

# ISAS Insights

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## Imran Khan's Political Rise

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### Abstract

*Imran Khan a former cricketer who, in 1992 won the cricket World Cup for Pakistan<sup>2</sup> has emerged in the last couple of months as a political phenomenon in a highly troubled country. He has thrown an open challenge to the governing Pakistan People's Party (PPP) founded four and a half decades ago by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, another populist leader who created the same kind of excitement as Khan is doing today. The PPP is currently headed by President Asif Ali Zardari, the most unpopular leader in the country's history. The Pakistan economy has performed poorly under Zardari, the country's politics is in disarray, the military leadership is at odds with the civilian government, relations with the United States (US) have reached possibly the breaking point. Islamic extremist groups continue to operate in the country and on the border with Afghanistan. As Bill Keller, former editor of The New York Times wrote for his old paper, 'if you survey informed Americans, you will hear Pakistan described as duplicitous, paranoid, self-pitying and generally infuriating'<sup>3</sup>. Can Khan halt the country's descent and prevent it from becoming a failed state? Hundreds of thousands of his well-wishers and supporters – mostly young in a very young population – have certainly pinned their hope on the former cricket star. As Khan reminded his admiring audience in Karachi at a massive rally on 25 December that he may not have been the best cricketer in the world, but he won his country the World Cup; he may not have been the most experienced philanthropist, but he built the country's best cancer hospital; he may not be a educationist*

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<sup>2</sup> Imran Khan has scored 3,807 runs in test cricket while taking 362 wickets, making him one of eight world cricketers to have achieved 'all-rounders triple' in test matches.

<sup>3</sup> Bill Keller, 'The Pakistanis have a point', *The New York Times Magazine*, 26 November 2011, p. 46.

*but he has built the only private sector university in rural Pakistan. Would he now succeed in this new enterprise – saving Pakistan from disaster—he asked his Karachi audience? The large crowd came back with a roaring ‘yes’.*

### **Feeding a hunger for honest and dedicated leadership**

There was hunger for change in leadership as Pakistan stumbled in 2011 in more than one way. Economy's poor performance, politicians' inability to address the problems created by shortages of electricity and natural gas, breakdown of relations with the US, terrorist activities in the country's northern areas, growing lawlessness in all major cities, and the growing belief that the people holding senior positions were enriching themselves at the expense of the economy and to the cost of the poorer segments of the population made large numbers of people very anxious and very unhappy. Khan, the 59-year-old cricketer who had become a national hero in winning the cricket World Cup for his country in 1992, tapped into the growing discontent. On 30 October, he addressed a large rally in a Lahore ground that supports the Minar-e-Pakistan, a monument to the passage, on 23 March, 1940, of a resolution by the Muslim League demanding the creation of an independent state for the Muslims of British India – Pakistan. There he pulled crowds not seen since Benazir Bhutto, the late prime minister, returned from exile in 1986. The turnout, which some estimates put above 100,000, stunned the country's political elite, say leading diplomats in Islamabad.<sup>4</sup> He repeated this remarkable feat in Karachi, a more difficult place for the rising star. Khan is from Lahore, descendent from a father who was a Niazi Pathan from Mianwali, a district in northern Punjab and his mother a Burki Pathan now from Lahore. Pathans and Punjabis have been at war with the Muhajir community – the Urdu-speaking refugees who came from India at the time of Pakistan's founding in August 1947. Could Khan draw a large crowd in a city that has boiled over with ethnic violence, most notably in the summer of 2011?<sup>5</sup> The answer came on 25 December when he addressed a crowd even larger than the one he drew in Lahore on 30 October.

After retiring from cricket, Khan was more successful as a philanthropist rather than a politician. According to Financial Times' Lionel Barber who spent an afternoon at Khan's hill-top residence in Islamabad, 'inside two and half weeks, he raised Rs2.5 billion (\$30 million) to help the flood victims; now he is in the middle of a \$20m annual fund-raising exercise for the cancer hospital he set up in his native Lahore in 1994 in memory of his mother, a victim of colon cancer. He is also expanding Namal College in the rural north, built in association with the University of Bradford, where he is chancellor'. Barber not only played cricket with Khan but also talked politics. 'Like many of his countrymen, Imran is enraged by the stand-off between President Zardari and the judiciary, which is challenging

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<sup>4</sup> James Lamont, 'Khan seeks to turn groundswell of support into serious political challenge', Financial Times, 24 December 2011, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Shahid Javed Burki, 'Exploding Karachi', ISAS Brief No. 212, 15 August, 2011, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore.

the president's right to immunity against long-standing but unproven corruption charges. Imran has an ill-disguised contempt for Zardari, the widower of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. We are ready to go out on the street at any time,' he says with a booming laugh.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Parallel**

Perhaps a good parallel between the rise of Khan is with the rise in the late 1960s of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir's father, and that of his newly founded political organisation, PPP. As Khan was to do four and half decades later, Bhutto built his political career and the future of the PPP on the basis of simple populist slogans.<sup>7</sup> He promised all people 'roti, kapra and makan' (food, clothing and shelter) and promised to distance himself from the US by following a foreign policy designed to serve Pakistan's interests rather than those of Washington. Bhutto, who entered politics at the invitation of General Ayub Khan who was looking for a Sindhi presence in his cabinet, ultimately turned against his mentor. The issue was the orientation of the country's foreign policy. Ayub Khan had built strong ties with the US, having engineered the membership of his country in two defence pacts in order to stop the advance of Communism into Asia. The pacts – the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and the South-east Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) were the brain children of the US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles under President Dwight Eisenhower. After having left the cabinet headed by the general, Bhutto questioned the wisdom of becoming so subservient to American strategy in the region that Pakistan was unable to pursue its own interest, Ayub Khan countered by calling his political autobiography, *Friends not Masters*.<sup>8</sup> Bhutto was not persuaded and published his own book under the title of *The Myth of Independence*.<sup>9</sup> Bhutto was keen on developing close relations with China, Pakistan's neighbour to the east. He succeeded and now China is commonly referred to as Pakistan's 'all weather friend' to distinguish its relations with the US that have been on a roller-coaster ride for the last half century<sup>10</sup>. It is interesting to note that after holding a successful public meeting in Lahore, Imran Khan went on a visit to Beijing where he met with some of China's senior leaders.

### **The Khan Bandwagon Begins to Roll**

The political establishment was also stunned and shaken by the number of prominent leaders who began to climb on the Khan bandwagon as it began to roll forward following the meeting

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<sup>6</sup> Lionel Barber, 'Cricket with the FT: Imran Khan', *Financial Times*, 5 November 2010, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Philip E. Jones, *The Pakistan People's Party: Rise to Power*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003, for a competent account of the founding and political ascent of the People's Party of Pakistan.

<sup>8</sup> Mohammad Ayub Khan, President of Pakistan, *Friends not Masters: A Political Autobiography*, London, Oxford University Press, 1967.

<sup>9</sup> Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, *The Myth of Independence*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1969.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of Pakistan's relations with the United States, see Dennis Kux, *The United States and Pakistan: Disenchanted Allies*, Baltimore, Md. Johns Hopkins Press, 2001.

in Lahore. Among those who came on board was the respected former Foreign Minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi. A long-standing member of the PPP, Qureshi served the Zardari administration for three years, from 2008 to 2011. He left in early 2011 over his differences with his government on the ‘Raymond Davis affair’ – the matter involving the murder by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative of two young men in a busy Lahore street. The US sought diplomatic immunity for Davis; the Foreign office refused to grant him that. Davis was ultimately let go and Qureshi chose not to return to the cabinet when it was reconstituted. With his coming on board as the Vice Chairman of the Pakistan Tehrik-e- Insaf (PTI), Khan’s political party, the Khan bandwagon received acceleration it was looking for. Following Qureshi into PTI were other senior politicians including Khurshid Kasuri who had served the military government of Pervez Musharraf also as foreign minister. Jehangir Tareen, another minister from the Musharraf cabinet also came on board as did Ishaq Khaqwani and Owais Leghari both prominent south Punjab politicians. But perhaps the most important catch for PTI was Javed Hashmi, a highly respected politician also from south Punjab who had been a loyal supporter of Mian Nawaz Sharif and the latter’s Pakistan Muslim League.

Hashmi joined the party on the eve of Imran Khan’s meeting in Karachi. The 64-year-old leader from south Punjab had a large political following in all parts of Punjab. In the 2008 elections, he contested from four seats for the National Assembly, winning three. His only loss was to Shah Mahmood Qureshi who was now a fellow senior member of the PTI group. Even before switching sides, moving from Nawaz Sharif’s Muslim League to the Tehrik, Hashmi was known to have had serious differences with the Sharif brothers on matters of policy. He opposed Muslim League’s support for Zardari when the latter offered himself for the presidency in the elections held in August 2008. The Sharifs refused to follow Hashmi’s advice and threw their support behind Zardari. This was one of the several occasions when the wily Zardari was able to outmanoeuvre the Sharif brothers. Hashmi would have wanted to be the Leader of the Opposition in the Assembly elected in February 2008 but the Sharifs chose instead Nisar Ali Khan, a trusted lieutenant. For the last several months, Hashmi was campaigning for the division of Punjab, now with a population of close to 100 million people, into four smaller provinces. The PML (N) opposed the idea. Most political observers were of the view that Hashmi’s entry into the Tehrik would add significant weight to the fledgling party.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Karachi Meeting**

For the meeting in Karachi, the PTI chose another place that would serve as symbol for the rising organisation: the grounds surrounding the mausoleum of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan’s founding father. The Karachi meeting pulled an even larger crowd than the one that heard the Tehrik-e-Insaf leader at Lahore’s Minar-e-Pakistan. It was estimated at

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<sup>11</sup> Amir Wasim, ‘Why Hashmi decided to leave PML-N’, Dawn, 26 December 2011, pp. 1 and 3.

200,000. Held on 25 December, the Karachi jalsa or political rally, made clear that the party had done some serious homework since the meeting in Lahore. Several leaders who spoke posed a direct challenge to President Zardari with Qureshi, the former foreign minister, suggesting that Pakistan's nuclear assets were not safe in the hands of the government that was in power.

Khan's Karachi speech was more focused on Pakistan's internal problems, in particular corruption which he claimed was costing the country \$5 million a day. This would amount to almost \$2 billion a year or about two per cent of the country's gross domestic product. This is probably a fair estimate. There was no direct reference to Pakistan's relations with the US; only the suggestion that Pakistan will not become a 'servant of any outside power', echoing the theme used in the 1960s by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The Americans, keenly aware that it will matter a great deal for their country as to who gains the lever of power in the nuclear-armed nation as it began to disengage from Afghanistan, were paying close attention to political developments in Pakistan. A reasonable accommodation was needed to smoothen the American exit from Afghanistan. But they seemed not too worried about the growing influence of Imran Khan and his party. Cameron Munter, the US Ambassador who met with the rising star of Pakistan's politics right after the Lahore meeting, seemed not to be too worried. 'Imran Khan is, as far as he tells me, for the same kind of values that we think are important', he said on a popular talk show on 22 November. 'He says he is for democracy, he's for governance that is clean, and he's for economic growth. We're for all these things.'<sup>12</sup> A day after the Karachi meeting, The New York Times reported on its front page that Washington had concluded that an arrangement with Pakistan could be worked out that would be limited in scope from the one envisaged earlier and more costly for the US. 'We have closed the chapter on the post 9/11 period,' a senior American official told the newspaper. 'The US will be forced to restrict drone strikes, limit the number of its spies and soldiers on the ground and spend more to transport supplies through Pakistan to allied troops in Afghanistan. US aid to Pakistan will also be reduced sharply,' said the officials.<sup>13</sup> This relationship was in line with what Imran Khan had been demanding.

Imran Khan's platform remained defined in vague terms. 'Mr Khan has won support with his anti-Americanism and contempt for Zardari-led government beset by claims of corruption. He has mocked Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State, for hectoring style towards Islamabad as 'Chachi' or aunty; and called for a halt to army operations in the country's unruly tribal areas in the border with Afghanistan.'<sup>14</sup> Focus on Baluchistan was a new element in Imran's developing programme. He said he would apologise to the Baloch people on behalf of other Pakistani citizens. Addressing the people of the estranged province, he said that 'we have committed excesses and have treated you like the people of a colony as we did

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<sup>12</sup> Imtiaz Shah, 'Massive Khan rally defies Pakistan ruling party', *Reuters*, 25 December, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Schmitt, 'U.S. redraws Pakistan ties with limits', *The New York Times*, 26 December 2011, pp. A1 and A8.

<sup>14</sup> Lionel Barber, 'Cricket with the FT: Imran Khan', *Financial Times*, 5 November 2010, p. 12.

in the case of the people of East Pakistan. I pledge that when we come to power, we will give you a special status as West Germany gave to East Germany by diverting all development projects to the latter'.<sup>15</sup> He informed his audience that his next big public meeting would be held on 23 March 2012 in Quetta, Baluchistan's capital. The country celebrates 23 March as Pakistan Day, the day the Pakistan resolution was adopted in 1940. The choice of the date was important: to underscore to the disenchanted Baluchi youth that their future was in a united and prosperous Pakistan.

However, recognising that in order to win votes from the citizenry he had to be more specific in laying out his plan if he were to gain power, he announced that he had set up a working group under the chairmanship of Jahangir Tareen, who had served with distinction as the minister of industry in one of the administrations headed by General Musharraf. Tareen was also a successful entrepreneur having built modern agricultural processing industries in a southern Punjab district. The Tareen group would produce a number of position papers dealing with the subjects of concern for the common man. Some of these were mentioned by Khan in his Karachi address. They included increasing agricultural productivity, introducing computerised land records, improving working conditions of industrial and commercial labour, improving women's welfare, reorienting relations with India, reforming the civil service, encouraging the members of the rich Pakistani Diasporas to invest in their homeland and – of course – reducing the incidence of corruption. Imran Khan promised he would wipe out large scale corruption in 90 days after assuming office, modifying his Lahore stance when he had talked of eliminating all corruption in three months. The papers to be produced by the working group would be discussed in seminars Tehrik-e-Insaf will organise. This was reminiscent of the approach adopted by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto when he launched his political organisation in 1967. The PPP produced a number of 'foundation documents' to explain its position on a number of important social and economic issues. Some of these documents were to become the basis of the making of public policy once the PPP under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto came to handle the reins of power.

## **Conclusion**

Judging by some of the reactions to the Karachi rally, it appears that Imran Khan succeeded in persuading those who had treated the Lahore meeting as flash in the pan, not likely to endure. 'After Imran Khan's October 30 rally in Lahore, we asked the question: Is Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaf a jalopy or a juggernaut? As hundreds of thousands poured into the grounds opposite the Mazar-e-Quaid in Karachi on Sunday and rallied in Imran's support, the answer to the above question has become clearer: not only has Imran's status as a rising star in politics been cemented, his PTI will also be a force to reckon with in the coming days,' wrote The News in an editorial published a day after the Karachi rally. 'After the rally in Lahore, it

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<sup>15</sup> Habib Khan Ghori, 'Tsunami sweeps Karachi', *Dawn* 26 December 2011, pp. 1 and 3.

was said that it would take weeks before we could assess the impact of the rally and months before the party's real prospects at the upcoming general elections become clear. But as the crowds came to cheer for Imran, it could be reasonably said that the show of force and the numbers in Lahore wasn't a one-off.'<sup>16</sup>

But some scepticism remained. There were some bloggers who thought that Imran Khan was setting himself for failure by promising more than he could possibly deliver. According to one, 'Imran says a lot of things that sound really great. His apology to Baluchistan at the Karachi jalsa is welcomed and much needed recognition of the situation there, but changing national policies and stabilising the region will require much more than applause lines at rallies. He says he won't allow any militant group from Pakistan. He says if he becomes PM, the Army and ISI will answer to him. He says he will set up an 'e-government system' which will 'automatically eliminate corruption from society'. He promises free legal aid, free health care, and free education. He promises that the police will treat everyone equitably – from the lowest mangnay wala (beggar) to the PM himself. The tax system will be reformed so that it is perfectly just, and everyone will gladly pay. The most amazing thing about this list of promises is that my otherwise perfectly rational friends are accepting them with the most delusional excitement. It's not that I don't like some of what Imran Khan says; it's that even if PTI's tsunami sweeps national elections, achieving even a fraction of these changes during one five-year term would be next to impossible. Even two terms is unlikely. And how long until the same people who today complain that the present government has been a miserable failure in its three years of governing will decide that Imran has overpromised and under-delivered?'<sup>17</sup>

If Imran Khan makes it to the top rung of the Pakistani political ladder, he would have performed a rare feat in the country's history. His rise would have happened without being catapulted by family connections or being pushed up by institutional support such as that from the military. General Ayub Khan assumed power as a result of a military coup as did Generals Yahya Khan, Ziaul Haq, and Pervez Musharraf. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto owed his ascent to his mentor Ayub Khan, who brought him into his cabinet. Bhutto had been the army general's hunting partner. Nawaz Sharif got elevated to leadership by the support given to him by General Ziaul Haq. He was first appointed Chief Minister of Punjab by General Gilani, then Governor of Punjab province who was a close associate of the military president. Benazir Bhutto was anointed by her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto while Asif Ali Zardari was appointed as Chairperson of the PPP since that was the will of his assassinated wife, Benazir Bhutto. He went on to become president. Imran Khan is, therefore, breaking new ground by being lifted from below by the youths, who are desperately looking for a person who can arrest the country's rapid downward slide.

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<sup>16</sup> The News, editorial, 'Imran in Karachi', 26 December 2011, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> 'We're no angels. New Pakistan' new-pakistanblog@gmail.com, 26 December, 2011, 9:51 AM.

While it is too early to speculate as to the kind of governance Imran Khan and the Tehrik will bring to Pakistan, what appears at this stage is that were he and his party to succeed, it would be a repeat of what is being seen in the Arab world. As the Arab Spring moves into the second phase in which alternative systems of governance are being found to replace autocratic rule, the citizenry appears to be opting for the parties that draw their inspiration from Islam. The success of Turkey under the rule of this kind of party is being seen as a model that the Muslim world can follow. Perhaps under Imran Khan Pakistan may also be headed that way.

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