

Imran Khan, PTI, the Cypher and the Problem of Non-Radical Radicalism

The release of the text of cypher by the “The Intercept”, which former Prime Minister Imran claimed was proof that his government was removed by US, has once again reignited the debate about US interference in Pakistan’s affairs.

Down in poll surveys due to his poor handling of the economy, with a growing perception that his governance and ruling style is no different from Pakistan’s traditional political parties, Imran Khan found himself in trouble in September 2021. The military establishment then decided to remove him from power. It gave the green light to Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) to initiate political moves for the removal of his government.

Concerned about his poor governance performance and low public opinion ratings, Imran Khan embarked upon one of his most successful propaganda campaigns. He decided to whip up anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. He alleged that the removal of his government was not because of his poor performance, but because he refused to take dictation from the super power on the Russian-Ukraine conflict. His supporters now argue that the text of the cypher, which Prime Minister Khan referred to as proof of US hostility towards his government, vindicates the PTI chief’s stance.

The rise of PTI and Imran Khan in Pakistan’s politics, since his famous political rally at Minar e Pakistan Lahore in 2011, has shaken the Pakistani political system. Pakistan’s old ruling political elite and intelligentsia was shocked at the total disregard for established norms and rules of politics, which had been agreed amongst the elite, by Imran Khan’s firebrand politics. In cahoots with the military establishment at the time, Imran Khan built a radical narrative against established political parties and the governance consensus of the ruling elite.

Imran Khan tapped into the deep anger and frustration amongst the masses, who were fed-up with the failure of the democratic system. The masses wanted an alternative to the current ruling system and political leaderships. Through his very aggressive targeting of the old political parties and traditional leaderships, Imran Khan’s radical narrative sought to delegitimize traditional politics.

However, this narrative inadvertently delegitimized many institutions of the Pakistani state itself. He attacked the judiciary, which he accused was packed with Sharif loyalists. He attacked the Election Commission, whom he accused of political bias. He clashed with the military establishment, where he named army generals for their political hostility towards his party. He then criticized the bureaucracy for creating obstacles to his government. Thus, no one was spared from the vehement raging rhetoric of Imran Khan’s firebrand politics.

Although Imran Khan’s political narrative was radical enough to create a crisis of legitimacy for the Pakistani state and the established political parties, he himself deployed his firebrand rhetoric for the sole purpose of seeking power for himself. This is evident from the personalized nature of his support, which is not built around his party, or an ideological platform, but around his personality. According to this narrative, Imran Khan is the politics, policy, ideology and the ruler which Pakistan needs. This personalized and self-centered politics of Imran Khan was evident when PTI built a narrative that “Imran Khan is our redline,” when it became clear that the military establishment is planning to arrest him, to stop him from participating in elections, and coming back to power.

The rise of PTI and Imran Khan, and its downfall, is due to the problem of non-radical, radicalism. Imran Khan rode the wave of a revolutionary current, which was a powerful torrent within the Muslim World. The revolutionary current focused its anger on the Muslim rulers and the governance structures, which had piled up misery and humiliation on the Ummah. It is no coincidence that Imran Khan’s rise coincided with the Arab Spring, which rocked the political structures in the Muslim World. The Arab Spring struck many of the artificial states, which were established by European colonialists, after the destruction of the Ottoman Caliphate. Imran Khan adopted this radical fervor, which was building within the masses, channeling it for his personal advantage. However, he refused to use it to get rid of the political structures and ruling systems implemented in Pakistan, which are the real cause of misery for Muslims of Pakistan.

Like other populists around the world, Imran Khan has successfully deployed the politics of dignity to exploit the massive anti-American sentiment in Pakistan. He has carved for himself an image of an anti-American politician, who is as offended by American hubris and arrogance as the Muslim street. However, this politics of dignity is nothing more than a benign form of anti-Americanism. This specific brand of populist, yet benign, anti-Americanism does not seek to challenge American hegemony of the world. It does not challenge the liberal world order. It does not aim to strike at core American interests around the world or even in the Muslim World or Pakistan. It does not seek to break the relationship of dependency between Pakistan and America. It does not even challenge the American vision for the region where it is building India as a counter-weight to China, whilst using Pakistan's strength to manage the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Imran Khan's anti-Americanism is thus non-radical, although it seeks to whip up radical, popular public opinion. This non-radical radicalism of Pakistan's political and military elite has become an obstacle to a radical and powerful transformation of the Muslim World. That truly radical transformation is based on a new vision, new ideology and a new politics. It seeks to uproot current governance structures in the Muslim World, and replace it with Islam's system of governance.

Consider the case of the cypher itself. While Imran Khan lashed it as a whip to foment anti-American public opinion, the text of the cypher shows Pakistan's ambassador trying to pacify the US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Donald Lu. He argued that Pakistan has not challenged American interests related to Russian-Ukraine war. The cypher mentions the Pakistani ambassador and Donald Lu's clear agreement that Imran Khan's public posture, of refusing to take West's side on the Russian-Ukraine conflict, was only for the sake of Pakistan's domestic politics.

"The Prime Minister's remarks during a political rally were in reaction to the public letter by European Ambassadors in Islamabad which was against diplomatic etiquette and protocol. Any political leader, whether in Pakistan or the U.S., would be constrained to give a public reply in such a situation," argued Pakistan's ambassador to the US Asad Majeed Khan. The ambassador further argued that this is a case of misunderstanding on behalf of American political leadership. He asserted that is because of a lack of high-level diplomatic and political contact between American and Pakistani political leaders. The ambassador went on to suggest that if America felt so strongly about this issue, it should have raised its concern before, and not after, Imran Khan's visit to Moscow. He asserted that Pakistan sought to keep communication channels open with Moscow to collaborate with Russia on the Afghanistan policy. He thus indicated that even Pakistan's visit to Moscow was aimed at securing American interests in Afghanistan. None of this made it to Khan's public narrative on the cypher and American interference in Pakistan's political affairs.

Imran Khan seeks to whip up a certain kind of anti-American narrative, which helps him achieve his domestic political goals. As the detailed arguments of his ambassador show, Imran Khan, and the government he was leading, was not pursuing an anti-American policy. On the contrary, Imran Khan repeatedly sought high-level engagement with the American political leadership. His government worked with the Biden administration on a wide range of issues. These included Biden's exit from Afghanistan and went on to Pakistan pursuing normalization agenda with India, on American insistence.

Moreover, Khan's excessive appeal for US support, settles any notions of a genuine anti-American world-view, which some have argued may be behind Khan's ouster. He excessively lobbied US legislators and made a direct appeal to the American administration and the US Congress. He wanted America to put pressure on Pakistan's government and military establishment to back off from dismantling his party and a campaign of repression targeted against it. Thus, Imran Khan, in his weeks and months of wilderness, when out of power, was inviting American interference in Pakistan's affairs.

An argument can be made that this is not non-radical radicalism. This is pure Machiavellian politics where an anti-American narrative is expediently deployed by a power hungry politician for his personal interests. This, in other words, is a classic case of a politician's hypocrisy. And in Imran Khan's case, this is true. However, the reality is that Pakistan's masses and its elites are

genuinely angry at American hubris and arrogance. They seek to end the humiliation of being at the receiving end of an American policy and American world order, which has consistently strong-armed Pakistan into securing American interests at the cost of the interests of the Muslims of the region. The strong-arm tactics included America's War on Terror and the FATF pressurizing Pakistan into introducing legal and financial reforms to secure Indian interests. They also included the IMF forcing Pakistan, in Pakistan's Finance Minister's words, to etch lines on the floor with our noses, via extremely tough conditions, accompanying its loan program. They even extended to the Pakistani state being forced to choose between economic interests, or hostility against European states, over the issue of the attack on the sanctities of Islam.

However, the genuine anger against the West, and especially America has not been translated, by Pakistan and the Muslim World's political and military leaderships, into a radical and comprehensive anti-Western and anti-American world-view. A world-view that seeks to challenge the West's excesses against Muslim Lands and Muslim interests. A world-view that organizes the affairs of the Muslim World according to the ideology of Islam. A world-view that expels Western cultural, political, economic and military presence from Muslim Lands. A world-view which revives the great and powerful Islamic civilization which illuminated the world for centuries, and which entered in to direct clash with all other alternative ideologies prevalent in the world, on the basis of being intellectually superior to them.

Despite harboring genuine anti-American and anti-Western feelings and emotions, the Muslim ruling and intellectual elite have refused to embrace a civilizational and comprehensive view towards approaching its relationship with the West, and the rest of the World. This non-radical radicalism is now the biggest obstacle in bringing a radical change in the Muslim World. The Muslim ruling and intellectual elite are caught between the Muslim street, which is vehemently anti-Western and anti-American, and which seeks the implementation of the Islamic ideology at the state level, and the international order and its demands, which is pressurizing the Muslim ruling and intellectual elite, to submit before Western and other great power's interests.

Ever since the destruction of the Islamic Khilafah (Caliphate) state in 1924, the Muslim ruling and intellectual elite has sought to carve out a new path for the Muslim World. It is a path that is a departure from the politics of the Khilafah state. The Khilafah viewed its relations with the West and the rest of the World from a civilizational lens. It entered into direct confrontation, challenge and clash with all powers and ideologies which contradicted the Islamic ideology. The Khilafah's world-view is that the World is divided in to Dar ul Islam and Dar ul Harb. Dar ul Islam are all the lands where Islam is implemented. Dar ul Harb, or the land of war, are all lands deprived of the rule of Islam. The Khilafah's world-view was that it was the duty of the Islamic State to carry the Islamic Dawah to the entire World through Jihad. This was deemed too radical by the Muslim elite.

It has been a hundred years since the destruction of the Khilafah state. Yet, the Muslim elite are still resisting the historical and intellectual radical vision, which stems from the Islamic ideology. The elite did so in search of a collaborative, middle ground, where the Muslim World can preserve its civilizational identity in a peaceful co-existence with other civilizations. Such a fanciful and naïve quest has failed miserably. The hundred years of so-called dialogue and engagement between the Islamic and Western civilizations has only resulted in the absolute and complete dominance of the Western civilization over Muslim lands. It is high time that the Muslim elite abandoned this reluctance to go radical. Islam does not believe in compromise and co-existence with other ideologies and world-views. Islam was revealed by Allah (swt) as a guidance for all humanity. It seeks to reshape the whole world according to the Divine Revelation sent down by Allah (swt) through Prophet Muhammad (saw).

﴿كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ﴾

“You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind: you bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and have faith in Allah.” [TMQ Surah Aal i' Imran: 110]

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