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Imran Khan's Towering Chase to Lead Pakistan to Victory

As a player and later on as a captain of Pakistan's national cricket team, Imran Khan – the new Prime Minister of Pakistan – was successful in guiding his team to frequent victories. The biggest prize came in 1992's Cricket World Cup. Despite a disastrous start by losing three of its initial matches in the tournament, and in the face of various injuries, Khan showed resilient leadership and guided the team to a world championship. The victory established Khan as a cricketing hero and boosted his popularity nationally and globally.

Right after the 1992 World Cup, Khan entered politics. Having spent considerable time in the West and seeing the non-patronage based politics being practiced there, Khan wanted to start a new chapter in Pakistan's politics by focusing on fighting corruption and improving governance. To implement his political project, he capitalized on his cricketing popularity and his social work, the latter of which culminated in his building a free-access cancer hospital. But just like the disastrous start of his team's 1992 World Cup bid, Khan's political innings started with a failure. In 1997's general elections, his political party – Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) or Pakistan Movement for Justice– did not win even a single seat in parliament. The failure showed the complexity of Pakistani politics to the cricket star and how hard his party had to work to make a mark on the country's politics. It took him and his party another 18 long years to finally clinch the premiership. In this successful political chase, he experienced multiple low points, matured politically, and weathered many political controversies. In his cricketing career,

Khan has chased countless targets successfully. Can he successfully chase targets in politics and governance, too? Now that he has steered his political party to victory in Pakistan's July general elections, can he lead Pakistan to victory once more? Can he and his party overcome Pakistan's towering challenges?

Weak Democracy

Pakistan's experiment with democracy has not been a success story. The democratic process has been interrupted regularly either by the powerful military establishment or by the elected but incompetent-cum-corrupt civilian dispensations. In Pakistan's democratic history, no prime minister has ever been able to complete his/her full five-year term. And this is only the second time in Pakistan's history that there has been a peaceful and democratic transition of power from one elected government to another. The democratic institutions such as the judiciary and legislature are weak and dysfunctional. Pakistan's judiciary has never been independent. It has played a complementary role to the military's domineering role in Pakistan's politics. The legislature is even worse off. Most of the lawmakers are corrupt and authoritarian with the feudal mindset that is contemptuous of democracy, human rights and, social justice. Protecting their own self-centered interests and land is a priority to them. Even PTI, which supposedly believe in clean politics, has granted memberships to these land-owning feudal politicians. Apparently, it is not just memberships; they are given leadership roles, too. Most political commentators consider their presence as obstacles to bringing meaningful democratic reforms at the federal and provincial levels. Additionally, media, which play a critical role in a democracy in protecting free speech and expression, have to routinely self-censor, face constant intimidations, and toe the line of the military establishment by giving more coverage to their favored candidates and agenda. Although Pakistan has moved over the last decade toward embracing elections, it will be interesting to see what role the PTI can play in strengthening democracy.

Economy in Crisis

Pakistan's economy is reliant on foreign aid and economic loans from international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. On most occasions where Pakistan faced an economic crisis, the United States and Saudi Arabia have rescued it. This is probably one of the reasons Pakistan has not moved towards economic self-sufficiency, because most of the money from the foreign donors have landed in the pockets of corrupt politicians and their Swiss bank accounts. Pakistan's military has joined the party, too. Since 2001, most of the aid money from the

U.S. to Pakistan's efforts to fight the so-called war on terror has gone to the military establishment to fund the lavish lifestyle of its top brass, instead of being invested to improve infrastructure, boost domestic production, alleviate poverty and, generate employment.

According to State Bank of Pakistan, the economy is in a free fall, as it now "faces problems in its ability to repay debts or pay for imports." This crisis is caused by an increase in oil prices as "Pakistan imports 80 percent of its oil and energy needs," and the growing costs have led to an increasing trade deficit. The rising trade deficit has led to a decrease in Pakistan's foreign currency reserves. If Pakistan relies on imports more than exports, it has to have a strong foreign currency reserve. The current reserve of almost \$10 billion won't last long. In addition to the budget deficit, which has grown by 10 percent of GDP, Pakistan faces a currency crisis, too. Since December 2017, "the rupee currency has been devalued four times and interest rates have been raised three times."

PTI has to react fast to calm the situation. Its Finance Minister Asad Umar has his work cut out for him. He may be forced to negotiate with the IMF for new a bailout. PTI will be tempted to seek the IMF's help to stabilize the economy and keep the country running. Due to the lack of commitment in meeting its past bailout conditions, the IMF will be reluctant to oblige Pakistan's request. The IMF's main funder, the U.S. will seek all kinds of guarantee that Pakistan not only meets the terms of the loan, that it will commit to market-based reforms, and that it will not use the loan to pay Chinese Belt and Road project debts. In the long term, PTI's manifesto has mentioned two broad strategies to deal with the economic crisis. One is the transformation of state-owned companies (SOCs). Due to corruption, incompetence, and weak management, SOCs are running on losses. They are in debt and their profit margins are low. They suffer from "ailing infrastructure, politicized leadership, and poor policies." Handing them over to the corporate sector may boost their productivity and stop the losses, although it is also likely to increase prices on important (formerly) public goods in the name of corporate profiteering. Even if Pakistan chooses to go through the IMF, the security situation in the country is fragile. Terrorist and fundamentalist outfits are active in the country and hold anti-American and anti-Western political sentiments. Any miscalculated political moves by American and Western governments can easily provoke fundamentalist groups and jeopardize the IMF program and other foreign direct investment in Pakistan.

The second strategy of PTI is improving its collections of tax revenues to deal with the economic crisis. Increasing such revenues is sensible, but collecting taxes is never an

easy task in Pakistan. Only a small fraction of the population pays taxes and most of the citizens are not familiar with the practice and culture of taxation. This policy faces a couple of problems. There is a profound trust deficit between Pakistanis and their political leaders. Most Pakistanis believe that the tax money goes to the pockets of corrupt politicians. Why bother to pay tax when it is not used to improve their living standards? On the other hand, the majority of Pakistan's population is poor, so they may not be able to afford new taxes in the first place.

In relation to the economic crisis, the biggest aspect is the burgeoning external debts that Pakistan owe to IMF, Paris Club countries, Asian Development Bank and other creditors. In 2017, Pakistan's external debt level was US\$83 billion. This level is expected to climb to \$103 billion by June 2019. How Imran Khan and his Finance Minister are going to deal with this mounting amount is the real question.

Military Establishment

Pakistan's military establishment is a powerful institution – a government within a government. It has ruled Pakistan more than half of its history, has an entrenched grip on the defense and security policies, and has spread its ever-growing influence over the economic sector. The popular phrase that “every country has an army, in Pakistan, it is the army that has a country” speaks of the military's power and influence. Strangely enough, there is no mention of how to deal with the powerful military vis-à-vis the elected government in PTI's manifesto. The defense and security policies have been looked at through the civilian prism. The manifest talks about putting more focus on the foreign office by “updating and expanding its institutional structure” to deal with Pakistan's national security, in spite of the fact that the defense and national security policies are the prerogatives of the military. Reading the national security and defense policies of the PTI's manifesto, one sees a complete submission of the party to the military. This subordination means the undermining of the PTI's allegedly democratic reforms. Moreover, the PTI's economic and infrastructural reforms may also be endangered. Considering that more than fifty percent of the national budget is consumed by the military establishment, building dams, schools, and hospitals means cutting the military's budget which is a daunting challenge for PTI.

In empowering the Pakistani military state, America's contribution should not be overlooked either. In its dealing with Pakistan, particularly in the so-called war on terror – the U.S. has resorted to a “single-window operation” by preferring to go through the military, rather than democratically elected officials. It is far easier to talk to one center of

power than to consult with various centers. Sadly, this is part of the problem. Americans and the West should have supported democratic processes and institutions but have allowed their own realpolitik motivations to drive their policies toward Pakistan.

Foreign Policy

There is no chapter titled “foreign policy” in PTI’s manifesto. The subject is discussed in the chapter dealing with Pakistan’s national security. Pakistan has contentious relations with its eastern neighbor Afghanistan, its western neighbor India and its ally in the so-called war on terror, the United States. Although the U.S. and India are mentioned in the national security chapter, there is no specific mention of Afghanistan. There is a broad reference to “improving relations with Pakistan’s eastern and western neighbors” – referring to Afghanistan and India – using “conflict resolution” approach, but this goal will be a challenging one moving forward.

Since 9/11 and with the new dispensation in Kabul, the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan have been tense and confrontational. Afghanistan accuses Pakistan of sponsoring terrorist attacks in Afghanistan and undermining the peace. Pakistan, on the other hand, blames Afghanistan for giving India a free reign to destabilize Pakistan by allowing it to grow its presence in the country by opening consulates in major cities and training Afghan security forces. Considering this difficult relationship between the two, it is surprising that Afghanistan does not find any place in the PTI’s manifesto. As a member of Pakistan’s Parliament and PTI’s Chairman, Imran Khan has made known his stance on Afghanistan. He has voiced his support for the Afghan Taliban and has called the war in Afghanistan a “holy war” and “justified.” He is against the American presence in Afghanistan and termed the war on terror a failure, which has been imposed on Pakistan. Khan has no love lost for the Afghan leadership either, calling the former Afghan president Hamid Karzai an “American puppet.” If Khan still holds these opinions of the Afghan Taliban and considering Pakistan’s undeniable influence on the group, his government may well be on course to jeopardize the on-going talks between the Taliban and the Americans. The Taliban’s continuation of war against the Americans and the Afghan government would be the fulfillment of Khan’s policy preference.

Unlike Afghanistan, India is discussed in PTI’s manifesto. The issue that has strained the relations between the two for more than 71 years is the Kashmir Valley. In its manifesto, PTI has said that it will work on a “blueprint towards resolving the Kashmir issue within the parameters of UN Security Council resolutions.” PTI is perhaps referring to the U.N. Security Council Resolution 47, which calls on both the sides to resolve the issue through

peaceful means. Pakistan has consistently raised the issue of Kashmir on international forums focusing more on the plebiscite aspect of the Resolution. India, however, sees Kashmir as a bilateral issue, and has reacted irritably to Pakistan's policy of raising it on the international stage.

As far as the U.S. is concerned, Imran Khan has shown his antipathy for the American policies in the region. Khan has been a long-time critic of the American war on terror and has called it a "bogus war" that has destabilized Pakistan. He has objected angrily to his country's participation in the campaign. He is against the drone attacks that have had significant collateral damage on his country's eastern borders and the FATA areas. The U.S., on the other hand, has accused Pakistan of playing a "double game" of getting aid money to "fight terrorism" while extending covert support to the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani Network that attack American and NATO forces in Afghanistan. At the moment, the relation between the two is apprehensive, although Khan's party has pinpointed "reciprocity and mutuality of interest" as the "determinants" of the U.S.-Pakistani relationship in its manifesto. It will be difficult to improve the relations. Currently, there seems to be no common ground to serve as a mutual interest. The so-called war on terror is not a point of mutual interest. Considering the hawkish views of Khan on the American presence in Afghanistan, more twists are likely to unfold in his dealings with the Americans.

All the above challenges will be added on top of the serious obstacle of getting through the gridlock of Pakistani politics, which have long been wrought with a "contradiction." Those who go against the military establishment risk descending into political oblivion via military coup, prison time, or exile. And the hard political gridlock erected by the military state won't let a political party in power bring forward the needed economic reforms to deliver necessary services to the public. For any political party, it is pretty much a lose-lose situation. You can't sideline the military establishment, nor you can carry out your development agenda and economic reforms. Dealing with this "contradiction" is Imran Khan's real challenge.