

Cricket Legend Khan May be Down, but He Is 'Absolutely Not' Out

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*Events in Pakistan these past few days have been quite astonishing and yet the treatment of its **former Prime Minister Imran Khan**, jailed on spurious corruption charges, has raised barely a headline beyond the foreign pages of Western newspapers. Possibly because most reporting is one-dimensional, the complexities of Pakistan's politics seem incomprehensible to most Western commentators and the British politicians who dismiss the importance of this country because it is indeed mired in corruption.*

Cricket legend Khan is the least corrupt politician in Pakistan these days. I was told by a senior political figure some years ago during a briefing on Pakistani politics, that the former superstar would never make it as a politician because "he is not corrupt". The people in Pakistan, I was told, expect their politicians to be corrupt. "But how can you trust a man who can't be bought?" This has probably been quite a stumbling block for those in Washington for whom the solution to every problem is a steady stream of dollars.

As Prime Minister, Khan posed a problem to America the moment that he said "absolutely not" [to a question](#) about moving US forces from neighbouring Afghanistan to bases in Pakistan. When he uttered those words in June 2021 I knew that the US would move heaven and earth to get rid of him, and was not in the least surprised when he faced a "no confidence" vote in March 2022 and then went on to claim that the US "threatened" him and was [seeking his removal from office](#).

During an interview four months later, former US ambassador to the UN and ex-White House national security adviser **John Bolton** [boasted](#) that he had helped plan coups in foreign countries. It is very easy, therefore, to believe Imran Khan's allegation, but this deliberate attempt to meddle in Pakistani affairs seems to have been ignored by a contemptuous media that simply does not understand what is unfolding in the nuclear-armed state, the world's fifth-most populous country — more than 249.5 million people — and home to the world's largest Muslim population.

However, most of us have to rely on the vain ramblings of foreign correspondents who simply sneer at Khan's dream of building an Islamic welfare state in a Third World country which is divided politically and forever staggering from one public debt crisis to another.

This has not been lost on the underappreciated [Craig Murray](#). The former UK ambassador to Uzbekistan is amazed that "there have been no protests from the UK or US governments."

Sadly, Murray's analysis and knowledge of the region are largely ignored by journalists who simply regurgitate briefings against him. The demonised yet invaluable observer has to publish [his own blog](#) because the corporate media don't want to upset the Establishment by offering him his own column. Murray is also convinced that Khan's removal from his position as prime minister was a CIA-engineered coup, and that the vicious campaign of violence and imprisonment against Khan and his supporters is a demonstration of dark forces at work.

Nevertheless, there's something much larger at play now in Pakistan: the people. They have finally woken up to the fact that their country has been in the grip of a military dictatorship since its creation in 1947.

"Pakistan's politics are, to an extent not sufficiently understood in the West, [it is] literally feudal," Murray pointed out. "Two dynasties, the Sharifs and the Bhuttos, have alternated in power, in a sometimes deadly rivalry, punctuated by periods of more open military rule."

Moreover,

"There is no genuine ideological or policy gap between the Sharifs and Bhuttos, though the latter have more intellectual pretension. It is purely about control of state resources. The arbiter of power has in reality been the military, not the electorate. They have now put the Sharifs back in power."

I remember documenting Khan's arrival and determination to change the political landscape in his beloved country. His achievements in under three decades have been staggering coming from point zero and launching the Pakistan Tehreek e Insaf (PTI) party in 1996. In one interview, I put it to him that the life expectancy of a successful political leader in Pakistan was not good, but he brushed away any fears, and declared his faith in Allah.

That was back in 2003 when the tide was beginning to turn against the US presence in Pakistan. The arrival of US drones wiped out hundreds of innocents over the following decade. This rough US justice and extra-judicial assassinations by Predator drones probably inspired the PTI's astonishing victories in the 2018 National Assembly elections.

Khan had shattered the two-party system and stunned the political dynasties in Pakistan. He was already much loved for his legendary heroics in cricket, but ordinary Pakistanis also loved the way that he was prepared to stand up to Uncle Sam. With the exception of [Malala Yousafzai](#), not a single Pakistani has ever walked into the Oval Office and told the US president [to stop US drone attacks](#). But Khan did.

As Murray writes in his blog,

"The Pakistani military went along with him. The reason is not hard to find. Given the level of hatred the USA had engendered through its drone killings, the invasions of

Afghanistan and Iraq, and the hideous torture excesses of the 'War on terror', it was temporarily not in the interests of the Pakistan military to foreground their deep relationship with the CIA and US military.

"The Pakistan security service, ISI, had [betrayed Osama Bin Laden](#) to the USA, which hardly improved the popularity of the military and security services. Imran Khan was seen by them as a useful safety valve. It was believed he could channel the insurgent anti-Americanism and Islamic enthusiasm which was sweeping Pakistan, into a government acceptable to the West."

While he was in power Khan achieved a great deal, which resonated with the people in the street. He brought an end to the US drone attacks and stopped Pakistani soldiers from being sent as cannon fodder for Saudi Arabia in the Yemen war. His sincerity and ability to endear himself to the common man knew no bounds, just as his unfortunate capacity to make powerful enemies left him terribly exposed.

I suppose, given Pakistan's awful record for political assassinations, it came as no surprise when a gunman fired five shots at Khan after he very publicly condemned military corruption. Up until that point, no one had ever spoken out from a political platform [against the military](#). Khan basically challenged the generals who thought themselves untouchable.

And when he moved last year towards a closer trading relationship with [sanction-hit Russia](#) it was inevitable that Washington would attempt to pull the rug from under Khan's feet by reaching out to corrupt senior army officers. When it comes to power grabs America is not fussy about who it jumps into bed with, and the generals were obviously more than happy to reap the rewards on offer.

The state of Pakistan today is depressing. Thousands of PTI members are behind bars for nothing more than daring to dream of an end to years of corrupt military and dynastic rule.

The media has been defanged and told not to broadcast any interviews with Khan or even show his image. Such censorship of a political leader is almost unprecedented, apart from Nelson Mandela perhaps during the racist Apartheid era in South Africa.

Where are the voices in the British government condemning the injustice of it all? At the time of writing, not one political voice has been heard in Westminster about the treatment of Khan or his followers. Britain's ties to the US are evidently strong enough to ignore the influential presence of hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis within the British Asian community. Around 80 per cent of them are believed to support Khan.

Murray is more to the point on this:

"...I feel confident it also reflects in part the racism and contempt shown by the British political class towards the Pakistani immigrant community, which contrasts starkly with British ministerial enthusiasm for Modi's India. We should not forget New Labour has also never been a friend to democracy in Pakistan, and the Blair government was extremely comfortable with Pakistan's last open military dictatorship under General Musharraf."

Someone else who clearly understands Pakistani politics more than most is Yusuf Islam, aka singer-songwriter Cat Stevens, who has spoken out on social media about Khan's imprisonment. Yusuf tweeted that,

“The majority of balance-minded Muslims know that the politics of Pakistan has for years been allowing corruption to flourish...”

He described Khan’s imprisonment as a “charade” and reminded “those who have orchestrated this premeditated coup... that God, the Seer of all things, is not unaware” before urging them to set Khan free “immediately.”

The arrest of Imran Khan on charges of corruption is so clearly unjustified. The majority of balance-minded Muslims know that the politics of Pakistan has for years been allowing corruption to flourish in the shadows, behind party doors. Now someone has risen who speaks out...

— Yusuf / Cat Stevens (@YusufCatStevens) [May 9, 2023](#)

At the time of writing this column, Imran Khan was in the first week of three years in prison — and a five-year ban from politics — for the alleged embezzlement of official gifts. According to **Shah Mehmood Qureshi**, the vice chairman of Tehreek-e-Insaf, the former prime minister is not being allowed to meet his lawyers. He also admitted to being “extremely concerned” about Khan’s wellbeing following the [assassination attempt](#) last November.

Khan believes that he and his party are still capable of returning to power in Pakistan’s next elections despite his latest incarceration. Early last month he compared himself to embattled leaders from history like Mandela and Gandhi, and almost foreshadowed his own arrest and imprisonment.

For those journalists still trying to figure out if Imran Khan will compromise or throw in the towel, consider this: the cricket legend may be down, but he is “absolutely not” out.

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