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The PTI and Pakistan's Changing Political Landscape

Summary

- As the Pakistani electoral cycle gears up for an election, the country's traditional political stakeholders face a change in the tenor of political discourse and a more robust electoral field due to the recent rise in popular support for the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), or Pakistan Movement for Justice, helmed by cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan.
- The PTI's platform and rhetoric reflect current disaffection with Pakistan's civilian leadership. Encapsulated within the party's populism is capitalization on a political opening in Pakistan created by a tumultuous year and facilitated by perception of Khan as an 'anti-politician politician.'
- The party possesses a security outlook in line with Pakistan's security establishment and differs little from other political options in ways which should mitigate expectations that the PTI's political engagement will bring lasting changes to Pakistan's status quo.
- Khan's popularity with oft-politically marginalized groups and his emphasis on improving government accountability are forcing other political parties to shift their responsiveness in ways which reflect changing notions of the responsibilities of the state to its citizens. This change indicates a continuing maturation in Pakistani democracy.

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Background

Pakistan is preparing for an election in early-2013. Within the context of this timeline, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), a right-of-center political party, surprised observers when its self-proclaimed political 'tsunami' drew a crowd 100,000 strong to a rally in Lahore on October 30, 2011. Since then, the PTI has enjoyed a sharp rise in popular support, drawing similarly large crowds to rallies around the country. Much has been made of this meteoric rise in popular support for the party, currently the most popular political party at the national-level according to a recent IRI poll, and in particular, PTI Chairman Imran Khan. June 2011 Pew Research Center polling data marked Khan as Pakistan's most favorably viewed political leader, with 68 percent of respondents rating him positively, up from 52 percent in 2010. The public response has political observers speculating about the PTI's electoral performance in the upcoming national elections. Equally interesting, however, is the impact of the PTI's increased appeal on public discourse regarding the nature of politics and democracy in Pakistan, and what these conversations mean for the relationship between citizens and elected leaders.

Khan formally entered Pakistani politics in April 1996 as the founding chairman of the PTI. A national hero for captaining Pakistan's 1992 one-day Cricket World Cup-winning team, Khan was readymade for a cult of personality as he shifted his public persona toward social work and criticism of the rampant corruption in Pakistan's political system. The PTI failed to win a single seat in the 1997 national elections, but Khan has championed the PTI as a 'third force' between Pakistan's two most popular parties, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N). Eventually elected to Parliament in 2002, Khan became increasingly known for inconsistencies; an outspoken supporter of General Musharraf after he took power, he later called for Musharraf's execution. In short, few took Khan seriously, and in a country where voting behavior is driven more by patronage and kinship than by potential and performance, the PTI continued to lack genuine national influence.

Capitalizing on a Political Moment

Six months ago, just weeks before the Lahore rally, expectations for the PTI's political future were relatively low. What, then, has enabled the rapid transformation in the credibility enjoyed by the PTI in recent months?

Overall, 2011 was a bad year for Pakistani politics. For months, there has been widespread disillusionment with the PPP, from leadership absences at times of domestic crisis, namely President Zardari's slow return from France at the onset of the devastating August 2010 floods, to the country's deepening economic crisis. Anger over corruption, inflation and frequent power outages have coalesced in a populace fed up with the governance failures—perceived and real—of the country's major parties, from the PPP-Awami National Party (ANP)-Muttahid Quami Movement (MQM) governing coalition to the PML-N in the Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province.

The unceasing parade of crisis moments compounded with a tumultuous year in Pakistan-U.S. relations and the discontent embodied in the Arab Spring created a political opening for Khan and the PTI. As the only major party not in power, the PTI was well positioned to become a mouthpiece for popular grievances. In many ways, this political opening can be traced to the 2007 Lawyer's Movement, which, whether grassroots in nature or institutional in its focus, brought about a paradigm shift in state-citizen relations. Khan's own emphasis on support to the resurgently independent judiciary and on improvements in government transparency and accountability reinforce the PTI's position as a responsive and aware alternative in the current context, particularly given perception of Khan as a clean politician. This ability to convey not just awareness of the grievances of the average Pakistani, but empathy and a commitment to prioritize "legislation benefiting the common man"¹ helps explain much of the PTI's popular support. This messaging rejects citizen complicity in Pakistan's current state of affairs and pairs effectively with anti-U.S. populism which, while disconcerting to Western observers, should not be mistaken for the PTI's primary missive. It also speaks to the closeness of the PTI's stance, particularly on issues of national security, to Pakistan's military. This affinity in views has prevented active pushback from the security establishment to the PTI's rise, even as potential military backing of the party, often claimed by observers, remains unclear. Khan's regular interaction with traditional power brokers such as the military, however, brings into question whether the PTI's rise marks a new political moment, or more of the same.

The Same Pakistan or a "New Pakistan?"

Whether the PTI's current role in Pakistani politics is conceptualized as continuation of a democratic evolution, or a new phenomenon, it is important to consider the ways in which the PTI invokes a political status quo which may hinder its impact even while enabling its success. Foremost is the

reality that, like the Bhutto's PPP and Sharif's PML-N, Khan embodies 'personalization of power' wherein a leader, whether lauded or derided, is synonymous with the party or institution they head.² While effective for gaining popularity given the proclivity of Pakistanis to vote based on personalities and subsequent patronage, such a personalization of power limits opportunity for democratic culture to develop within parties themselves. The removal of the sub-clause requiring intra-party elections from Pakistan's constitution during the passage of the 18th Amendment removed the impetus for parties to develop a new generation of leaders by stifling internal dissent. While the PTI has on multiple occasions declared intent to hold party elections despite the lack of a legal obligation to do so, it remains to be seen whether this would be a shallow exercise or one fostering genuine internal debate. Nonetheless, that the PTI shares the structure of the country's other major parties should dampen expectations of the PTI as a divergence from currently weak political party accountability to constituent needs, despite the party's rhetoric.

Within Khan's cult of personality is a parallel to other crisis moments in Pakistan's history. In Khan's rhetoric, one finds echoes of *roti, kapra aur makaan* ("food, clothing and shelter," a central PPP slogan during the PPP's rise) and the mass support for the Islamic socialism of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s. Khan's own populism is most evident in his promise to eliminate corruption within 90 days as part of his vision to make Pakistan an Islamic Welfare State.³ As the PTI welcomes individuals from the political old guard, such historical parallels suggest an extension of similarities beyond popularity to the endurance of Pakistan's power structures, and subsequently a political status quo. It remains to be seen whether the PTI is welcoming these old hands in order to lend viability to the rhetoric of hope and change yet unsubstantiated by concrete policy prescriptives. But in Khan's arguable electoral pandering—both with these old hands and in the PTI's unclear relationship with groups such as the Difa-e-Pakistan Council, a coalition of 40-plus right wing religious parties—are questions about the true intent and capacity of the party should it be given the chance to govern. By enveloping old names and maintaining a security outlook in conformity with the security establishment, the PTI leaves scant space to shift Pakistan's overall strategic outlook in ways necessary for the state to transform its civil-military relationship, and in turn, alter state priorities and resource allocation to address issues of governance and socioeconomic advancement.

Contravening the ways in which the PTI and Khan are following a script of political ascendancy is the party's support among Pakistani youth, a key constituency given that an estimated 67 percent of Pakistan's population is under 30. During an April 20 PTI rally in Quetta, more than half of the top trending topics across Pakistan on Twitter were PTI related,⁴ highlighting both the demographic reach of the party's appeal and the space the PTI occupies in social media. This engagement with politics by Pakistani youth marks a major divergence from recent years, during which high demand by Pakistani youth for positive political change was inversely met with high disapproval of active political engagement. A 2009 British Council survey found that "few young Pakistanis feel able to campaign for change," with the result that half of those surveyed were not on the voter lists.⁵ While youth interest in the PTI has been particularly evident, this shift extends beyond the PTI into other arenas of Pakistani political life. Voter registration drives have been undertaken on Facebook as political discussion has broadened into non-traditional mediums. As the PTI phenomenon transforms Pakistan's youth into an accessible and arguably vital voting bloc, the PPP and PML-N have been forced to heighten their youth outreach. In March, Nawaz Sharif, PML-N Chief, visited Punjab University and promised the distribution of 300,000 laptops in the coming months in a clear attempt to win over young voters. PPP and PML-N campaigning across the country show additional signs of having adopted the PTI engagement model, particularly as both parties reemphasize their youth and women's wings and visibly promote the next generation of each party's personalization of power in the form of Bilawal Bhutto Zardari (PPP) and Maryam Nawaz (PML-N).

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief examines changes in the Pakistani political landscape in advance of the country's election, expected in early-2013. Stephanie Flamenbaum is a senior program assistant for the Afghanistan and Pakistan programs in USIP's Center for Conflict Management.

In the same British Council survey, respondents indicated that Pakistani youth, not unlike other demographic categories, see the government as widely corrupt. Imran Khan's use of accountability as a lynchpin of his political persona subsequently resonates deeply. Khan, who emphasizes his requirement that members declare their financial assets before joining the PTI, boycotted the February 2012 by-elections when the voter lists he had requested be reviewed by the Supreme Court were not validated in advance of Election Day. This review process uncovered 35 million potentially invalid names among the 80 million registered. When complete, it will enhance the ability of the Election Commission of Pakistan to guarantee clean elections, regardless of the party or parties which come out on top. While Khan's anti-corruption stance raises eyebrows among those who question his ability to solve Pakistan's corruption challenge, his regular insertion of corruption into public discourse has changed the anti-corruption narrative from lamentable reality to actionable issue. The PTI's opponents are being forced to address increasing allegations raised by media actors emboldened by the PTI's stance on accountability. This narrative shift has even impacted the PTI; Khan's call for internal elections reflects pressure on the PTI to maintain its high level of transparency and appear responsive to public sentiment.

Progress in the Political Landscape

If the PTI's current trend toward reliance on Pakistan's traditional power structures continues rather than affecting a lasting shift towards the grassroots mobilization the party's reach among youth implies it seems likely that history will repeat itself. But a potential space for political restructuring appears to exist in the conversations happening about the PTI, its political viability, and its political rivals within the country's traditional power structures. In combination with the ways in which Pakistan seems to be moving further from its historical oscillations between civilian and military rule, current circumstances provide more opportunity for the PTI to develop into a political alternative capable of bolstering civilian effectiveness, particularly given the way in which the party has energized youth participation and required traditional actors to react to mass sentiment. Regardless of the PTI's electoral or legislative performance in the coming months, the need for realistic expectations for the PTI's ultimate political influence should not undermine the fact that the party's impact on conversations about Pakistan's political future means a bad year for Pakistani politics is translating into an opportunity for Pakistani democracy to become more responsive and perhaps even more accountable to the people whose will it is meant to represent.



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Notes

1. "An Agenda for Resurgence: The Manifesto of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf."
2. See Lawrence Ziring, *Pakistan in the Twentieth Century: a political history* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1997).
3. For Khan, this predominantly relates to income distribution in the context of anti-corruption. In a February 1 interview, Khan defined such a welfare state as one where leaders "Use taxes for the people, not against them. The State is responsible and must provide the basic needs of the people. All policies must be made for the bottom 50 percent of the population." See Kiran Nazish, "Pakistan is a rich, rich country: Imran Khan," *The Express Tribune*, 1 Feb 2012.
4. The top 4 trending topics across Pakistan near the end of the rally were #PTI4Balochistan, #Quetta, Imran Khan and Balochistan
5. The British Council, "Pakistan: the Next Generation," November 2009, pg. 15-16.