that he claimed was a 'message of threat' passed by a foreign power. He claimed that he got this letter on 7th March, a day before tabling of vote of no confidence.

The PTI Speaker of the National Assembly refused to hold a vote on the No Confidence motion in violation of the constitution. The United Opposition went to the Supreme Court against this unconstitutional act of the PTI government. The Supreme Court had rescued the PTI government several times prior to this hearing. The top judges were considered to be pro-PTI. After four days of hearing, the Supreme Court gave a verdict against the PTI and

## Opportunism behind Imran Khan's anti-Americanism

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ordered the Speaker to call the National Assembly session and hold a vote on 3rd April.

The difference this time, was the so-called 'neutrality' of the military establishment during the crisis. No parliamentarian received any telephone call by "unknown" persons as was the case in the past. The military establishment which had helped Imran Khan to come to power in 2018, was not happy for several reasons.

Imran Khan wanted to replace the sitting army chief, General Bajwa, with his own favorite: General Faiz Hameed. The military establishment was also in trouble because the army was being blamed for the bad governance of PTI government since the military establishment rigged the previous elections to bring Mr Khan to power. The apparent neutrality was a signal to the PTI allies and defectors to help the United Opposition in ousting Imran Khan government. But Imran Khan kept addressing the nation on television on almost daily basis before he was removed and in one of his final speeches, he named – apparently as a Freudian slip of tongue - the USA as the conspirator.

After high pitch theatrics, a vote of no confidence was held and Imran Khan was voted out. This was only possible through military's covert intervention.

Since he lost power Imran Khan rhetoric against the USA has intensified. Imran Khan's anti- America stand cannot be termed as anti-imperialism. It is an opportunist act to deceive people. It is an act of sheer desperation. It is an act of anti-imperialism of the fools. It is to find an excuse for generating public support. It is an exploitation of anti-imperialist feeling of the people of Pakistan.

Imran Khan ruled Pakistan for three and half years accepting all the harsh conditionalities of IMF and raised the prices of electricity, gas, petroleum products along all the kitchen items. He never raised the wages according to the level of price hike. He was a committed neo-liberal, staunchly anti-left who tried to do away with the pension system. He introduced a "health card" which allowed all the private hospitals to treat the patients at the public expense. This policy was aimed at pleasing the private hospital mafia. Instead of building new public hospitals and medical colleges, he tried to privatized all areas of health sector. Most of sugar mill owners were from his party and the sugar price went up from 55 Rupees a kilo to 110 Rupees a kilo in three years.

In the realm of culture, he tried to 'Islamize' every aspect of state and society. Imran Khan, for instance, introduced "single national curriculum" to further introduce religion in education. In at least one province, the Punjab, even PhD scholars in sciences now have to study Quran. The school children are supposed to recite Quran on daily basis. He tried to employ 70,000 religious' teachers at the school level instead of improving the present education staff.

Being an anti-American, his effort is to attract the conservative votes. "Death to America" was a popular slogan of the extreme religious fanatics including the Taliban and al-Qaida. There is a great difference between "Anti Americanism" and "Anti-imperialism".

We as the left, are anti-imperialists and not Anti-Americans. Anti-Imperialism means opposing colonialism, imperial hegemony, and defending the right of self-determination. Progressive anti-imperialism means opposing all imperialist states, not siding with some of them against the other. Imran Khan says that because he went to Russia and supported President Putin during the Ukraine war, hence Americans wanted him out of power. For him, it is ok to side with Russia, a thoroughly imperialist state as opposed to the USA.

To quote Farooq Sulehria, a leftwing activist,

Anti-imperialism is freedom, for all oppressed, from all oppression. In contrast, an Osama bin Laden, or Ayatollah Khomeini for that matter, offers an anti-imperialism that does not tolerate these values. There 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.

## Opportunism behind Imran Khan's anti-Americanism

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Imran Khan's "anti-imperialism of an opportunist" is the latest variety on display. His "anti-imperialism" is based on repression of women, religious minorities, trade unions, peasant organizations and all the political parties. He termed all opponents as traitors.

Imran Khan termed Osama Bin Laden a "martyr" in August 2020, while he was prime minister. His ministers termed this as slip of tongue. But on 13th April, 2022, while Imran Khan was speaking at mass rally in Peshawar, one of his charges against the US was that they killed Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan.

We never sided with religious fanatics when they were fighting NATO or American forces in Afghanistan as they were not anti-imperialists. Imran Khan is a softer version of extreme religious fanatics. Being "anti-American" implies more votes from the extreme right. This is sheer opportunism and not anti-imperialism. Internationally, an impression is being given that Imran Khan has been overthrown because he was an anti-American. Far from it, this was an afterthought to build a political narrative that could help find some support among the ordinary people. We must not be fooled by Imran Khan's empty anti-imperialist demagoguery.

*14 April 2022*

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