

ISAS Brief

No. 35 – Date: 12 December 2007

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Forthcoming Pakistan Elections: A Profile on Imran Khan

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The Election Commission of Pakistan has announced elections to the national and provincial assemblies of Pakistan on 8 January 2008. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan subscribes to the parliamentary system of multiparty democracy. Universal adult franchise is followed, and all men and women who are at least 18 years of age are entitled to vote for a candidate of their choice through a secret ballot. The first-past-the-post procedure is followed to elect members of the national and provincial assemblies. It means that the candidate who receives the highest numbers of votes in a constituency is elected to the legislative assembly. The national parliament consists of two houses - an upper house, called the Senate, and the lower house, called the National Assembly. The National Assembly, which is elected directly by the people, consists of 342 seats of which 60 seats are reserved for women and 10 for minorities.

The last general elections were held in October 2002. At that time, the opposition alleged vote rigging by the government of General Pervez Musharraf, acting as Chief Executive Officer under a quasi-martial law, imposed after the *quo d'état* in 1999. It allegedly favoured the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) and the Muthidda Quomi Movement (MQM). Both remain his main political support base even this time. It can be pointed out that election rigging has a long history in Pakistan, which has also experienced long periods of military rule. Consequently, democracy remains precarious and weakly institutionalised.

The political opposition had been debating for some time whether the election should be contested or boycotted, but no unanimous position was taken. Two of the main parties in the opposition – the Pakistan People's Party led by Ms Benazir Bhutto, and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) have decided to contest the elections. Some minor parties are likely to boycott them, however.

It should be noted that unlike in 2002, both Ms Bhutto and Mr Sharif have returned from exile and General Musharraf who in 2002 retained his position as Chief of Army Staff has removed his uniform and is therefore a civilian, albeit controversially elected President. This election therefore promises to be far more exciting than the previous one,

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and despite the uncertainties, the results are projected to have a significant bearing on the path that Pakistan takes hereon.

Some of the political parties are dominated by strong personalities while others are either ideology-driven or pragmatically associated with the government. In a series of briefs, we will introduce the personalities and the political parties involved in the bid for power in Pakistan through the electoral process.

The first in this series of profiles is Mr Imran Khan. Born on 25 November 1952 in Lahore, Pakistan, Mr Khan is the leader of the Tehreek-e-Insaaf (Movement for Justice), a middle-of-the-road political party with some Islamist leanings. Hitherto it has done badly in the elections of 1997 and 2002, but Mr Khan personally enjoys a wide popularity, though of a narrow and dispersed social stratum comprising students and some intellectuals.

Although born and brought up in the Punjab, Mr Khan identifies himself as a Pushtoon and not as a Punjabi. The Pushtoons (also known popularly as Pathans) are the main ethnic nationality of the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan (NWFP), which shares a long border with Afghanistan. Many Pushtoon tribes are settled in Punjab since a long time. Mr Khan belongs to the Niazi Shermankhel tribe of Mianwali, a western district of Pakistan's Punjab Province. The emphasis on Pushtoon ancestry derives from a pride in the reputation of his group as a martial people that has historically produced many rulers, administrators and soldiers. Mr Khan has been educated in Pakistan and the United Kingdom (UK). He is a graduate of Oxford University.

During the recent emergency imposed on Pakistan by General Musharraf, Mr Khan was arrested on charges of inciting defiance of the government's writ. He was taken to a jail far away from his home in Lahore and was reportedly treated harshly as a common criminal. He was released subsequently, as were thousands of other detainees arrested by the police throughout Pakistan.

Before he became a politician, Mr Khan gained considerable fame as one of the most outstanding Pakistani cricketer. He was captain of the cricket team that won the World Cup in 1992. Later, he gained admiration and sympathy from the people of Pakistan when he launched a campaign to collect donations for a cancer hospital in Lahore. Many leading personalities from the Indian film industry took part in those campaigns. The result has been the establishment of the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Trust named after his mother who died of that disease.

The Shaukat Khanum Memorial Cancer Hospital & Research Centre, a charitable hospital with 75 per cent free care, was opened in Lahore on 29 December 1994. Currently, Mr Khan has been working on two major social projects. He is building another cancer hospital in Karachi and a technical college called the Namal College in the Mianwali district.

However, Mr Khan also gained notoriety as a playboy during his long stay in the UK. His name was associated with several female models and socialites. He married Jemima Goldsmith, the daughter of the multi-billionaire Sir James Goldsmith in 1995. Jemima moved to Pakistan and lived in Lahore for several years, but the marriage ended on the rocks and Jemima returned to the UK in 2004. The couple has two sons together. Mr Khan's political opponents have tried many times, albeit unsuccessfully, to exploit scandals from his past life to tarnish his image.

It is interesting to note that Mr Khan began his political initiation and apprenticeship under the hawkish Lt. General (R) Hamid Gul, who was head of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), considered by many analysts as a state within the state in the Pakistani power structure. The ISI spearheaded the jihad during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In 1996, Mr Khan founded the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf with a proposed slogan and vision of "Justice, Humanity and Self Esteem".

The Tehreek-e-Insaaf took part in the 1997 general elections but was completely routed at the polls. In the 2002 general elections again, it fared very badly. Out of 272 seats contested by it, only one seat was won by it – that by Mr Khan from the Mianwali district. As Member of Parliament, Mr Khan was member of two National Assembly committees - the Standing Committee on Kashmir and the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

Although in October 1999 Mr Khan supported General Musharraf when he overthrew the government of then Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif, he became increasingly critical of General Musharraf over time, accusing him of dictatorship and corrupt government. He has also been a very vocal opponent of what he believes is subservience to the United States' (US) pressure in the war against terrorism by the government of General Musharraf.

Mr Khan had been emphasising, for quite some time, the need for an independent and impartial judiciary to ensure good government and justice in Pakistan. Thus when General Musharraf declared Chief Justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court, Mr Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, as non-functional in March 2007 on alleged charges of abuse of office, Mr Khan became one of the most outspoken and vociferous critics of that decision. He has also not been hesitant in criticising some politicians in the opposition, such as Ms Benazir Bhutto, for allegedly seeking a power-sharing deal with General Musharraf.

On 2 October 2007, Mr Khan joined 85 other members of the Pakistan Parliament in protest to the scheduled presidential elections for 6 October 2007. It may be recalled that General Musharraf (while still retaining his position as Chief of Army Staff, something he has promised to give up when his election as President is confirmed) was elected as President by the outgoing members of the national and provincial parliaments on 6 October 2007. That election was challenged in the Supreme Court. General Musharraf later re-constituted the supreme court, removing those judges he suspected would give a ruling against him and retained only those he believed supported him. The Supreme Court validated his election as President by throwing out all the petitions challenging the election.

With regard to overall ideological and political orientation, Mr Khan remains an enigma. He claims to base his political platform on Islamic values though he does not approve of extremism. He considers himself an orthodox Sunni Muslim inspired by Sufi ideas of personal piety and purity of heart. He is in favour of democracy and is a supporter of a deregulated economy, but also of a welfare state. He claims to be committed to rooting out corruption, ensuring quick justice through an independent judiciary. He also favours decentralisation of government powers, and a radical cut on bureaucratic 'red-tapism'. He blames the West, especially the US, for fanning anti-Islamic feelings in the world.

Mr Khan has advocated a dialogue with the Taliban and other radical Islamist groups in Pakistan. In external matters he has come out strongly against US President George W. Bush's policies on Afghanistan and Iraq. With regard to India, he generally favours

normalisation of relations with that country through increasing trade, and sport and cultural interaction, but insists that the resolution of the Kashmir dispute is imperative for an overall normalisation of relations between the two states.

Mr Khan and his Tehreek-e-Insaaf have declared that they will boycott the elections on 8 January 2008. However, even in an election held under normal circumstances without an emergency being in place, they are not expected to provide a major upset, though they might perform better than before. Their electoral support base continues to be assessed as quite limited.

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