**An attack on democracy**

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A possible long march by the PTI appears to be yet another desperate attempt by the former prime minister to destabilize the country. A cursory look at the past 25 years of the PTI’s politics shows that Imran Khan has had nothing but a sole desire to become ruler of this country by any means.

There was a time in the 1990s that the PML-N played a similar role against the PPP but 2008 onwards there has been a visible change in the politics of both the PML-N and the PPP. When the PPP assumed office in 2008, initially there was some bonhomie between the two parties but soon the PML-N parted ways and did create some problems for the ruling PPP. Still, the opposition did not cross red lines and the PPP managed to complete its term in office – though former CJ Iftikhar Chaudhary did not allow the PPP government a smooth flow.

In 2013, for the first time in Pakistan’s history there was a peaceful transition of power from one political party to another after the completion of a full five-year term of the National Assembly. Though it may be recalled that the then prime minister Yusuf Raza Gilani had to pay a heavy price in 2012 for refusing to follow the guidelines the Supreme Court of Pakistan had issued to him for writing a letter to Switzerland against the then president of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari. Nawaz Sharif had to quit office in 2017 – again without completing his five-year term.

The way Imran Khan was brought to power is no more a secret. The machinery that supported Imran Khan had been working on this project for over a decade. From 2008 to 2018, despite all hurdles, democracy appeared to be taking some roots. In most democratic countries around the world there are two major political parties with many other smaller outfits. Normally one party represents a relatively conservative outlook which we may call centre-right; whereas the other party reflects a relatively centre-left approach. This is an established practice and most countries follow the same pattern.

In Pakistan, Imran Khan targeted the two largest parties and blamed them for ‘taking turns’ – as though there was something wrong with that. He built his narrative on packs of lies – not one but many. He accused those who had perhaps done no harm to him; in fact many in other parties had idealized him as a fine cricketer. For nearly ten years Imran Khan shouted at the top of his voice, hurling accusations without any solid proof. The young generation – and also the not so young – was led to believe that two parties had been ruling this country for decades and had been looting and plundering its resources.

Imran never mentioned that there had been long military rules spanning over decades that had done tremendous harm to this country and its social fabric. Imran Khan derived his power from those who had little understanding of history and had no love lost for democracy. His relentless campaign against the PML-N and the PPP had dull support from the right – or rather wrong – quarters. All those who should have remained apolitical indulged in a free-for-all, targeting anyone not siding with Imran Khan, who literally became a blue-eyed-boy of the powers that be.

Just like General Musharraf had used arm-twisting to break the two largest political parties, once again the same practice came in handy. There were mass defections of senior politicians from both the PML-N and the PPP who were ready to become turncoats at the given signal. In 2017 and 2018, the pro-Imran machinery was in full swing – all hurdles removed and all opponents either tied up or thrown aside. To a great extent it was an action replay of 1965 under General Ayub Khan, 1985 under General Ziaul Haq, or 2002 under General Musharraf.

Finally, the scheme had to be successful, at least for the time being. Somehow, the Imran Khan project reminded many observers of the Altaf Husain and Nawaz Sharif projects of the 1980s. Imran Khan received his power in a platter and made tall claims about his team and its ‘high level of competency’. His claims were hollow from the word go; claiming to be Mr Clean, he had accepted in his party the same political elite that had changed sides many times in the past. Most of them had faced corruption charges and had accumulated billions by all means.

But perhaps the most devastating impact of Imran Khan’s dirty politics on Pakistan was not economic alone. His inability to learn parliamentary language and propensity to use expletives and monikers for his opponents spawned a whole new generation of those who were rude and disrespectful to anyone who disagreed with them. In less than a decade Imran Khan had transformed the political landscape of Pakistan for the worse – or rather the worst. He served as a torpedo to any democratic aspirations the people of Pakistan ever had. His sole purpose being to destroy any democratic culture that may have taken root in the country.

While stories of corruption within his own close circle of friends were circulating, Imran failed to take any action against anyone who violated ethical and moral codes of conduct. His tirades against other political parties became louder and nastier as he struggled to stay in power. For nearly four years he had a near-complete vote-of-confidence from those who should have remained ‘neutral’ all along. A destruction of the economy was not the only fault that Imran Khan displayed; his refusal to respect parliamentary practices and democratic norms were even more devastating.

The hallmark of the inept handling of affairs by the PTI government included the targeting of the opposition parties, attempts to subdue the media, initiation of cases – most of them baseless – against dissenters, and the use of presidential ordinances for controversial legislation. How could he get away with all this? Elementary, Dr Watson. If you have strong support, you can get away with anything – no matter how criminal it is. You siphon off the Toshakhaana gifts, it is excusable. You make a mockery of Senate elections, pardonable. You try to manipulate by-elections by abducting election officials, no big deal.

The list is endless and the worst part is that a large section of society has started believing him and following in his footsteps in rudeness and chicanery. He propagates a conspiracy theory and his followers believe him. He expounds the idea of a long march to paralyze the capital and he has throngs after him. He spins a yarn about a cipher, and keeps repeating it ad nauseam while his followers trust every word he says, even if there are no grounds to believe in such a concocted story. If there are leaks of conversations, the ones that go in his favour are all believed as true; those which expose him are all false.

Imran Khan’s deceitful narratives have been extremely harmful for democracy, for politics, for rule of law, and for society itself. There appears to be no logical conclusion to this farce of politics that the former prime minister is staging. Calling others traitors and trying to save his own skin has been his forte. The torpedo has done enough harm; it must be defused now, but who will do it and how is a million-dollar question.

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