

Imran Khan: Another Act in Pakistan's Circus

It wasn't Imran Khan who won the election. It was (as always) Pakistan's army.

By C. Christine Fair
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On Wednesday, July 25, Pakistanis went to the polls thinking that they were electing a new prime minister. In fact, the choice was made for them. The army resolved to have Imran Khan elected as prime minister.

This was not an easy thing to do. Khan had long opined that he would never come to power through a coalition. Yet the math of Pakistan's electoral politics would preclude him from doing so without a coalition of those willing to work with and through Pakistan's army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), the intelligence agency it controls to do its bidding at home and abroad. Over time, Khan also had a history of irritating the army with his anti-army rhetoric.

But Khan and the army were destined to work together. The army needed a new political ally with which to vanquish its *bete noir*, Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). The Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of the Bhuttos had long ago proved to be a problematic partner. Khan, for his part, came to realize that the only way he'd occupy the prime minister's house would be by working with the most powerful institution in the country: the military. Indeed, the Pakistan Army is a friend with many benefits.

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Not only was the outcome of this election pre-ordained, so are the consequences. Pakistanis will soon discover — sooner than later — that Imran Khan will not be substantively different than their previous political masters. For Pakistan's international partners, it will be business as usual.

Hoisting Imran to the Throne

Imran Khan could have been prime minister earlier had he been willing to be more cooperative with the men in uniform. Khan cannot be accused of being a quick learner. However, once he figured this out, his fortunes were preordained. **As Khan cozied up to the military**, the military responded in kind by working through the ISI **to fund his various rallies throughout the country and to help shape him** into the candidate whose party would take largest share of votes in yesterday's election.

Once Khan agreed to this tryst, the army and its handmaids in the ISI toiled tirelessly to **improve upon his political prospects** by inducing **politicians from other parties — along with their vote banks — to defect** to Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) through promises of allurements and threats of adverse consequences. The frequency of turncoats turning up at Khan's doors gave rise to the joke that the PTI is in actuality an acronym for "Pakistan Turncoat Industry." The security forces **browbeat the media** to ensure that it showered the Khan and his PTI with praise while maligning Nawaz Sharif and his PML-N. They rounded up, detained, or otherwise intimidated and harangued **PML-N party workers while behind the scenes worked to have PML-N candidates disqualified from contesting.**



Pakistani politician Imran Khan, chief of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party, shows his marked thumb after casting his vote at a polling station for the parliamentary elections in Islamabad, Pakistan (July 25, 2018).

Image Credit: AP Photo/Anjum Naveed

Militants Onboard the Imran Khan Train

In the most appalling and craven move yet, **the army facilitated the rise of numerous political parties with explicit ties to terrorists.**

For example, the **Tehreek-e-Labaik Pakistan** is a relatively new party. Its principal platform is that it wants stricter anti-blasphemy laws that would make it even easier to kill someone suspected of insulting the prophet. In May, one of its members attempted to assassinate Pakistan's interior minister. In 2017, the party made considerable hue and cry when Pakistan considered altering the oath which candidates must take in order to contest elections in which they aver that they are Muslims and accept the finality of the prophet. They argued that the change would permit Ahmadis — whom they and many others in Pakistan view as apostates because they do not accept the finality of the prophet Mohammad — to contest the elections. **This pro-violence party fielded 566 candidates** in Wednesday's polls.

Imran Khan gave many signals to appease this group and its followers **by invoking a similarly hard line on blasphemy**, which is pretty ironic given his **loathario past, multiple marriages**, and allegations of **heavy cocaine use**, which also carries a death penalty in Pakistan.

Another party that is a political front for a terrorist organization is the **Milli Muslim League**, headed by Hafez Saeed who is also the head of the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT). The LeT committed the November 2008 multiday siege on Mumbai. Hafez Saeed and his terrorist group are proscribed by the United States as well as the United Nations Security Council. Saeed had been under "house arrest," or as some say, "protective custody," until mid-2017. Upon release he announced the formation of this party. **The MML fielded some 260 candidates.**

In addition, Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat, (previously known as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi) is another internationally proscribed terrorist groups with ties to the Islamic State; the ASWJ fielded 150 candidates. Brazenly, **Pakistan lifted the ban on this group and unblocked the assets of its chief** in June of this year mere hours before the country was placed on the "grey list" by the Financial Action Task Force for failing to curb terror financing. (It should have been placed on the "black list," if it were not for the American requirement to continue working with Pakistan to sustain its presence in Afghanistan.)

In addition, Fazlur Rehman Khalil, the founder of Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), also said that his organization **supports Imran Khan and his PTI**. HuM is a U.S.-designated global terrorist group with links to al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban.

This is in addition to another **1,500 or so candidates that Pakistan's right-wing Islamist organizations fielded in the election.**

Roping in a petting zoo of terrorists and their political allies seems like an odd gambit given that the Pakistan army has been ostensibly waging operations against the so-called Pakistani Taliban for well over a decade. What could possibly go wrong with additionally mainstreaming groups who not only espouse violence but actively engage in it in effort to enthrone Imran Khan — whose own closeness to militant groups has earned him the moniker "Taliban Khan"?

After the Coronation?

The votes are not yet all counted. The other political parties are already **filing complaints with the election commission** because of the industrial-strength rigging that will bring Khan to power. Yet it is certain that Khan will be Pakistan's next prime minister. The only lingering questions concern the exact composition of the coalition with which he will claim to govern this complicated state of nearly 200 million Muslims, with a troubled history at home and an equally troubled history of waging terrorism and insurgency on its neighbors, Afghanistan and India.

Some Pakistanis are elated with Khan's election and sincerely believe that he is the face of change — the man who singlehandedly crushed the stronghold of the two-party system that produced a carousel of dodgy rulers. But sooner rather than later the reality will settle in. The army will call the shots on Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, India, China, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The army will continue to prosecute its proxy wars in Afghanistan and India. It will continue to cultivate those terrorists who work on its behalf while weeding out the ones who have turned on their erstwhile patrons.

In this election, it was not Khan who won, but rather the men on horseback.

Dr. C. Christine Fair is a Provost's Distinguished Associate Professor in the Peace and Security Studies Program within Georgetown University's Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service.

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