

IMRAN KHAN

MYTH OF THE PAKISTANI MIDDLE-CLASS

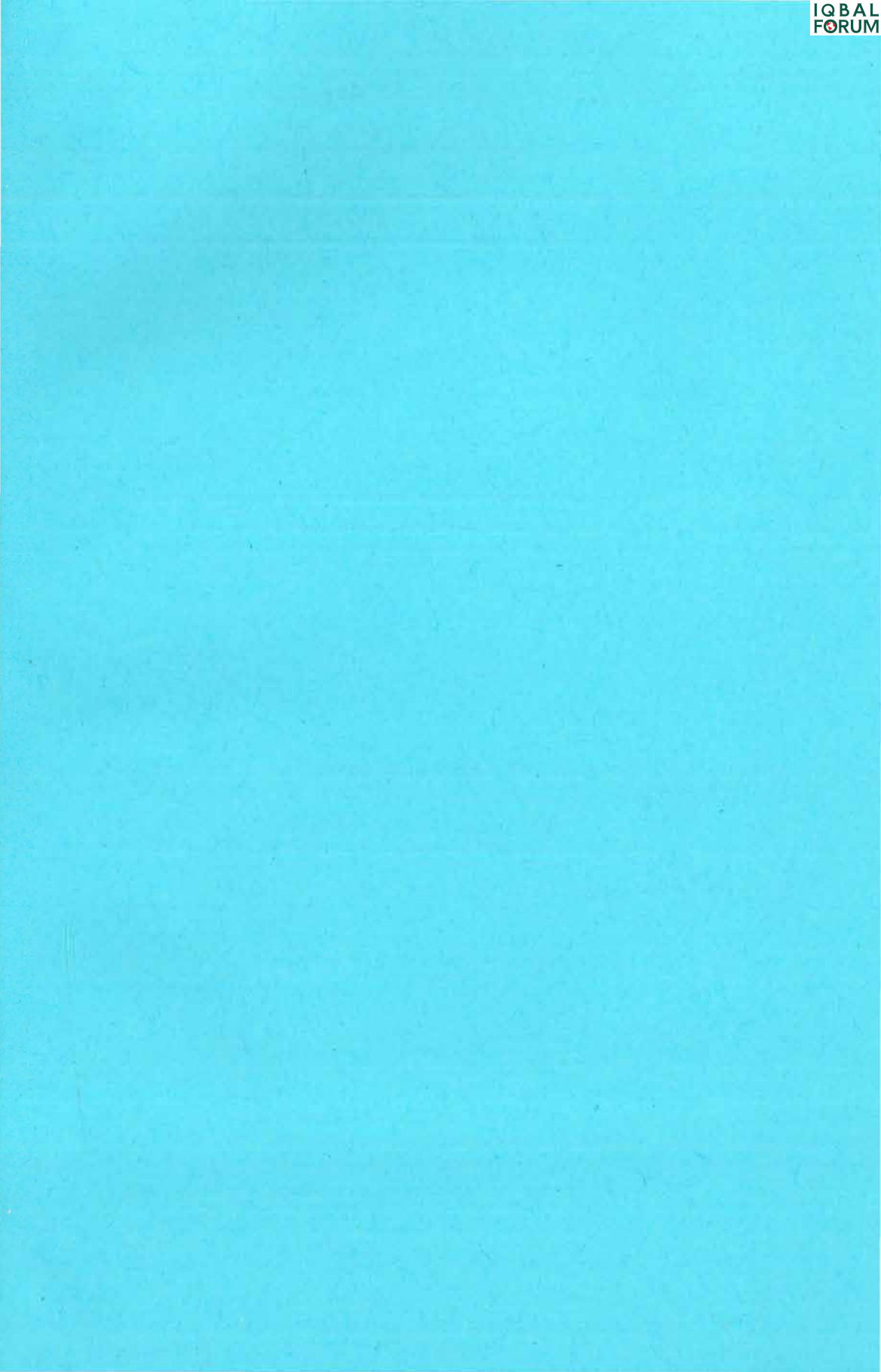


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NADEEM FAROOQ PARACHA



VANGUARD BOOKS

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Chapter 1

The Anti-Leader

Imran Khan had a remarkable cricket career. It began in 1971 when he was just 18-years-old, and ended in 1992 when he retired from the game, aged 40. From a struggling medium-fast-bowler who made a forgetful debut for the Pakistan cricket team, Khan rebounded to become the country's premier fast bowler and then all-rounder. In 1982, he was appointed captain of the team. As captain, he raised his game even further, becoming one of Pakistan's most successful and influential cricketers.

He was also perhaps one of the country's first international sporting stars, even though, at the time, the Pakistan hockey team was among the top three in the world, and men such as Jahangir Khan had begun to dominate international squash rankings. Till the 1980s, international cricket was played by just a handful of countries. So it wasn't cricket alone that turned Khan into an 'international' star. Good looking and charismatic, he was often seen with women from the upper echelons of British society. He loved London's nightlife and was a regular at the city's finest nightclubs. Such clubs had been closed down in Pakistan in April 1977.

Even his cricketing exploits were not always about his abilities as a cricketer. Some sections of the press in Pakistan often described his style of captaincy as 'dictatorial,' and based on 'favouritism.' A graduate of Oxford University, and coming from an influential upper-middle-class family of Lahore, he spent a lot of time in England. He seemed rather intimidating to most Pakistani players, especially those from lower-middle-class or working-class backgrounds.

As captain, his word was always final. On various occasions, he had led the team from the front. Captaincy actually bolstered his bowling and batting prowess. This is why, even the most powerful

members of the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB)¹ hesitated to confront or contradict him. He would always get the team *he* wanted. Sometimes this meant leaving out players that *he* did not like, no matter how talented they were. These were often those who refused to follow the rules *he* had set. Or those who were not thrilled by the manner in which he often unleashed a barrage of curse words aimed at players that he thought were not performing the way *he* wanted them to. If a player complained, out he went, never to play for Pakistan again.

Qasim Umer is an example. An exceptionally gifted batsman who was given a brutal dressing down by Khan when he got out, playing a reckless shot. This was in Australia, in 1986. Qasim was offended by Khan's tone and choice of words. Khan told him that he was not welcome in *his* team anymore. When the team returned to Pakistan, Qasim held a press conference. He accused Khan and other players of being habitual marijuana/hashish smokers, and of bringing women to their hotel rooms for sex.² Khan did not respond. And it was Qasim who got the axe. He was banned by PCB for life.

In 1987, another batsman, Younas Ahmad, repeated Qasim's accusations. He too was axed. The curious bit is that, most Pakistani cricket fans already had a pretty good idea about what Qasim was carping about. Tabloids often ran 'stories' about Khan's sexual escapades and other equally colourful non-cricketing activities. But Khan and his team were performing well. In fact, in 1988, Pakistan had become the leading Test cricket side in the world. So no one really cared what the team's captain and his players were doing off-the-field. Khan understood this mindset well.

When one of Khan's protégées Wasim Akram was made captain in 1993, he often behaved like his mentor. He used to audibly curse players on the field. Akram was more talented than Khan. But he came

¹ The board at the time was called Board of Cricket Control in Pakistan. Its name was changed to PCB in the early 1990s.

² 'Call Girls to be Questioned in Cricket Scandal' (The Guardian, January 21, 2001)

from a lower-middle-class background. Khan got him to play county cricket in England so that Akram could not only sharpen his cricketing skills, but also his personality. However, as captain, when Akram adopted Khan's authoritarian demeanor, nine players rebelled against him and got PCB to remove him from captaincy.

Khan cultivated a strong friendship with the team's tall swing bowler Sarfaraz Nawaz. Nawaz had made his debut in 1969. He had a temperament of a brawler. He took Khan under his wings in 1974. He taught him the 'art of swing bowling' and seemed to know where all the best nightclubs in England were. In 1981, when a Pakistani-Australian opened a nightclub in Sydney, he invited Khan and Nawaz to inaugurate it. Sarfaraz was a volatile character and outspoken. Khan enjoyed that.

In 1983, when Sarfaraz retired, Khan coaxed him to continue playing. Sarfaraz was too important a player and friend to let go, especially during Khan's early years as captain. Then there was Javed Miandad. Between 1976 and 1992, Miandad and Khan were the two core constants in the team. Yet, they were not always on the same page. Miandad came from a lower-middle-class family in Karachi. He had learned his cricket on the streets, and then by playing local club cricket. Imran learned his from playing on the grounds of Lahore's prestigious Aitcheson School and at the Lahore Gymkhana. He then left for England to study at Oxford. He also played cricket for the university.

Miandad was talkative and quick-witted. And he couldn't speak a word of English when he made his debut in 1976 at the age of 19. He was nurtured as a player by the then captain and fellow Karachiite, Mushtaq Mohammad. In 1980, Miandad was made captain. He was just 24. In 1982, ten players led a rebellion against him. The rebellion was orchestrated by Khan's cousin, and the team's premier opening batsman Majid Khan. Imran too was part of the uprising. The rebels lamented that Miandad was immature as a captain and his attitude towards senior players was crude. PCB sided with Miandad. But he

agreed to step down as long as Majid and another senior batsman Zaheer Abbas, weren't made captain. PCB opted for Imran.

The team's once fragmented nature had begun to transform during Mushtaq Mohammad's captaincy. Pakistan had won just two Test matches between 1960 and 1973. During Mushtaq's two stints as skipper (between 1976 and 1979) the team won eight. Mushtaq retired after he was replaced by his deputy, Asif Iqbal. After badly losing a series against India, Iqbal quit. PCB requested Mushtaq to return as captain. But he suggested Miandad's name. Miandad's appointment as captain came as a shock to most. He was the side's best batsman, but critics believed he was too young to captain a side, many of whose players were much older and more experienced than him. Miandad's first stint as skipper (1980-82) was a torrid affair — even though in his first 13 Tests as captain, he won 4 and lost 3. But due to the aforementioned tensions, the team was divided.

As captain, Khan was successful in almost immediately turning things around. With his performances, he was able to attract respect from the players. He led them from the front, cutting a bold figure who played to win. Khan's idol was Ian Chappell, the Australian batsman who captained his country's cricket side in the early-and-mid-1970s. Chappell's style of captaincy was aggressive, and even provocative. Khan admired the manner in which Chappell loved to play 'mind games' with the opposition. Khan was quick to pick on this. During his first series as captain, Khan selected a discarded leg-spinner Abdul Qadir. Qadir had made his debut in 1977, but by 1981, his career seemed to be as good as over.

Khan's first series was against England in England. He believed that the English side would struggle to read Qadir because right-arm-leg-spinners were becoming extinct in England. PCB disagreed. But Khan insisted. Then he threatened to quit the captaincy even before it began. PCB relented and Qadir reached England with rest of the side. Just before the team's departure, Khan asked Qadir to grow a goatee.

Qadir obliged, even though he had no clue why the captain was asking him to do this. During a press conference in London, Khan told the British press that he had a ‘secret weapon.’ That secret weapon was Qadir, and Khan described him as a ‘wizard’ (with the cricket ball). Qadir finally understood why Khan had asked him to grow a goatee. He wanted him to look the part.³

Khan was right. The English batsmen struggled against Qadir’s bowling and he became a mainstay in Khan’s team. This was a more vocal Imran. A review of interviews that Khan gave before he became captain, shows a rather shy person. He didn’t say much. He seemed happy to remain in the shadow of his cousin Majid Khan who he greatly admired. His friendship with Sarfaraz was well-known, but Sarfaraz did all the talking. Khan did start to open up a bit during a 1981 feature that the now defunct Pakistan magazine *Herald* published on Wasim Raja and him.

Raja was a dashing left-handed batsman. Like Khan, he too was considered a ‘sex symbol’ with a dedicated fan following. Raja was a moody character, with a dry sense of humour. He greatly enjoyed his Scotch as well. Sometimes a bit too much.⁴ His bat had a mind of its own. It was erratic, though. Khan believed Raja was one of the most talented batsmen in the game, yet he didn’t have what other ‘natural greats’ had: consistency. Raja would score big in one game but would often throw away his wicket in the next. His whole career was spent being in and out of the team.

The *Herald* feature was not about the two’s cricketing skills as such. It was more about how Khan and Raja handled phone calls and letters from their female fans. Khan wondered from where the (female) fans get his phone number. It wasn’t listed in the phone directory. But small talk and some cricket is all he was willing to discuss in his interviews. Even when he became part of the rebellion against

³ ‘The Magician is Dead, But the Magic Lives On’ (Pakistan Today, September 7, 2019)

⁴ W. Alam, G. Haigh: *Sultan: A Memoir* (Liberty Publishing, 2022) p.217

Miandad, he let Majid do all the talking. But by then his admiration for his cousin was starting to wane. When Miandad agreed to step down, some Urdu newspapers reported that Khan was willing to play under Miandad's captaincy if the PCB agreed to increase his playing fee.

Khan also had no issue with Miandad's ultimatum that he would only step down if Majid and Zaheer were not made captain. Majid did not appreciate his cousin's 'betrayal.' Things got worse between the two when Khan did not play (an ageing) Majid in any of the three Tests in England. Majid never talked to him again. As captain, Khan became more vocal than ever, spouting bizarre claims because the Qadir stunt in England had worked. During an ODI series in Australia, he told the Australian press that Manzoor Ilahi was the hardest hitting batsman in the world. And this world at the time had swashbuckling hitters such as the West Indian Vivian Richards, England's Ian Botham and India's Kapil Dev.

Indeed, in domestic cricket, and on flat tracks, Ilahi was a big hitter. But certainly not the biggest. He did hit a few long ones in Australia, but could not impress much. This was Khan's way of using exaggeration to keep his opponents guessing. It was a hit or miss tactic. Qadir had enough skill to pull off Khan's 'he's a wizard' stunt. Ilahi didn't. Then in 1988, Khan told an Indian reporter that the Kashmir issue (over which Pakistan and India have fought multiple wars) should be decided on the cricket field. The Indian press was baffled.

Of course, Khan firmly had his tongue in his cheek. Yet, it was quite a statement to make. In a way, he was more-than-alluding that India-Pakistan games were like actual wars. His statement played more on the minds of the Indian cricketers because Pakistan had been on the winning end of the majority of Tests and ODIs⁵ played between the two in the 1980s.

⁵ One Day Internationals.

Khan retired from cricket immediately after the 1987 Cricket World Cup. The Pakistan side led by him was expected to win the event, but it fell in the semi-finals against a weaker Australian team. Khan was distraught. He announced his retirement. A few months later, when Pakistan was preparing to travel to the West Indies, the country's military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-88) requested Khan to take back his decision. The West Indies at the time was the world's strongest cricket side. It was almost unbeatable at home. Khan missed a home series against England in which Pakistan was led by Javed Miandad.

When Khan came out of retirement, he was reinstated as captain and Miandad was again appointed his deputy. Miandad didn't make a fuss. The West Indies series was tied 1-1, but Pakistan came very close to winning it. Zia had often used the exploits of the country's cricket team to negotiate settlements with archenemy India. Zia was overseeing and navigating an insurgency against Soviet troops in Afghanistan. He was doing this on the behest of the United States and Saudi Arabia. Both dished out billions of dollars' worth of aid which was channeled through the Zia regime to host, arm and train Islamist opponents of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul.

Zia thus, could not afford any serious tensions with India. He needed to neutralize the 'Indian threat' to concentrate on the 'jihad' in Afghanistan. This so-called jihad, bankrolled by the US government and the Saudi monarchy, had become a lifeline for Zia's increasingly unpopular and repressive dictatorship. Zia often used cricket series between Pakistan and India to flex what became to be known as 'cricket diplomacy.' Imran Khan was an important component of this diplomacy, even if he had no idea how Zia was playing him. Or so it seemed.

Khan was hugely popular in India. He was treated there as if he were a Bollywood star. He had already been involved in romantic affairs with at least two leading India film actresses. One of these

affairs (in 1979) almost saw him agreeing to marry a famous Bollywood siren, but reportedly, Majid intervened and forced him to end the relationship.⁶ However, Khan's popularity in India remained intact. Zia was pleased when Khan led Pakistan during a long tour of India in 1987 and defeated the hosts. Zia was invited by the Indian PM to visit India and watch the fourth Test match of the 5-Test-series. Zia spent a few hours watching the game with the Indian PM.

Zia was confident that he had repaired relations with India that had begun to deteriorate when Pakistan was accused by India of aiding a Sikh uprising in Indian Punjab in the early 1980s. A strong Pakistani cricket side led by a charismatic captain who was equally popular in India played a vital role in strengthening Zia's 'cricket diplomacy.' Khan's cricket career ended on a high when in 1992, Pakistan won the Cricket World Cup for the first time. Just when it seemed that the team's chances of reaching the semi-finals had all but evaporated, the team pulled off a series of wins in its last few games to enter the semis. After defeating an in-form New Zealand side in a thrilling semi-final game, Pakistan went on to down England in Melbourne to lift the trophy.

The euphoria of the win was dampened a bit when the Pakistani media criticised Khan's victory speech. It was all about himself. He did not bother to praise or thank his team that had rallied around him when it looked as if Pakistan would never make it to the semi-final stage. Players such as Miandad, Wasim Akram, Inziam-ul-Haq, Aquib Javed, Aamir Sohail, Mushtaq Ahmad and Moin Khan had registered some outstanding performances to help the team win its last five games. Khan was a bit out of sorts during the tournament, but he did strike an important partnership with Miandad in the final when the team had lost both of its opening batsmen in quick succession.

Khan would later apologise for his speech, saying that he wasn't much of a public speaker and had been overwhelmed by the experience

⁶ 'One of the Greatest India-Pakistan Love Story' (Times of India, August 14, 2018)

of lifting the World Cup. He said he dearly wanted Pakistan to win because a major victory could go a long way in helping him raise funds for the cancer hospital that he was building in Lahore. He confessed that had Pakistan not reached the final, or even if it had lost the final, he would've had to struggle to attract the kind of donations which were required to build a modern cancer hospital.

Khan was gripped by the fear of being unable to raise the money when his team was losing game after game during the first half of the tournament. The manner in which his team made a comeback, and then went on to win the event, left Khan feeling emotionally overawed, knowing that his campaign to raise the required money would be bolstered by the win. Money began to pour in even before Khan and his team landed in Pakistan. Zia had died in a plane crash in August 1988. Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had formed the first post-Zia government after winning the October 1988 elections. In 1990, her regime was dismissed by President Ishaq Khan on charges of 'corruption.'

Nawaz Sharif was the PM when Khan returned to Pakistan with the trophy. Nawaz had been elected PM in 1990. He was a protégée of Zia, groomed by the late dictator as his civilian vessel. PM Nawaz received the team at the Lahore airport. He then quietly invited Khan to join his party, the Pakistan Muslim League (PML). Khan politely refused.⁷ He told an interviewer that he wasn't cut-out for politics, and would rather concentrate on completing the construction of the cancer hospital. In fact, he wasn't even sure about his retirement from cricket. The PCB wanted him to continue playing — at least in the 5-Test-series against England in England that was to take place just months after the World Cup final.

However, during an interview aired on State television (PTV) Khan announced his retirement. The long-time manager of the team Intikhab Alam (a former Pakistan cricket captain [1971-75]) however, kept

⁷ 'When Nawaz Offered Imran to Join His Party' (DAWN, August 16, 2020)

reassuring the interviewer that Khan was bound to change his mind. But Khan insisted that he had decided to retire. Miandad replaced him as captain. This is also when Khan began to fall out with his former teammate and best friend Sarfaraz Nawaz. Sarfaraz had retired in 1985. In 1988, he joined the PPP. Even though he narrowly lost an election in Lahore, PM Benazir appointed him as sports advisor in her government.

During a joint-interview that Khan gave with Sarfaraz on PTV, Khan began to criticise the country's first-class cricket structure. Sarfaraz wasn't amused. He told Khan that he (Khan) might have played most of his first-class cricket in England, but a majority of players representing Pakistan had emerged from the country's domestic cricket circuit. Khan was of the view that Pakistan should adopt Australian or British first-class cricket structures that were more competitive. Sarfaraz again disagreed, reminding Khan that most of the players that had helped him win games in the 1980s and eventually the 1992 World Cup, were all produced by the country's domestic cricket structure.

After his retirement from cricket, Khan was regularly sought by the media to comment on the game. He was also close to completing the hospital. During Pakistan's series against England in the summer of 1992, Khan invited a handful of players who were part of the touring squad. Strangely, Miandad, who had dutifully served Khan as his deputy, and played a major role in helping Khan's team lift the World Cup, wasn't invited. The invited included Khan's protégées, the devastating fast bowling duo of Wasim Akram and Waqar Younus. Miandad didn't say much. But a statement by Khan in which he more-than-alluded that Akram would make an excellent captain, did bother Miandad. Pakistan won the series. However, in late 1992, the world champions were routed in a triangular ODI tournament in Australia.

Miandad was unceremoniously removed from the captaincy when Akram and Waqar publicly criticised his tactics. Akram was appointed

captain, and Waqar became vice captain. Miandad was livid. He accused Khan of encouraging the two fast bowlers to lead a rebellion against him. According to Miandad, Khan was ‘taking revenge’ against him because Miandad had refused to donate his World Cup earnings to Khan’s hospital project. Miandad claimed that almost every other member of the team too had refused to donate their earnings. But he added that on various previous occasions, the players had gone out of their way to help Khan’s project.

Miandad raged that unlike Khan, most of the younger players came from poor families and had every right to keep their earnings which grew manifold after Pakistan became world champions. Khan rubbished Miandad’s claims and stated that Miandad’s ouster was due to his own failures. The resulting grudge between the two lasted for years. Miandad also claimed that Khan had faced a players’ rebellion during the World Cup event.⁸ He said that it was due to his endeavors that Khan was able to survive a potential revolt during the tournament.

The hospital was completed in December 1994. In 1993, Sharif’s government fell when it was dismissed by President Ishaq Khan for ‘being corrupt.’ However, Ishaq too lost his post during his tussle with Sharif. The 1993 elections were won by Benazir’s PPP and she became PM again. In 1995, she expressed her desire to visit Khan’s cancer hospital. But when she did, Khan refused to meet her. He didn’t turn up. This came as a surprise to most because till then Khan had remained apolitical. But his refusal to meet PM Bhutto was a signal from him that he was not very fond of her.

By then, Khan had developed a working relationship with a former spymaster General Hamid Gul. Gul had played a crucial role during the anti-Soviet insurgency in Afghanistan. With US and Saudi money, he had organised the training and funding of Islamist fighters that were operating from Pakistan. In 1987, he was appointed head of the

⁸ ‘Imran Khan Survived A Players Revolt at 1992 World Cup’ (Reuters, March 25, 2021)

country's premier intelligence agency the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). After Zia's demise in 1988, Gul feared that the PPP was poised to sweep the election, form a government, and undo Zia's policies.

Gul also feared that Benazir would halt Pakistan's nuclear program. Gul saw Benazir as a pro-West politician, committed to sideline Zia's 'pro-Islam' policies. The irony is that Gul had worked closely with the US government during the Afghan insurgency, and had helped Zia suppress anti-US protests in the country. But once the Soviet troops began to leave Afghanistan, and US aid to Pakistan shrunk, Gul started to oppose the US. He wanted to continue Pakistan's engagement in Afghanistan. He enjoyed considerable influence over some Islamist groups who had fought against the Soviet troops. To neutralise the electoral threat posed by the PPP, Gul used his position in the ISI to raise funds to help form a right-wing multi-party electoral alliance.⁹ He succeeded. The alliance was called the Islamic Democratic Alliance (IDA).

Although the PPP won the most number of seats in the election, IDA was able to deny Benazir an outright majority. She had to form a coalition government with the help of the Mohajir nationalist party, the Mohajir Quami Movement (MQM), and some independent candidates. In 1989, Benazir dismissed Gul from the ISI. Five years later, during Benazir's second stint as PM, Gul began to be seen in Imran's company.

Khan was a political novice. As an adult, he had spent more time in the UK than in Pakistan. In a book which he authored in 2012,¹⁰ he confessed that he had only superficial knowledge about his own country. It was years later after he retired from cricket that he became

⁹ 'Hamid accepts responsibility for creating IJI' (DAWN, October 30, 2012)

¹⁰ *Pakistan: A Personal History* (Random House, 2012)

aware of the manner in which Zia had consolidated his power and elongated his dictatorship. Khan was rather ignorant about the fates of dozens of journalists and political activists who were publicly flogged, and of hundreds of young men and women who were tortured and some even hanged, by the dictatorship.

He also didn't seem to know much about the manner in which Islam was being used as a political tool by Zia when Khan was enjoying London's nightlife and socializing with Britain's elites. In the book he claims that he began to understand all this when he quit cricket. Yet, as his first political mentor, he chose Hamid Gul, one of Zia's closest confidants and henchmen. Or maybe Gul chose him? Khan was first approached by a group calling itself Pasban (guard). Pasban largely included former members of the mainstream Islamist party the Jamat-e-Islami (JI).

Pasban claimed that it stood to safeguard the political and economic interests of the middle-classes which, the group claimed, were sandwiched between a 'corrupt' ruling elite and vulnerable and ill-informed poorer classes who were gullible because they kept voting for 'corrupt' parties, especially the PPP and the PMLN. There was no mention of the military establishment, though, despite the fact that till then it had been in power for almost 23 years (out of the country's 45 years of existence). Corruption within the military, the bureaucracy and in politics had witnessed a manifold increase during the Zia dictatorship. But Pasban did not mention Zia or the military at all.

In 1995, Khan agreed to become part of a 'lobby' formed by Gul and Pasban that was to recruit influential individuals and generate pressure against the second Benazir Bhutto government. The lobby also wanted to popularize the presidential system of government and, if need be, encourage the military to grab power once again. Nevertheless, the military continued to enjoy political influence even after Zia's demise, but this time in a more indirect manner. Some well-placed CEOs of multinational companies and businessmen too were

active in this lobby.¹¹ Various influential figures were approached to facilitate the lobby's 'patriotic agenda.' One of them was the famous philanthropist, Abdus Sattar Edhi.

Based in Karachi, Edhi had developed a widespread network of charity services across the country. His organisation received millions of rupees in donations every year. Yet, he lived in his old depleted home in an impoverished area of Karachi with his equally humble wife and children. Praised for being selfless, empathetic and modest, Edhi was often in the crosshairs of clerics and of 'charities' run by Islamist parties. They often accused him of being an atheist and a communist just because he insisted that humanitarianism was the best form of religion. He was a practicing Muslim, but he quite vocally detested clerics (mullahs). One is not sure why a clearly right-wing lobby would approach Edhi. Especially after the fact that Edhi had cordial relations with Benazir and her party.

After some members of the lobby approached Edhi, he almost immediately accused Khan and Gul of planning to overthrow the Benazir regime.¹² He told the press that when he flatly refused to become part of the 'plan,' the two gentlemen threatened him. Edhi also claimed that Gul attempted to kidnap him.¹³ Khan vehemently denied the accusations. But the accusations were coming from a well-respected and admired philanthropist, not a conspiracy theorist. Pasban publicly distanced itself from the episode. In February 1995, Pasban insisted that there was no lobby, but a plan for a movement to 'empower' the people through education so that they could make better political choices. Pasban was already uncomfortable with Gul's presence in the lobby and/or 'pressure group' as he liked to call it. This may also mean that it wasn't Pasban's

¹¹ I was a working journalist at the time and was approached by two senior executives who wanted to speak to me about the 'lobby.' They both claimed to be major players in it. One was associated with a large multinational company and the other was a senior employee of a private bank.

¹² 'Who's Afraid of Imran Khan?' (Herald, February 1995)

¹³ Ibid.

idea to contact Edhi. Instead, it more-than-likely came from the CEOs and businessmen who were involved in the ‘movement.’ Especially those who were regular donors to Edhi’s charity organisation. They believed he could not say no to them. He did.

After Edhi’s dramatic outburst, the ‘movement’ collapsed. Pasban put the blame on Khan’s ‘naïveté’ and on Gul’s ‘arrogance.’ The same year, Khan married Jemima Goldsmith, the 21-year-old daughter of a British tycoon Sir James Goldsmith. Jemima’s father was Jewish, and her mother Lady Annabel, Christian. Jemima, like her parents, has never been very demonstrative about her religion. However, she agreed to convert to Islam after marrying Khan. The union did not go down well with Gul who worried that Khan’s marriage to the daughter of a famous Jewish father was likely to dent his political future. Like Pasban, Khan too had begun to see Gul as a liability. Gul’s interactions with Khan decreased and in 1996, when Khan launched his own party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (Pakistan Justice Movement/PTI), there was no room for Gul in it.

Interestingly, some of the party’s founders (but not Khan) explained the party as a ‘centre-left’ outfit. Khan, on the other hand, claimed that he was a great admirer of the South Asian Muslim poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938), and the revolutionary Iranian sociologist and activist Ali Shariati (d.1977). In November 1997, Benazir’s second government was dismissed, this time by her own handpicked president. The charges included her regime’s inability to control ethnic violence in Sindh. Khan and his PTI began preparing for elections that were to take place in February 1997.

PTI presented itself as a ‘third force’ and an alternative to the country’s two main parties, the PPP and the PMLN. But Khan could not attract the kind of crowds that his charity campaigns had pulled in the early 1990s. The tiny crowds that did gather to listen to his political speeches weren’t sure what he really stood for. He seemed nervous and sounded inarticulate. In one such speech he declared that his will not be

a typical election campaign because he didn't have the funds for it. Yet, to the media he announced that his party was poised to win a large number of seats. This is perhaps one of the first examples of him uttering outlandish claims in politics, a tactic he had successfully deployed as captain of the country's cricket team.

He developed his narrative as he went along. It was all over the place, though, till he began to squarely focus on 'justice.' He promised that his party would make judicial reforms so that the poor could get instant justice from the courts. This became his core cry. A burst of euphoria engulfed his party. The veteran journalist and columnist late Kaleem Omar wrote in *The News International* that many PTI candidates had already gotten brand new suits and *shervanees*¹⁴ stitched for themselves because they were sure they would win and attend their government's swearing-in ceremony in Islamabad. This is what their leader had told them.

PMLN swept the election, winning a two-thirds majority. PTI could not win even a single seat and bagged just 1.61 percent of the total vote. What's more, Khan lost as well, receiving just 4,595 votes from a constituency in his home town, Lahore. The party got even tinier and rumours began to circulate that Khan was planning to quit politics. But in October 1999, when the Nawaz Sharif regime was toppled in a military coup by General Pervez Musharraf, Khan bounced back by hailing the coup and the ouster of Nawaz. Musharraf was an Imran Khan fan. That is, Imran Khan the cricketer. In his autobiography published in 2006,¹⁵ Musharraf wrote that he often met Khan and entertained him but was shocked to listen to his political views. According to Musharraf, with both Nawaz and Benazir now out of the picture (both went into exile), Khan insisted that he be 'made' the prime minister. Musharraf asked him to wait till he called for fresh elections in 2002.

¹⁴ A formal long-sleeved outer coat worn by men in South Asia.

¹⁵ *In The Line of Fire* (Simon & Schuster, 2006)

Musharraf wrote that Khan sounded like a confused man with ideas that one expects from a member of an Islamist party. Khan had been going through a period of transformation ever since his retirement from cricket. He was convinced that God had intervened to help his team win the World Cup when all seemed lost. Khan approached some 'moderate' Islamic scholars who began to 'draw him back to Islam.' In his book, Khan confessed that there was a period in his life when he was about to adopt atheism. After his retirement, though, Khan's rhetoric increasingly became a hodgepodge of political Islam, 'anti-colonialism,' socialism, and romanticised notions of a 'perfect Islamic State' that apparently existed in 7th century Arabia.

Khan's musings were a mixture of half-digested ideas. He borrowed bits from the writings of Abul Ala Maududi, Edward Said, Shariati, Iqbal, Chomsky. And most of these bits were picked out of context. He also became interested in Sufism. Musharraf, however, thought that Khan was more suited to become a member of late Maududi's JI. PTI went to the 2002 polls with a lot of hope and fanfare. Musharraf had facilitated the formation of a new political party (PML-Quaid [PML-Q]) by bringing together PMLN members who had had a falling-out with Nawaz. Musharraf also managed to attract the support of some former PPP leaders.

Benazir and Nawaz were in exile, and most of their parties' leaders in Pakistan were in jail. Both the parties were unable to fully run an effective election campaign. Khan was sure that PTI was now in a good position to at least bag the second largest number of seats. Khan raged against the 'corruption' of the PPP and PMLN, praised Musharraf for sidelining these parties, and promised to provide social and economic justice to the people. But the election results once again demonstrated Khan's naïveté and empty bombast. PMLQ, backed by State machinery, won the most number of seats. The PPP surprised the pundits by coming second. The Islamist alliance, the Mutahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), came third by winning a majority of its seats in the

erstwhile NWFP (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). PTI could win just one seat, receiving a dismal 0.72 percent of the total vote.

It was a pathetic performance, even though Khan managed to enter the new Parliament. He won his seat from Mianwali in Punjab. After this debacle, Khan suddenly turned anti-Musharraf. His chance to stay in the game was strengthened when Musharraf (who had become 'President' in 2002), allowed the setting up of privately-owned TV channels. Many of these were news channels. Khan quickly became a regular on political talk shows. Initially, the news channels were favourably titled towards the Musharraf regime and its economic policies, until the devastating 2005 earthquake in the northern areas of the country. Attacks on police, military and the public by militant Islamist organisations such as the Al-Qaeda also increased. Anti-Musharraf politicians, now free to appear on TV, often accused Musharraf of ordering operations against some militant outfits, but nourishing others which he planned to use in Indian-held Kashmir and in Afghanistan.

Khan was of the view that Musharraf was going after the militants because the US was paying Pakistan billions of dollars to do exactly that. The Musharraf regime had become a US ally in the latter's post-9/11 'war on terror.' Khan began to fancy himself as an 'anti-colonialist' and believed that the militancy problem could only be resolved if Pakistan exited the war on terror. This was the line that the Islamist parties in the MMA were also taking. Khan had come increasingly close to the JI. JI was part of the MMA which was heading the provincial government in NWFP.

During a 2006 talk show on *GeoTV*, Khan praised the JI for being the country's 'cleanest and most democratic party,' until reminded by a guest from the PPP that, JI was part of the Zia dictatorship's first cabinet. Khan was also reminded that JI had been given a free hand by Zia to recruit young Muslims to fight in Afghanistan and that the mayorship of Karachi had been in JI's hands from 1979 till 1987. This

was the period when ethnic violence had exploded in the city and Karachi's law and order situation had become precarious.

The PPP guest went on to tell Khan that across the 1980s, hundreds of JI members had received US visas and most of them settled there and became US citizens. Also, in 2003, a JI member once again became Karachi's mayor and was provided millions of rupees by the Musharraf regime for the 'uplift' of the city. It was quite apparent that Khan had *no* idea about any of this, other than that a JI man had become mayor of Karachi in 2003. More than a politician, Khan became a popular talking head on TV. His PTI was still a tiny party, but as an individual he carried enough charisma and populist appeal to remain a mainstay on talk shows. He raged against the Musharraf regime, accusing it of being a 'puppet' of the US, and of trying to enforce 'Westernisation,' and modernity in an 'inherently conservative society.' However, after the 2002 election, he only sparingly criticised the PMLN and the PPP because he was now sitting on the opposition benches with them. He also spoke against incidents of blasphemy in the West.

On the other hand, he continued to frame the increasing episodes of atrocities committed by militant Islamists, as a result of 'neo-imperialist' policies of the US and of Muslim countries that the US had 'enslaved' through dollars and arm-twisting. In 2007, PTI joined the All Parties Democratic Movement (APDM) when a 'lawyers' movement' erupted against the Musharraf regime. The PPP did not join the APDM, even though the party was active in the movement. The PTI and PMLN too were active in the protests, but Khan could not get the kind of media attention that Nawaz and Benazir did when they returned from exile. Both were received by thousands of supporters.

Musharraf announced new elections to be held in early 2008. APDM decided to boycott the election, unless Musharraf resigned. Benazir convinced Nawaz that a boycott would be disastrous because Musharraf would be able to fill the assemblies with members of pro-government parties. Nawaz agreed, and PMLN quit the APDM. So did

the Pashtun nationalist party, the Awami National Party (ANP). But Khan went ahead with the boycott and so did the JI, even though, ironically, the JI was still part of the MMA government in NWFP. MMA's performance in NWFP was weak, and polls were predicting that MMA would be routed in the 2008 election. So JI decided to stay away, even though its leadership insisted the party was boycotting the election because Musharraf was refusing to resign.

Khan tried to remain in the picture by plunging into the lawyer's movement, but the Musharraf regime never took him seriously. Benazir and Nawaz were the besieged regime's main concerns. They had begun to draw large crowds. In October 2007, Benazir survived an assassination attempt. The large rally that she was leading in Karachi on her return from exile, was attacked by suicide bombers. At least 180 people were killed and over 500 injured. In a press conference, Benazir more-than-hinted that Islamist extremists were used by Musharraf's intelligence agencies to kill her. Benazir had earlier promised that as PM she would go after *all* militant groups and not just a few (while propping others) as, allegedly, Musharraf was doing.

On December 27, 2007, a suicide bomber and an assassin with a pistol targeted Benazir as she was about to leave an election rally in Rawalpindi. Over 130 people were killed — including Benazir. Her husband Asif Ali Zardari accused the Musharraf regime of not providing her adequate security (and thus allowing militants easy access to infiltrate her convoy and kill her). Nawaz Sharif, once her archenemy, rushed to the hospital where her body lay. He broke down while talking to the media.

Khan's response to the tragedy was lukewarm. Even controversial. He refused to condemn the murder. Instead, he said that knowing she would be targeted, she should have been more cautious. After she had survived the first attack, Khan had insisted that the attack had been her own fault.¹⁶

¹⁶ 'Benazir Bhutto has only herself to blame' (The Telegraph, October 21, 2007)

The 2008 elections were won by the PPP, now led by Zardari. PMLN won the second largest number of seats. After a short coalition government with PMLN, through which both the parties forced Musharraf to resign, PMLN fell out and Zardari stitched together another coalition, this time with MQM and ANP. PPP's Yousaf Raza Gillani was elected PM, and Zardari replaced Musharraf as President. The new government inherited a crumbling economy and a manifold increase in terrorist attacks by militant Islamist groups, especially the newly-forged Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). A populist Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP) Iftikhar Chaudhry, didn't make things easier for the regime by constantly interfering in parliamentary affairs and admitting almost every petition submitted in the courts against the government.

On the other hand, the new military chief General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani was not very forthcoming in aiding the Zardari regime in battling Islamist militants. He only agreed to take action when in 2009 the TTP occupied Swat and was threatening to march into Islamabad just 201 km away from Swat. The militants in Swat were cleared out but many of them still held large swaths of land in the rugged tribal areas of north-western Pakistan. They had also managed to establish secret cells in various cities across the country. Relations with the US that were repaired by Musharraf, plummeted during the Kayani tenure as military chief. This further frustrated the Zardari regime that was dependent on the continuation of US aid to stall the economic decline that the country had been experiencing from 2006 onwards. The US believed that Kayani was retaining Musharraf's policy of eliminating one segment of Islamist militants while nourishing others so that they could be used in Afghanistan and Indian-held Kashmir. Kayani was of the view that the US was trying to manipulate the Zardari regime into compromising Pakistan's strategic interests in the region in return for increased aid.

In 2011, when Islamist violence was peaking and the economy was struggling, Imran Khan suddenly announced that he would hold ‘Pakistan’s largest ever political rally’ in Lahore. Most political commentators dismissed this as being just another outlandish statement by the maverick politician. But there were also those who more-than-alluded that something significant was afoot. While the media was spending all of its time bemoaning the ‘incompetence’ of the PPP-led coalition government and regurgitating the line ‘given’ to it by the military establishment (ME) on the increase in terror attacks by Islamist militants, Khan was being propped up by the ME, mainly through the offices of the then ISI chief Lieutenant General Shuja Pasha.¹⁷

Khan had become a constant on TV talk shows and one of the main mouthpieces of ME’s narrative against the Zardari regime. He also toed Pasha’s anti-US line vis-à-vis Islamist terrorism in Pakistan which Khan (too) insisted was being compounded by the presence of US forces in Afghanistan and by US drone attacks against Al-Qaeda militants hiding on the Pakistan side of the Pak-Afghan border. Much effort and resources went into buttressing support for Khan.

Musharraf had been successful in shaping a constituency for himself during his 8-year-dictatorship. These were largely segments of the country’s urban middle-classes. This constituency, which Musharraf had wanted to use to formulate his return to politics (this time as a civilian), was diverted by Pasha towards Khan. This, Pasha did to mould Khan as a replacement for the ousted Musharraf. The ME signaled to Khan its intent to bring him into power by sharing with him a concocted conspiracy involving the Zardari regime’s ambassador in the US, Husain Haqqani.

Khan was one of the first politicians to be told about this ‘conspiracy,’ despite the fact that he was heading a tiny party. The idea was to exhibit to him ME’s commitment at aiding his political rise. Khan’s Lahore rally was a success. Thousands of people turned up,

¹⁷ M.Waseem: *Political Conflict in Pakistan* (Hurst, 2022) p.28

mainly middle-class families. Half-way into his speech, Khan unrolled details about the conspiracy. He said Haqqani was trying to invite the US government to neutralise the Pakistan military. Khan said he had ample evidence of this. The startling ‘revelation’ caught many by surprise. The media went ballistic, but without first inquiring why this was shared with a politician whose party had not a single member in the Parliament. Conceiving this as information shared by the ME, the PMLN jumped on the bandwagon. Even before Khan could approach the courts to order an investigation into the matter, it was Nawaz who moved the milords.

Nothing came out of the investigations and it became increasingly clear that the government and Haqqani were not involved in any such conspiracy. Yet, Khan, PMLN and the media turned and twisted the narrative behind ‘revelation’ in such a manner that Zardari was forced to dismiss Haqqani. In his TV show, the veteran political commentator Najam Sethi reported that Zardari collapsed on a sofa. According to Sethi, Zardari lamented, ‘what more do they (the ME) want from us? We have done everything they’ve asked for.’ Sethi was one of the few journalists who had seen through the ruse shaped by Shuja.

Just before the 2013 elections, Khan told the TV anchor and journalist Hamid Mir that PTI was set to sweep the elections. During the campaigning phase, PMLN and PTI vehemently attacked the PPP and its allies of being corrupt US stooges who were facilitating Pakistan’s enemies by murdering their own brothers. By ‘brothers’ Khan meant Islamist militants who, till then, had killed over 40,000 civilians, soldiers, cops and politicians. To both PMLN and PTI, these were ‘misguided brothers’ who needed to be talked to. The mainstream Islamist parties thought the same, and bewailed that the ‘brothers’ had become militants because the rulers of Pakistan were unwilling to establish a ‘Sharia State.’

The election results, however, shocked Khan. PMLN swept the polls. PPP came a distant second and PTI third. At first, Khan

congratulated PMLN. But within a year after the election, he began to question the results, claiming that they had been rigged to deny Khan's party a majority. He accused PMLN (that was in charge of Punjab before the elections) of installing its 'assets' in the administration that was to oversee the polls. Ironically, Khan had been consulted and had expressed his satisfaction regarding the people that were to head the short interim government. But now he was wagging a finger at the interims for allegedly rigging the elections to keep him out.

The issue was brought forth with 'evidences' in front of the courts and the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). But both could not find any credible indication of wrong-doing. Khan then decided to hold a sit-in in Islamabad. Pasha had been replaced by Zaheer-ul-Islam as chief of ISI and Kayani with General Raheel Sharif. In April 2014, the famous TV anchor Hamid Mir was shot. He received six bullets, but survived. During an angry outburst, Mir's brother accused the ISI chief of ordering the attack. Hamid Mir had increasingly become critical of ISI's role in politics. However, since Mir had played an active role in bolstering Khan's political currency through his talk show, Khan decided to visit Mir at the hospital.

Khan's sit-in received unprecedented media coverage. During this period, Najam Sethi claimed that General Raheel had advised Nawaz to dissolve the assemblies and hold fresh elections. Nawaz rejected the 'advice' out-rightly. Rumours also began to circulate that the ISI chief was overtly aiding Khan by compelling certain businessmen and industrialists to fund the sit-in. He was also accused by the PML-N regime of pushing a large group of TV anchors to engrain Khan's narrative in people's minds. But all this was put on hold when TTP attacked an army-run school in Peshawar, killing over 140 people. These included students and teachers.

General Raheel had already been nudging PM Nawaz to green light a military operation against the TTP. But Nawaz was hesitant. For years the ME, the media, PTI, Islamist parties and PMLN had been

portraying the militants as ‘misguided brothers’ whose emotions and poverty were being exploited by hostile anti-Pakistan forces such as the US and India. Now a top general was asking to put aside this narrative and vanquish the misunderstood brothers. Raheel was also under pressure from his own men who were being viciously targeted by the militants. After the school attack, Nawaz told Raheel that he was ready to green light an operation but only if all other parties sign a consensual agreement. He was particularly weary of Khan who was constantly accusing Nawaz of being pro-US, pro-India and anti-military. Khan was vehemently against any kind of military operation against the militants, claiming that they (militants) and common Pakistanis had become victims of a war fought on the behest of the US.

Getting impatient, Raheel arm-twisted Khan to end his sit-in and sign the agreement. Khan eventually did, but not before telling his supporters that he will be back to topple Nawaz. An unprecedented military operation was finally launched. Within the next two years, thousands of TTP militants were eliminated, while others crossed over into Afghanistan. Despite the operation’s success, Nawaz did not give Raheel an extension as army chief. Nawaz was obviously not happy by the manner in which Raheel had asked him to resign and then remained aloof when Nawaz complained that the ISI chief Zaheer-ul-Islam had been conspiring against his regime by aiding Khan. However, Zaheer was no more the ISI chief when the operation against the militants was initiated.

The question is, if, before the operation, Nawaz and Khan were both mouthing the ME’s narrative, why did the ME want Nawaz to be replaced with Khan? The answer to this lies in the friction between two strands of the country’s middle-classes. We will explore this friction in detail in the next chapter.

With the economy somewhat improving and incidents of terrorism receding, Nawaz found himself in a secure position. He began to push PMLN’s ideological disposition from centre-right to the centre. But in

April 2016, the so-called 'Panama Papers' were leaked online that contained thousands of documents naming famous personalities around the world who had stashed wealth in offshore accounts. Names of some members of Sharif's family were in the documents as well, even though the documents did not have Nawaz's name. Yet, this was enough for Khan to reboot his campaign against the regime.

The first sign that the ME was still interested in pushing out Nawaz emerged when in a statement General Raheel urged that the allegations made against some members of the Sharif family must be investigated. This was soon followed by Khan's announcement that the matter would be taken to the Supreme Court. He also urged that an investigation should be launched against the PM, even though his name was not mentioned in the documents. Khan threatened to storm Islamabad and throw out Nawaz. In 2017, Nawaz appointed General Qamar Bajwa as the new military chief. But the same year, Nawaz was disqualified and removed as PM by a panel of judges of the Supreme Court.

Whereas the decision was roundly criticised by many legal experts, Khan rejoiced. The Panama Papers were what the Supreme Court was investigating and a possible involvement of Nawaz in the off-shore accounts that the documents claimed were opened by some relatives of his. But no such involvement was found. Instead, in a rather shocking decision, the judges dismissed Nawaz for taking salary from one of his son's businesses in the UAE and not declaring it.

Nawaz had been on the payroll of the company, but had not received any salary. Therefore, Nawaz's lawyers kept insisting there was nothing to declare. However, the judges did not budge. Nawaz was dismissed, but the PMLN regime remained intact with a new PM. Khan claimed that it was he who had succeeded in ousting Nawaz. Once again, he began to declare that his party would sweep the 2018 election. The ME, the judiciary, large portions of the media, and a growing urban middle-class constituency all sat on his drawing board, placed exactly where he wanted them. Yet, PTI could not win the kind of

majority that Khan had been hoping for.

He had to stitch together a weak coalition government with other parties and independents, most of who were coaxed by the ME to join him. Major parties such as the PPP, PMLN and JUI derided the elections as being rigged and lamented the overt manner in which the ME and the judiciary had manufactured a win for Khan, even though it wasn't a strong win. But Khan was okay with this, knowing that no party was powerful enough to dislodge his regime that had the overt backing of the ME and the covert support of the judiciary. At least this was the predominant perception.

As the ME and technocrats took charge of foreign policy matters and the economy, Khan put more effort in building his image as a destroyer of corruption. He used State and government agencies to go after his opponents, getting them arrested, and keeping them busy attending court hearings. The economy began to slide and the ME asked Khan to approach the IMF for loans. Khan stalled, claiming that he could generate money from overseas Pakistanis who were invested in keeping him in power. This was a naive assessment. By the time Khan green-lighted the decision to approach the IMF, the economy had begun to spiral.

Across his almost four-year-tenure, Khan's government came across as being incompetent, unsure and volatile. Khan responded to the crisis by intensifying a new image, that of being a besieged crusader. Also, his lack of tact strained the country's relations with donor countries such as the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE and even China. The ME began to worry. It suddenly discovered that Khan was too volatile and naive. But wasn't the ME naive as well by investing so much effort and resources to bring him into power? Couldn't the likes of Pasha, Zaheer, Raheel and Bajwa see the erratic and volatile nature of his politics during his 2014 sit-in against Nawaz?

Zardari was quick to pounce on ME's growing nervousness, and the increasing unpopularity of the Khan regime. Zardari had formed an

opposition alliance, the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) with PMLN and JUI-F. Various smaller opposition parties joined the alliance as well. Zardari asked PDM to work towards gaining the trust of the ME. The idea was to make ME cede ground (for the opposition) by distancing itself from Khan. The resultant space was then to be used by PDM to launch a no confidence motion and vote in the National Assembly (NA) against the regime. Zardari was confident that quite a few NA members belonging to parties allied to the PTI regime and within the party itself were not happy with Khan.

PMLN chief Nawaz (who was in exile) and JUI-F chief Fazalur Rahman were more inclined to march into Islamabad and resign from NA. Zardari thought this to be a mercurial strategy that would not achieve anything. When Zardari was unable to convince Nawaz and Fazal, he pulled the PPP out of the alliance. However, Shahbaz, the brother of Nawaz, was in favour of trying out Zardari's idea. Unlike his brother, Shahbaz had somewhat sustained a working relationship with the ME. Khan mocked the PDM saying it was a ragtag group of people with opposing views.

Zardari got the ball rolling in mid-2021. ME decided to replace the staunchly pro-Khan chief of the ISI Faiz Hamid with a more 'neutral' Nadeem Anjum. Khan was livid. He tried to stall the new appointment, further antagonizing his relationship with his erstwhile 'supporter' General Bajwa. Bajwa eventually got Anjum appointed. The tussle between Khan and Bajwa created confusion in the ranks of the parties that were supporting PTI in the Parliament. Zardari fully exploited the situation and by April 2022, the PPP and the PDM were ready with the numbers required to oust Khan. There is evidence to suggest that even 48 hours before his ouster, Khan was sure that he would survive the vote.

Then, on the day of the vote, Khan instructed the NA Speaker to delay the session, despite the fact that the Supreme Court had already ordered the assembly to hold the vote on that day. Khan delayed. He

was in no mood to allow his loyalist Speaker to go ahead with the vote. As the morning turned into noon and the day was about to end, the court opened its doors, a military helicopter was seen over Khan's resident, and a police van appeared outside the assembly. Khan's ministers present with him at his residence started to get nervous. Finally, the vote was held by an Acting Speaker when the Speaker and Deputy Speaker resigned. Khan was ousted.

During the 1992 Cricket World Cup when Khan's underperforming team was faced with the difficult task of winning its last three games to slip into the semi-finals, Khan proudly embraced his team's status of being the underdogs. During an interview conducted by Ian Chappell, Khan appeared in a T-Shirt with the image of a tiger on it. He told Chappell that his team will 'fight like cornered tigers.' To the team, he nonchalantly declared that they will win the World Cup. This sounded awkwardly ambitious and even ridiculous to most of his players. Not only did Pakistan needed to win its last three games, but the team's march into the semifinals stage also depended on the results of matches between other sides.

This was Khan once again playing his card of spouting audacious claims. He had been using it across his tenure as captain. At times the claims actually came good, but on most occasions they had fallen flat. Some were calculated to seed confusion in the minds of opponents and some were just blurted out to exhibit a sense of self-confidence when Khan and his team were feeling nervous, unsure or not in control. But whereas he had often explained this card as a tactic to create confusion in the minds of opponent teams, during the 1992 World Cup he increasingly began to define it as his undying faith in the notion that the Almighty intervenes to provide support to those who have true faith.

He said this in immediate hindsight, of course, when his team came from behind to unexpectedly win the World Cup. He had used the aforementioned card sparingly in the 1980s, but believing that it had struck gold in 1992, he carried it into his political career as well. For years he has often been adored and mocked in equal measure for making audacious claims. These included promises of making Pakistan a country where people from richer countries would come and work in; making the Pakistani passport one of the most powerful in the world; bring back billions of dollars allegedly stashed in offshore accounts by 'corrupt' Pakistani politicians; provide millions of jobs and homes to the poor; wipe out corruption in a matter of months; create a Welfare State that would be a cross between the Scandinavian Welfare State and the State enacted in the 7th century by the early caliphs of Islam. He also claimed that his government had discovered vast reserves of gas on the shores of the country.

The list is long. As PM, he didn't even come close to turning any of his lofty claims into reality. After he was ousted, he bemoaned that he could not do much as PM because he was heading a fragile coalition government. He also dreamt of 'rescuing' Pakistan from its economic dependence on Europe, the US, Saudi Arabia and the UAE and instead, create an independent 'Islamic' (economic, military and cultural) bloc headed by Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey and probably Iran.

This was a terribly naive intention. But it sounded exciting and daring to many of his followers. And this is all that mattered to him. What he did not foresee was the manner in which it offended Saudi and UAE monarchies who for decades have pumped billions of dollars in aid and investments in Pakistan. Saudi Arabia still fancies itself as the leader of the Muslim world and it isn't all that friendly towards Iran or Turkey. Secondly, European countries are Pakistan's leading trading partners and so is the US.

The ME was furious. When Khan was ousted he continued to fall back on the tactic of making incredible claims. He insisted that his

government was ousted through a US-engineered conspiracy with the help of opposition parties and the ME. He threatened to overthrow the new government through a ‘long march’ that he claimed will be attended by millions of people. However, with no evidence of a conspiracy coming forth and not many people turning up to attend the march, the tactic fell on its face. Khan had to backtrack, leaving supporters who he had reenergized, stranded. Also, one allegation after another began to surface involving the ‘greed’ of his third wife, her relatives, his ministers and even himself.¹⁸

Beyond those who swore that there was never a political leader like Imran Khan in Pakistan, were those who were convinced that he had been one of the most self-destructive politicians the country has ever seen. He had everything going for him. He had star power and charisma that were systematically nurtured by the powerful ME. It peddled him as an incorruptible and ultra-patriotic leader with a ‘vision’ to create a ‘*Naya Pakistan*’ (New Pakistan), devoid of corruption, immoralities and old ‘degenerate’ mainstream parties such as the PML-N and the PPP. A lot of effort and planning went into utilising State institutions and the electronic and social medias to make him seem like a messianic character — especially to the country’s growing urban middle classes which, according to some estimates, now constitute 38 per cent of Pakistan’s population.¹⁹

The idea was to engineer a ‘hybrid regime’ fronted by a ‘handsome,’ iconic figure. But, of course, the regime was largely navigated by those who had bolstered his otherwise unremarkable political career. An election was allegedly manipulated to bring his party to power. His opponents were harassed and deeply demonised.

¹⁸ ‘Court Summons Imran in Toshakhana Case’ (Express Tribune, December 15, 2022)

¹⁹ S.Akbar Zaidi in The Hindu (February 28, 2017)

The military and the judiciary went out of their way to keep him afloat, no matter how incompetent and chaotic his regime became. Yet, Khan could not turn these into advantages. Instead, as PM, he became a mixture of complacency, ego and outlandish outbursts that often left his mentors embarrassed. After his dramatic ouster in April 2022, he did well to regenerate a lot of popularity that he had lost when he was PM. But the fact is, he treated this fresh burst of popularity in the same manner he treated the many factors that were manufactured to put him in power.

He demonstrated no patience to play a waiting game to sustain his regenerated popularity for the next election. Instead, he became busy burning his boats and fingers by lashing out against his erstwhile sculptors. More than a politician, he began behaving like a jilted lover, unable to reconcile to the fact that those who had constructed him, ultimately dumped him. They had no other choice, really. Those who adored Khan, saw him as a great leader. But the truth is, he is what the late American scholar Arnold Beichman called an 'anti-leader'. Beichman described an anti-leader as a popular and charismatic politician but one who subverts himself and, in so doing, seeks the subversion of an entire society.

To Beichman, the anti-leader type is a person who has led and lost. He is that rare individual who can still evoke grand memories even as he now sounds an uncertain trumpet, stimulating a half-hearted and foredoomed charge. Continually flirting with self-destruction, he lives his private nightmares in public places. While winning, he plans his defeat. Beichman then adds that the anti-leader needs the limelight to demonstrate his daily destructiveness. His life as an anti-leader becomes extra-institutional, while he insists on living within the institution. Still, in his own mind, his *raison d'être* is moral; his deeds are moral; his words are moral; his life is moral.

Khan's politics, especially when he was PM and during the months after his ouster, matched the characteristics of Beichman's anti-leader.

As a star cricketer and a former 'playboy', his behavior was typical of how a celebrity sportsman and a sybarite socialite are often imagined. But his politics took a more unconventional turn. He became to politics what male anti-heroes are to films and novels. Men who are not archetypal heroes, but charismatic figures whose flaws and conflicted dispositions are the source of their charisma. They understand this well. But it becomes a trap. When a politician realises that it is his unconventional and non-conformist mannerisms that draw the loudest cheers, he is likely to continue solidifying them. He becomes one-dimensional, myopic and self-indulgent to the point of mythologising his outsider strand of politics.

Whereas mainstream politics requires flexibility and pragmatism, the anti-leader goes in the opposite direction. Khan who was managing to get away with the kind of digressions that have landed other leaders in trouble, developed a sense of invincibility. Despite the fact that this sense gradually began to be challenged by State institutions, Khan was the slowest to recognise this. Even when his ouster was becoming a surety, he was in denial.

He continued to believe that he was irreplaceable by a desperate ME. All the while, his opponents were slowly cutting him down. Instead of playing mainstream politics to safeguard his position through compromises and negotiation, he first plunged into renunciation and then became defiant to the point of becoming to be seen (by his opponents and State institutions) as an existentialist threat. It was an anti-heroic posture. It was the kind of indulgent individualism which may draw traction and excitement, but is self-destructive. And as this realisation finally crept up on him, he not only continued to subvert himself, but in so doing, looked to subvert an entire society.

Chapter 2

The Flowing Fantasies of A Blocked Elite

The political economist S. Akbar Zaidi is of the view that it has become increasingly difficult to define exactly what it means to be middle-class in Pakistan. Zaidi, so far, has settled for – but is not entirely convinced by – the term ‘aspirational classes’ that are the most active acquirers of consumer goods. Therefore, according to him, 38% of the country’s population can be counted as middle-class.¹ From this chapter onwards in this book, I will be using the term middle-class in Zaidi’s context and understanding.

The tussle between Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) was a political reflection of economic and social tensions between two factions of the country’s middle-classes. But, for example, whereas a similar tension between two strands of the Turkish middle-class is defined by two clearly differing ideological dispositions — secular-republicanism on the one end, and an upstart Islamism on the other — the ideological distinction between the two middle-class strands in Pakistan is largely blurred.

Both strands belong to a new middle-class that began to emerge from the late 1970s. The expansion of the new middle-classes in Asia has been a constant study of interest for political economists. They have noted an unprecedented growth of economic and political influence of the new middle-classes in developing countries. This has put the new middle-classes in various developing regions at the heart of their respective countries’ social, political and economic evolution.

¹ S.Akbar Zaidi in *The Hindu* (February 28, 2017)

The old middle-classes in these regions were engineered by State-backed 'development economics.'² The State sought to form a 'national bourgeoisie'³ which was shaped to fortify a post-colonial nation-state's sovereign status. The national bourgeoisie was tasked to produce an economy navigated by a bureaucracy. The old middle-classes (in developing countries) were thus involved in various sectors that the State had directly or indirectly set up.

The old middle-classes were highly dependent on the support provided by a State working to bolster a 'modernisation' project. Yet, historically, whereas a national bourgeoisie was expected to develop into becoming a progressive political force, and a mediator between labour and capital, in most developing countries it remained weak and undermined by oligarchs. The oligarchs and/or economic elites who too were the result of the State's national economic policies, sabotaged the political evolution of the national bourgeoisie as a way to subdue their potential to democratise the country's politics and economy. This means that the early projects of development economics in most 20th Century developing countries were largely overseen by authoritarian leaderships.

This is what happened in Pakistan during Ayub Khan's 'modernist' dictatorship (1958-69). Z.A. Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) understood this as a malaise, largely expressed by the frustrated intelligentsias of the national bourgeoisie that began to take shape during the Ayub period. With the help of these intelligentsias, Bhutto radicalised the frustrated components of the national bourgeoisie who had failed to convert themselves into becoming a more politically

² Development economics is a branch of economic study that focuses on improving fiscal, economic, and social conditions in developing countries. It considers factors such as health, education, working conditions, domestic and international policies, and market conditions with a focus on improving conditions in the world's poorest countries. Development economics seeks to understand and shape macro and microeconomic policies in order to lift poor countries out of poverty.

³ By bourgeoisie here I specifically mean middle-income groups.

influential class.

The radicalised intelligentsias worked closely with working-class groups and student outfits by mostly adopting a mixture of leftist political ideas as a way to challenge a modernisation/development process that had given birth to rapid industrialisation. They felt they had little or no say in the process. Ironically, the same process had also birthed the national bourgeoisie. The radicalisation of this bourgeoisie was not only challenged by the State and the oligarchs, but by Islamist outfits as well, such as the Jamat-e-Islami (JI).

The JI too was part of the bourgeoisie. But it vehemently disagreed with the other half of the same class by rejecting socialism. Instead, it concentrated on replacing the 'secular' nature of the national bourgeoisie through a more 'Islamic' strand of nationalism.⁴ To the JI, the national bourgeoisie must work to 'Islamise' the State and the economy.

The Z.A. Bhutto regime that came to power in late December 1971, attempted to sharpen the role of the national bourgeoisie as a mediating player between the State, the rural peasants and the urban working-classes (the proletariat). Instead of providing patronage to the industrial bourgeoisie⁵ that the economic policies of the Ayub regime had developed, the Bhutto government began to make the national bourgeoisie even more dependent on the State, but through policies of nationalisation.

Yet, by the mid-1970s, it became apparent that a steady growth in the numbers of middle-class folk was giving birth to a new middle-class that had begun to demand more economic freedoms and less State intervention. From 1974 onwards, the Bhutto regime began to facilitate the ambitions of thousands of Pakistanis wanting to travel to oil-rich

⁴ The national bourgeoisie and the State in most developing Muslim-majority countries were secular in the sense that they understood being Muslim as a nationalist expression, and modernity as a pragmatic necessity. Also, they saw Islam as an 'inherently' modern faith.

⁵ Industrialists and other prominent capitalists.

Arab countries as blue-and-white-collar workers. After earning more than they could in Pakistan, the workers began to spend heavily on lifestyle choices that the State during the Bhutto government had strictly regulated.

Interestingly, one of the first political forces to demand private investment opportunities for the new middle-classes was the JI. The party dismissed any notion of land and economic reforms (deeming them as being socialist and thus ‘un-Islamic’). JI advocated an ‘Islamised’ variant of free market enterprise. This version envisioned a new middle-class storming the space once occupied by the old national bourgeoisie. JI envisioned an emerging new middle-class as an enterprising economic agent working towards building an indigenous Islamic society/economy and consequently, an ‘Islamic State.’

This narrative had the backing of wealthy, conservative Arab monarchies. Therefore, the Bhutto regime began to move to the right from 1974 onwards in a bid to usurp the emerging narrative. But the government’s political opponents continued to proliferate the perception of the Bhutto regime being irreligious and detrimental to the economic interests of the middle-classes.

In the next three decades (in developing countries) the old middle-class that was being overtly navigated by the State, had all but vanished. The new middle-classes wanted less State interference in economic matters. Across various developing countries, ‘economic freedom’ was gained by the new middle-classes through the accumulation of capital and consumption power, thus gaining them economic influence. In most Muslim-majority regions, economic influence was then synchronised with ‘Islamic’ and/or Islamist⁶ outlooks.

This synchronisation’s stated purpose was to formulate an ‘Islamic’ society, economy and State. But it had more to do with ideas such as

⁶ By Islamist I mean the politicised variant of the faith.

neoliberalism⁷ and globalisation. The new Muslim middle-classes desired global economic links and markets and experiences. Neoliberal economics facilitated this. However, this also resulted in a curious cultural phenomenon. In their own countries, the new Muslim middle-classes influenced the opening up of the economy and the Islamisation of the State, whereas in countries where they were migrants, they largely became self-insulated communities. The latter often entailed being part of a secular Western State, yet having the economic and political influence to stand apart from the cultural norms of their adopted countries. Neoliberalism tolerated this as long as the insulated communities were contributing to a globalised economy.

But not all among the new middle-classes in Muslim-majority countries were initiators and products of the aforementioned synchronisation. Indeed, those who weren't too, desired economic freedoms, but they saw the Islamisation dimension of their contemporaries as an impediment to economic growth, both personal and national. I will refer to them as being religion-neutral. This division within the new Muslim middle-classes was/is the starkest in Turkey, where the new Turkish middle-classes compete to control economic (and therefore, political and social) influence from two different ideological camps: secular and Islamist. In the last two decades, the Islamist camp has enjoyed the upper hand, even though with the gradual global failures of neoliberal economics,⁸ the secular camp's call to regenerate a national bourgeoisie linked to development economics and secular-nationalist disposition, is now getting increasing traction.

In Pakistan, the religion-neutral segment of the new middle-classes are searching for something similar. This is a reaction to the manner in

⁷ Neoliberalism is a policy model that encompasses both politics and economics. It favors private enterprise and seeks to transfer the control of economic factors from the government to the private sector. Many neoliberal policies concern the efficient functioning of free market capitalism and focus on limiting government spending, government regulation, and public ownership.

⁸ 'Fatal Flaw of Neoliberalism': D.Rodrick (The Guardian, November 14, 2017).

which this segment was steamrolled by their more 'Islamic' contemporaries, and even forced to meet certain 'Islam'-inspired conditions if they were to continue operating as active economic players. Most, begrudgingly, did meet these conditions. In the late 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, many of these conditions were enshrined in Pakistan's constitution and penal codes or were enforced in places of economic and social activity.

To navigate around them, the religion-neutral segment of the new middle-classes presented alternative interpretations of Islam which they insisted proved that Islam demands no compulsions. Unlike the old middle-class which was invested in the State-backed modernisation project, this one has numerous vague ideas about how best to gather economic and political influence outside State intervention and statist Islam.

Meanwhile, their Islamic contemporaries continued to strengthen the synchronisation process. But due to the failures of neoliberal economics, the Islamic segment has become desperate to retain its economic influence. As mentioned, neoliberalism benefited the synchronisation process. But since neoliberal economics is now increasingly being seen as a failed idea, the Islamic segment of the new middle-classes fear that their project of Islamising the State would stall and with it the economic benefits that the project provides this segment.

Neoliberalism encourages private capital to dictate the terms of economic growth. Multinationals and banks become vital players and the economic influence of the State recedes. Neoliberalism emphasises a preference for markets over government, economic incentives over cultural norms, and private entrepreneurship over collective action. In Muslim-majority countries, centre-right governments established networks of economic and political interdependence by appeasing the Islamic segments of the new middle-classes through lucrative contracts and business-friendly reforms. But like neoliberalism, this process too, has started to come under greater scrutiny.

The erosion of neoliberalism and of the idea of ‘globalisation,’ has begun to limit the influence of the Islamic middle-classes. They have increasingly started to look towards the State for solutions. The same State whose economic role this segment had greatly shrunk. For the State to regenerate itself as a dominant economic actor, it will need to lighten the Islamist baggage that the new middle-classes had put around the State’s neck. But the possible dilution of the State’s Islamist dimension is making the Islamic segments of the middle-classes jittery because an Islamised State was beneficial to their economic interests.

Decades ago, the old middle-classes had accepted State intervention in economic matters — from the capitalist point of view (Ayub) and then from a ‘socialist’ one (Bhutto). Empowered by personal economic growth and influence, the new middle-classes decided to opt for neoliberalism. They synchronised neoliberalism’s amoral, State-repellent disposition with notions of Islamisation. In other words, the synchronisation was largely initiated to formulate an apologia for profiteering, the accumulation of capital, and the acquirement of consumer goods. The synchronisation was weaved in such a way that it became a condition that needed to be met if one was to remain afloat in the new State-repellent economic landscape.

However, the weakening of the economy in Pakistan, especially after 2007, sent alarm bells ringing in the new middle-classes. Both the Islamic and religion-neutral factions began jostling for space in a shrinking economy. This triggered various responses which we will discuss here in the context of Pakistan’s contemporary politics.

In the 1990s, PML-N was a major party that found traction among the Islamic segments of the new middle-classes. However, during the party’s third stint in power (2013-2018) it began to shift more to the centre in a bid to absorb (as potential voters) the religion-neutral segments of the new middle-classes as well. It tried to perform a delicate balancing act between the two segments. This move was the outcome of the failure of neoliberalism. Therefore, PML-N wanted to

gradually reinvigorate the State's economic role through a form of development economics.

The PPP had failed to attract much support from the State-repellent new middle-classes. But it was the PPP which reintroduced certain State-funded welfare initiatives during its fourth stint in power (2008-2013). It did so to address the challenges triggered by the failures of neoliberalism. Initiatives such as the Benazir Income Support Program were not only introduced to reenergize the party's appeal among the working and peasant classes, but to also ease the fears of the middle-classes which were now once again looking towards the State in an eroding neoliberal economy — even though they were not the direct beneficiaries of such initiatives.

Whereas the PPP's initiatives were successful in the province of Sindh, these were seen as a threat by the non-Sindhi middle-classes who had retained the perception of the PPP as a party that was 'detrimental' to the economic and political interests of the middle-classes. This was not the case with the growing Sindhi middle-classes, though. They are a product of PPP's long rule in Sindh. This segment is largely religion-neutral. Its political dynamics developed somewhat separately from those of the Punjabi, Pashtun and Mohajir middle-classes.

During its third stint, the PML-N tried to replicate similar State-funded schemes in the Punjab and also reintroduced some forms of old-school development economics. But PML-N began being seen as a threat, mainly by the religion-neutral segment of the new middle-classes who feared that the party would squarely cater to the Islamic segment of the middle-class which was once its core constituency. The religion-neutral segment outside Sindh, had been unable to choose a political vehicle from among the established parties. In the 2000s, it allied itself with the Pervez Musharraf dictatorship (1999-2008). It understood his version of neoliberal economics as religion-neutral and thus more beneficial to them compared to their Islamic contemporaries

who had thrived during the Zia-ul Haq dictatorship in the 1980s, and during the first two PML-N regimes.

After Musharraf's departure, the religion-neutral segment as a constituency fell in the lap of Imran Khan's PTI which was aided by the military establishment (ME). The latter was looking to sustain its own interests and influence in a scenario in which a military dictator (Musharraf) had been forced to resign by the two old mainstream parties, the PML-N and PPP. As a way to expand its vote-bank and electoral appeal, the PTI continuously shifted between the centre and the right. As mentioned earlier, the religion-neutral segment of the new middle-classes had attempted to formulate their own variant of Islamism as a way to survive in an economic landscape shaped by the synchronisation of neoliberal economics and Islamism.

PTI adopted the alternative Islamic variant constructed by the religion-neutral segment because it believed that this was the segment which was now gaining more influence than the Islamic middle-class segment that had dominated the proceedings in the 1980s and 1990s. With the economy shrinking, tensions between the two middle-class segments increased and was symbolised by the manner in which the PML-N and PTI went after each other's throats. However, with neoliberal economics receding, and the need for the State to once again start playing a bigger role in economic matters increasing, powerful State institutions such as the military rebounded in 2022, to once again put their trust in the two older and more experienced parties, the PML-N and the PPP.

The Islamist dimension of the State is likely to corrode, and the dumping of PTI by its former makers and backers in the establishment has made both the middle-class segments return to their besieged state of mind. There is now every likelihood that both segments will further fragment. The goal of the State now seems to be to encourage bourgeoisie economic activity which is less ideologically-motivated and more pragmatic. This will be more beneficial to the religion-neutral

segment, even though the alternative Islamic variant that they had developed for themselves has mutated to become almost as conservative as the one harboured by the Islamic segment.

In 2012, there were many Pakistanis who were left feeling shocked after witnessing a barrage of hateful comments on social media when the then teenaged schoolgirl from Swat, Malala Yousafzai, was shot and then flown to the UK for surgery. The shocking bit wasn't about hate-filled statements coming from the usual suspects who, at the time, were blowing themselves up in markets, schools, mosques and shrines. The real surprise was the language used by many 'respectable' men and women, and the manner in which they derided a young teenage girl who had been shot in the face by militant Islamists.

It was once believed that only frustrated, uneducated young people from downtrodden families were willing pawns of those who use indiscriminate acts of terrorism and violence against the State and its citizens. It is estimated that over 70,000 Pakistanis lost their lives during the vicious campaign of suicide bombings and assassinations unleashed by militant Islamist groups between 2004 and 2015. Terrorism's impact on mental health in Pakistan left a large number of people exhibiting symptoms of the post-traumatic stress disorder. The security and political analyst and the director of Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) Muhammad Amir Rana has published a number of studies that explore the mental and emotional dispositions of young people who were once willing to become suicide bombers. Most of them came from low-income backgrounds and were indoctrinated by 'expert brainwashers' operating from inside militant sectarian and Islamist outfits.

In 2015, a progressive human rights activist Sabeen Mahmud was assassinated in Karachi by two men. One of them was Saad Aziz.

When details about this young man — who had become radicalised — were released, it took many by surprise. He did not come from a downtrodden background, nor was he an illiterate person or a madrassa student. He came from a well-to-do middle-class family that owned a trendy restaurant in one of Karachi's high-income areas. Also, Aziz had graduated from the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), which is one of the city's leading educational institutions.

This was perhaps the first prominent sign that the 'radicalisation of society' which was largely thought to be taking place among low-income segments, had begun to make its way up towards 'educated' middle-income groups. Aziz may still be an exception, in the sense that he actually committed a heinous act of terror. But this does not mean that the ideas that prompted him to do so too are exceptions in the class to which he belongs. Indeed, compared to lower-income groups, the number of people from the middle-classes who committed acts of terrorism (in the name of a religious ideology) is extremely low. But, since, for almost a decade, extreme ideas have been finding a home in the psyche of this strata, the middle-class was thus not above rationalising or even justifying the acts and narratives of those who were actually committing terrorism.

During the years when Islamist militancy and terrorism were peaking, one often saw many 'respectable' folk on TV and in drawing-rooms doing just that. Not only had members and supporters of mainstream Islamist parties become unabashed 'apologists' of Islamist groups, but also among these were 'lifestyle liberals' who had found a messiah in the populist shape of Imran Khan. They held on to his every word. According to him, terrorism was due to American policies in the region; it was due to US drone attacks; those being labelled as terrorists were 'our misunderstood brothers,' etc. Some of his followers even went to the extent of claiming that suicide attacks were being conducted by non-Muslims posing as Muslims.

Just how much of this mindset had penetrated middle-income groups? Apparently, quite a bit. But it is not producing armies of ‘educated’ middle-class men and women willing to blow themselves up, killing men, women and children. However, as mentioned, it is creating apologists of such acts. The apologies are equally problematic because they make it that much tougher for the State to weave a counter-narrative. Former military chief General Raheel Sharif, and the third Nawaz Sharif regime, faced this when both decided that the military will go all out to ‘crush’ the militants. To its horror, the State also discovered that it was now up against a mindset that it had itself help build.

The collective national mindset is a powerful thing. It determines how a nation thinks as a whole. National mindsets are often weaved from narratives formulated by the State and the nationalist intelligentsias. The narratives are shaped to build a collective mindset which supplement and fall in line with the State’s policies, without much resistance. Nevertheless, sometimes such a mindset, after it trickles down from above, and is then fully absorbed by those below, becomes the domain of the people. So much so, that even when the State decides to change the narrative to suit its new-found needs, it struggles to make the people shrug-off the old mindset. Because after decades of propagating the narrative, the mindset that it produced becomes ingrained in the DNA of a nation. Eradicating it or replacing it with a new narrative and mindset becomes an extremely tough ask.

This is what happened in Pakistan. And this is why the State found it difficult to transform the collective mindset which was propagated by the State to make Pakistanis believe that their country was a ‘bastion of Islam,’ surrounded by enemies who were plotting to destroy their majority faith (Sunni Islam). When the military was conducting an unprecedented military operation against Islamist militants (2015 – 2017), the State and government struggled to change a mindset which almost automatically generated numerous apologetic voices whenever

the military took action and whenever the militants retaliated. Such voices were the outcome of the mentioned mindset. This mindset could not fully reconcile to the fact that the militants were *not* holy warriors out to purify Pakistan and defeat its many ‘enemies.’

Pakistan’s battles against extremism cannot be solely won through the barrel of a gun. Because one of the most powerful facilitators of the troubling security situation that the country was/is faced with is more psychological in nature. It is that prevailing mindset which is yet to fully comprehend what is at stake. What is even more disconcerting is that, many of those carrying this mindset are probably not even aware of how they might actually be aiding extremism continue to flourish .

In the 1956 Hollywood film *Forbidden Planet*, a spaceship is sent from Earth to a planet that is 16 light-years away. The crew of the ship is tasked to find out what happened to a space probe that was sent to the planet 20 years before. On reaching the planet, the captain and crew find a human scientist and his family who tell the investigation party that an unknown entity had destroyed the probe and killed the inhabitants of the planet.

After facing attacks from the same entity, the crew finally figure out that the entity was actually the manifestation of the scientist’s subconscious mind triggered by a machine invented by him. The scientist continues to deny this, until he is finally convinced that the elusive entity which is slaughtering the planet’s inhabitants is indeed a physical manifestation of his own subconscious mind and/or the manifestation of what the German psychologist Sigmund Freud called ‘the id’.⁹

It is fair to wonder whether the unprecedented spats of violence by extremists that have been haunting Pakistan for years may actually be the physical manifestations of the collective subconscious of the nation

⁹ One of the three divisions of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory that is completely unconscious and is the source of psychic energy derived from instinctual needs and drives.

as a whole? This might also explain the state of denial or silence that many Pakistanis usually fall into every time some entity goes on a killing spree in the name of Islam. Laying deep within the larger polity have been notions of a problematic ‘self’ that fuelled a collective mindset which has become difficult to replace.

In December 2014, when terrorists attacked a school in Peshawar and murdered over 140 people — mostly students — the military chief Raheel Shareef asked Imran Khan to end his anti-government sit-in (*dharna*) in Islamabad. Khan was reluctant because (in his mind) he was close to ousting the Nawaz regime. Most Pakistanis had gone into shock after watching the bodies of young children on TV screens and scenes of mothers and fathers frantically trying to find their children. It was a rare case of the mentioned ‘self’ being jolted. Khan eventually decided to end the *dharna*, during which he had also wagged his finger at US drone attacks that were targeting the very people who had planned the attack on the school.

Khan was also against any military operation against the terrorists. But in this too, he was forced by Raheel to put his signature on a consensus document drawn by the government, opposition and the military to green-light an all-out operation against the Islamist militants. However, before this, the car that Khan was leaving the *dharna* area in, was stopped by a group of middle-aged women who pleaded with him not to go. They had tears in their eyes.

All of them belonged to middle-income families. The tears were not for the students who had been mercilessly gunned down in Peshawar. It was as if, the school attack — let alone the fact that thousands had already been killed in acts of terrorism — just did not matter to the wailing women. The fantasies of a Pakistan that Khan was peddling had become concretised in their minds. In him they saw a charismatic, modern-day messiah. In 2017, German researcher Jochen Menges conducted a study to explore the impact of charismatic leaders on their followers. His findings led to what he called the ‘awestruck effect.’

According to Menges, a lot of people suspend their emotions while listening to charismatic leaders. This also hampers their ability of critical thinking. Menges adds that ‘charisma as a dominant behaviour is successful only when it is matched by submissive behaviour on the part of a leader’s followers.’

An earlier theory in this regard is based on the works of Sigmund Freud. It is often referred to as ‘transference,’ in which a person or group projects an idealised image of a father-or-mother-figure onto a leader. When the leader becomes conscious of this, he/she tries to enhance this idealised image of him/herself. In politics, this is often done by the creation of the ‘cult of personality.’ For example, Khan’s photographs while performing prayers, or working out, or speaking to a group of youth, etc., were often floated to substantiate the idealised image of him being a morally-correct and fit father-figure who could do no wrong.

So, why was Khan adopted as this figure by thousands of middle-class folk? Why, like the mentioned women, were they willing to exhibit more heartbreak about the ending of his dharna, than about a traumatic tragedy? Also take the case of two ministers in Khan’s regime who in 2021 expressed their desire to blow themselves up in the Parliament and kill Khan’s opponents. They both belonged to well-to-do families. But why would they air a revenge fantasy which sees them becoming suicide bombers when such bombers had killed thousands of civilians, cops, soldiers and politicians in Pakistan?

They were only expressing something that has already plagued the psyche of middle-income groups. A large percentage of them will never actually become suicide bombers themselves, but, as discussed, they continued to be the violent subconscious that was consciously and physically being manifested by those from the classes below. The actual terrorists and militants usually get swayed by contemporary ‘jihadist’ literature and narratives that are directly or indirectly influenced by ‘Manichaeism.’ It constitutes a ‘dualist cosmology’,

based on the idea of a primordial conflict between light and darkness, good and evil. Class, ethnicity, nationality or material economic conditions do not play a role in such cosmic conflicts. But race and faith do. The militants explain the conflict as one which has been going on for centuries outside the material realm, and within a spiritual one that the sacred texts speak of.

Therefore, deaths during the conflict in the material world do not matter.

In a 2018 essay, the forensic psychologist Karl Umbrasas wrote that terror outfits who kill indiscriminately can be categorised as apocalyptic groups. According to Umbrasas, such groups operate like ‘apocalyptic cults’ and are not restrained by socio-political and moral restraints. Umbrasas adds that apocalyptic terror groups justify acts of indiscriminate destruction through their often distorted and violent interpretations of the sacred texts. Material and bodily destruction are of no consequence, because the ‘soul’ is already busy fighting a more important war on a higher plane. The human body is just an expendable shell for this soul which returns to the higher plane after the body is destroyed. Or something of the sort.

The middle-classes in developing countries are tightly sandwiched between the classes below and the electoral and non-electoral elites above. Middle-income groups in these regions are a blocked elite. They may have attained economic influence, but feel that they are being denied political influence by the ruling elites above. On the other hand, a fear of being relegated to the classes below, or losing economic influence to the more ambitious folk among low-income groups, triggers anxiety.

According to the American psychologist Michael Friedman, anxieties that cause depression can change how one fundamentally sees him/herself. It can undermine their identity. Friedman calls depression ‘the ultimate identity thief.’¹⁰ We build our identity through

¹⁰ ‘Depression is the ultimate identity thief’ (Psychology Today, October 29, 2020)

experiencing and discovering the things with which we connect in our lives. It can be anything – a musician or genre of music, a sportsperson or sport, an actor or genre of film, a religious figure or his/her particular philosophy, etc. The aforementioned condition (a feeling of being blocked/sandwiched) and the resultant anxieties, set off an identity crisis among middle-income groups.

For instance, in Pakistan, middle-income groups often feel cramped between the identities of folk/populist Islam embraced by the classes below; and the dryer ‘Islamic’ identities formed from nationalist meta-narratives, and conceived and propagated by the civilian and State elites above. The middle-income segments are often the more willing recipients of the latter, but there is a conflict between the civilian and State elites in the interpretation of the meta-narrative. The civilian ruling elites are compelled to adopt elements that the low-income segments identify with. The civilian elites fuse these with the nationalist meta-narrative. State elites find this problematic because they feel such a fusion dilutes and then displaces the core of the meta-narrative. That core is supposed to keep a diverse polity united as a nation.

This conflict of interpretation between the two sides of the ruling elites is explained by the civilian side as a battle between democracy and authoritarianism. By the State elites, the conflict is explained as a confrontation between ‘corrupt’ politicians and the institutions of national unity and interest. The Pakistani middle-class has become increasingly conservative, mainly due to the manner in which the State began to bolster the nationalist meta-narrative with variations of ‘Political Islam,’¹¹ especially after the departure of the erstwhile East Pakistan in 1971, and the coming to power of an Islamist military dictatorship in 1977 (General Zia-ul-Haq).

The dictatorship conjoined economic liberalisation with social/political conservatism (the aforementioned synchronisation

¹¹ The term Political Islam refers generally to any interpretation of Islam that serves as a basis for political identity and action.

process). Therefore, the classes that benefited the most by the policies of economic deregulation and liberalisation also adopted a conservative disposition. What this produced was a conservative middle-class, but one which was invested in neoliberal economic models and repulsed by the 'old style' politics based on class conflict, which it saw as tilted in favour of the classes below.

The military dictator Pervez Musharraf (1999-2008) repeated this formula by continuing the economic liberalisation that was initiated in the 1980s. But he diluted the Islamic/Islamist aspect of this formula by reinterpreting it to mean something more 'spiritual' in nature. This intensified the conflict of interpretation which split the middle-classes between pro-Musharraf 'moderates' and those still holding on to the sterner notions of Islam proliferated during the Zia regime (1977-88). However, as Musharraf's government began to crumble in 2007, along with the economy, and civilian ruling elites started to revive themselves, State elites such as the ME once again began to frame the tensions as a conflict between corrupt politics and national interest.

The middle-classes, though, split between Musharraf's idea of Islam ('Enlightened Moderation') and that of Zia's, remained to be the core beneficiaries of economic liberalisation. But sensing the imminent fall of Musharraf, they went into depression. Their identities, formed first by Zia, and then by Musharraf, once again began to disperse and disintegrate. The middle-classes had by then become a significant urban constituency. Musharraf tried to retain this constituency. As Musharraf's 'moderate' dictatorship began to slide in 2007, articulate men were unleashed on popular TV channels. These men began to frame the conflict between the dictatorship and the anti-Musharraf politicians as a cosmic battle between good and evil.

One Zaid Hamid became a regular on TV channels, churning out conspiracy theories claiming that the politicians were tools of international forces working to engineer the ouster of Musharraf and bring anti-Pakistan and anti-Islam forces in power. Many young

middle-class folk were spellbound by Hamid as he spouted one worn-out conspiracy theory after another, claiming that he had a plan to disrupt the nefarious designs of those out to turn Pakistan into a den of corruption and deviance. His ‘sources’ and ‘references’ were an assortment of conspiracy mongers, and debunked literature that had originally emerged in Europe and the US in the first half of the 20th century. He also used obscure Islamic sources. He was like a cross between a classical conspiracy theorist and an argumentative Islamist.

But he himself was not to be the one doing the physical bit. He was just the id which was to be manifested by others.

Then there was the TV anchor Shahid Masood who had had a promising beginning to his TV career in the early 2000s. But during the period of the Musharraf regime’s decline, Masood heavily borrowed material from the writings of the notorious Turkish conspiracy theorist and creationist Harun Yahya for a set of dramatic lectures on the ‘End of Times.’ His framing of the conflict (between the Musharraf regime and its opponents) was more apocalyptic. The distorted, invented and re-invented histories, revenge fantasies, and pseudo-scientific and magical economic gibberish spouted by these two gentlemen sat well with middle-income groups facing the possibility of an identity crisis, and fearing that they would be relegated to political obscurity or pushed downwards in the messy ranks of the classes bellow.

Even though the appeal of both Hamid and Masood eventually wore off, they had tapped into the psyche of an influential constituency that was feeling vulnerable after Musharraf’s departure. Some members in the ME were taking notes. They began looking for a suitable replacement for Musharraf, even though the left-liberal PPP and the centre-right PML-N had won the 2008 and 2013 elections to form governments. But they were the old civilian ruling elite at odds with a State elite that saw them as a threat. Imran Khan stepped in to fill the ‘void’ created by Musharraf’s departure. But the fact is: there really wasn’t any void. If there was one, it was filled by the PPP and then by

the PML-N. However, the middle-classes were now 84-million-strong.¹² They already had economic influence and were perched in all manner of positions in important institutions, including in the mushrooming electronic media. Musharraf had become their ‘strongman,’ and their minds were now stuffed with the conspiratorial balderdash fed to them as a way to explain the strongman’s fall.

The ME found in Khan someone who could be moulded into becoming a civilian Musharraf. To address the fears and anxieties of the middle-classes, Khan had to usurp not only Musharraf’s ideas of nationalism and ‘Sufi Islam,’ but also bits from Islamist ideologues and from Pakistani postmodernist hacks sitting in universities in the US but applauding Islamism as an admirable idea against Western modernity. In 2018, Khan received the bulk of urban middle-class votes, but they were not enough to give his party a majority. He had to stitch together a shaky coalition, but one that he began to run like an authoritarian. His lofty, passionate rhetoric continued, but, of course, it could not do anything to halt the decline of the economy, curb violent crimes (especially against women) or mend deteriorating relations with countries that are Pakistan’s leading trading partners and providers of financial and military aid.

Initially, as he failed, his core middle-class constituencies went quiet. But when it became evident that the ME had had enough of this experiment, and opposition parties had finally found some space to make use of the anger that was simmering in the polity against Khan’s misrule, the middle-classes began to go into meltdown mode again. Many among this class had invested a lot of emotion in Khan, identifying with him as an authoritative paternal figure. Many even imagined him as a messiah of sorts. Out came the conspiracy theories. They were rolled out by Khan, his ministers, and his supporters in the electronic media. Out went the anti-corruption rhetoric (mainly because Khan’s own administration had become plagued by corruption). And in

¹² Zaidi, op.cit.

came the tried and tested theories of foreign intervention. Supposedly, Khan, who in reality had only limited international exposure or clout as PM, had become a grave danger to US and European designs in the region. So, apparently, they influenced the ME to back off and allow the opposition parties to oust him through a no-confidence-vote.

Khan was trying to soften what was otherwise a hard fall. And his middle-class constituency did the same. But they knew the game was over. They had lost another identity that was formulated for them, this time by Khan. A young group of Khan's supporters that I know started watching old videos of Khan's 2014 dharna. They were there. Two of them fell in love there and married soon after. In this case, a fading identity was trying to regenerate itself through nostalgia.

Political identities formed by ideologies at the core of which is the hatred of 'the other' are fragile and volatile. Imagine a person in Nazi Germany whose political identity was crafted by an ideology, one of whose main planks was the detestation of Jewish people, communists, gypsies and physically or mentally impaired people. Take this plank out, and the identity that stands on it would collapse. The psychological impact of this on a person can be catastrophic.

A German colleague of mine, a scholar, who I befriended in Washington DC in 2018, once told me an rather telling story. He said his grandfather, who was a young man during Hitler's dictatorship, embraced the Nazi ideology, despite the fact that he was a supporter of the centre-left German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Once democracy in Germany crumbled after failing to withstand the weight of a rapidly sliding economy, his grandfather began to agree with those who wanted to see the coming to power of a 'strongman.'

The grandfather still held centre-left views. He hoped that the strongman would emerge from the left – perhaps hoping for someone

like Lenin or Stalin? His Christian family lived in a middle-class Jewish neighborhood in Berlin and was on friendly terms with the residents of the area. My colleague told me that most German Jews were not very demonstrative about their faith and considered themselves Germans first. But as the economy continued to slide, his grandfather, who had been hired as a teacher at a prestigious school, began to fear that he would lose his job. He had recently married and was planning to have children.

“He did not know how to handle his fear (of becoming unemployed),” the colleague said. “He liked being known and seen as a teacher,” he added. This was an identity he was most comfortable with. But the fear of losing the job — and perhaps his wife and his dreams of becoming a father — drove him into the arms of the Nazi Party that, at the time, was struggling to become an effective electoral outfit.

There was no real danger of his grandfather losing his job because the school only accepted students from the ‘moneyed classes’ that were not being impacted by the economy as much as the classes below. Secondly, the grandfather had married a woman who was an apprentice of a highly successful lawyer. So, there was no reason to believe that she would have left him, in case he lost his job.

“Many years later, my grandfather told my father, that his fears had made him feel helpless,” the colleague continued. “He told my father that he felt that he was not playing his role to save Germany, and that the party that he used to vote for had no future.” By the time of the 1932 German elections, the grandfather was fully smitten by Adolph Hitler and voted for the Nazi Party. His wife, though, was shocked. But he told her that, in Germany (apparently) there were more Jewish teachers, professors and lawyers than Germans. When the wife responded by saying the German Jews were German citizens as well, he told her she was naive, and that it will be a Jew who will take his place in the school where he taught.

When Hitler overthrew the parliamentary system, installed a totalitarian regime, and initiated a vicious campaign against the Jewish people, the grandfather began to get his Jewish neighbors arrested on fake charges. Then, he conveniently moved into a bigger house left behind by a Jewish family that he had reported to the authorities for being communist sympathisers. His wife secretly escaped to Sweden after fearing that he would report her as well for having ‘un-German’ and ‘anti-Aryan’ views. But he didn’t care. He was made the principal of the school and took an active part in authoring the new curriculum that glorified the ‘supremacy of the Aryan race’ and demonised Jewish people as swindlers, cheaters, corrupters and vermin.

He then married another woman provided to him by ‘The Belief and Beauty Society.’ The society focused on teaching young ‘Aryan’ women how to cook, sew and take part in politics, in line with Nazi ideals. The society forbade women from seeking anything that would compromise their ability to conceive healthy Aryan children. These ranged from smoking to pursuing higher education. My German colleague said that his father was one of the four children that his grandfather had from his second wife. After the Nazi regime collapsed in 1945, the second wife escaped to Uruguay with another man, without the children.

The abandoned children were raised in various orphanages in Berlin and Munich. The grandfather was briefly arrested by the Allied forces. The collapse of the Nazi government and Hitler’s suicide left him in a catatonic state. He didn’t know who he was anymore. He lost all sense of ‘the self’ when his identity of being a teacher (that was then fortified by an intense political ideology) disintegrated. He spent a decade in a mental institution. In 1956, he started living with one of his sons in Berlin, even though, according to my colleague, he was convinced that Hitler had gone into hiding and would return.

Such manic episodes of ‘hope’ were often followed by days of depression. Once, when a Jewish friend of his son visited the house and

tried to console the grandfather, the latter slapped him. So why did he slap the Jew who was exhibiting kindness towards him? The grandfather was still trying to hold on to an identity that was shaped by the Nazis. Hating the Jew 'other' was an important pillar of the ideology. Returning or accepting the kindness of a Jew would have negated the ideology. To the grandfather, it would have meant the defeat and erosion of ideas that his identity and sense of self were made of. He passed away in 1974, a bitter old man.

In October 2022, a scholar and activist from the left in Pakistan tweeted that despite the fact that most 'liberals' and progressives were heavily critiquing the government that had replaced Khan's regime for behaving like the ousted regime, they were still being abused (on social media) by PTI supporters. Indeed, equating the new government's crackdown against PTI workers with similar crackdowns that took place during Khan's regime was problematic for a lot of PTI supporters. To them, Khan's actions in this regard were justified. To gain their appreciation, one had to out-rightly censure the new government without mentioning that the PTI regime was no different. The fact is, it was worse.

But one can also see that the refusal (by PTI supporters) to acknowledge the condemnation of the new regime by the progressives, is a way to safeguard the political identity that was formed for them by PTI and its charismatic leader. A majority of Khan's largely urban middle-class supporters did not have a core political identity before 2011. Most of them were entirely defined by their professions: teacher, doctor, lawyer, corporate executive, entrepreneur, etc. This, and that they were 'Muslim' and 'proud Pakistanis.' Many of them happened to admire Musharraf. They treated the ME as a sacred cow.

So at the core of the ideology that was formulated for them by PTI was a hatred for mainstream political parties (because they were 'corrupt'); abhorrence of the parliamentary system (that needed to be replaced with a 'presidential system'); suspicion towards the US and

Europe (because they were neo-imperialist forces working against the interests of Islam and Pakistan); and reverence towards the PTI chairman who was a hero and saviour. It didn't matter even if one was a citizen of a Western country nor the fact that he/she was a lifestyle liberal in Pakistan. These ones described themselves as 'genuine liberals' as opposed to 'fake liberals.'

According to this ideology, fake liberals were *khooni* (blood-thirsty) because they were aiding Western powers to eliminate Muslim 'brothers' by labelling them as terrorists. Therefore, the identity formulated by this ideology would come into question if progressives and fake liberals were to be acknowledged or appreciated. As mentioned, losing a (political) identity can be troubling. One can grow out of it, though, and many do. But to some, this becomes something impossible to do because it provides them an existential purpose and, more so, possible economic benefits.

From the late 1980s, many young men in Karachi and Hyderabad began to join the Mohajir nationalist party, the MQM. Some of these men gradually rose from insignificance to becoming feared 'terrors,' after proving their loyalty and passion for MQM and its chief Altaf Hussain. Hussain gave them an identity. They were told that they belonged to a distinct ethnic group, the Mohajir, who had shed their blood to create Pakistan but were sidelined and forgotten by the Punjabi elite. The youth were also told that the Pashtuns were encroaching upon their economic and political interests in Karachi, and that the Sindhis wanted to throw them in the Arabian Sea.

The once irrelevant young men who led the way to impose 'MQM's writ' in various areas of Karachi and Hyderabad were given nicknames. For example, a Javed Ahmad became Javed Langra. There was also Abdur Rehman Bhola, Zubair Charya, Nadeem Anda Fry and dozens more. From being no-ones, they had become men who were feared and had clout. Many were eventually eliminated by the police, many escaped into exile, and some quit the party and became no-ones again.

But there were still those who refused to let go of the identity that was instilled in them.

They did not want to become non-ones ever again. There is a fruit vendor in Karachi's Shah Faisal Colony who used to be a 'terror' of MQM in the early 1990s. He came from a lower-middle-class family and was a grade 10 student at a public school when he was smitten by Altaf Hussain. I first met him when I was covering the 1992 military operation against MQM for an English weekly. His name is Anwari Nasir. This Anwari, after joining the MQM as a common worker in 1990, became Anwari Jazbati (*jazbati* in Urdu means emotional). With a pistol and a reputation of 'getting things done,' he was brought in the circle of important MQM musclemen in the area. He became 'respected'/feared in his neighborhood. He became someone.

Anwari was arrested during the 1992 operation. He was tortured and then imprisoned. He was released a decade later in early 2003. Due to his family's pleas, he did not return to MQM. He did odd jobs before finally setting up his own fruit stall in the area. When I met him again in 2014, he was 41 years old. He had married and had three children. He met me well. From Anwari Jazbati, he was now simply Anwari Fruitwallah. He said he did not rejoin the MQM, but he did reminisce about the days when he was someone. He also told me that he often gets depressed ("*udaas rehta houn*"). He couldn't understand why. To me, the *udaasi* (sadness/depression) was probably due to a loss of an identity that had made him feel purposeful, even if many of these purposes were rather questionable.

Societal change and personal life events sometimes make one feel uncertain about one's self/identity. This can motivate people to identify with social groups — particularly groups that provide a distinctive and clearly defined identity. This process can make the more extreme groups attractive as a source of identification. People may zealously identify with highly distinctive groups that have strong and directive leadership.

Uncertainty plays a major role in making people identify with social and political groups. It can be a harmless sporting group or a fan club. But since the motivator or trigger in this regard is a feeling of political and economic uncertainty, this theory is often applied to understand those who join radical or extremist groups. As mentioned, M. Amir Rana has carried out numerous surveys in which he interviewed dozens of young men and women who were radicalised by militant Islamists. The radicalised mostly came from working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds. They were young and dismayed by their static or uncertain economic existence.

They were provided a sense of certainty by militant outfits and a sense of purpose through an ideology that glorified self-sacrifice as a means to create an Islamic State/caliphate that would wipe out poverty, corruption and immorality, and provide justice. In this case as well, a young person is made to create a 'self' in relation to an opposite or 'the other.' The other in this respect are 'heretics' and 'infidels' who are not only conspiring to destroy Islam, but are the reason behind the person's economic woes and insignificant/meaningless existence. In his mind, his new identity as a jihadist transforms the ant into a giant with a cosmic purpose to cleanse a world of heretical filth.

But as we have seen, jihadists can also emerge from 'educated' middle-income groups. In February 2002, the Pakistani police arrested Omar Saeed Sheikh, a British-Pakistani accused of facilitating the kidnapping and murder of a *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Pearl was kidnapped in Pakistan's sprawling and chaotic metropolis Karachi, by militants allegedly associated with Al-Qaeda. After being taken to a hideout in Afghanistan, he was slain. A few eyebrows were raised when details of Sheikh's background began to trickle in. He wasn't your 'regular' militant Islamist. He was highly educated, middle-class and had lived a relatively comfortable life in England and Pakistan. Most Pakistanis didn't know exactly what to make of this.

In 2010, Faisal Shahzad, a young middle-class Pakistani-American unsuccessfully tried to blow up New York's famous Times Square. In 2015 one Saad Aziz assassinated a progressive activist Sabeen Mahmud. As mentioned, Aziz had graduated from an elite private school and then joined one of Karachi's finest business schools, the IBA. His father owned a trendy restaurant, and Aziz once also had a steady girlfriend. But he was drawn to a group formed by Islamic evangelists at IBA. The group was a kind of reading club where members read and discussed works of well-known Islamist ideologues.¹³

Omar Saeed Sheikh and Faisal Shahzad were 'acculturated natives' who had rebelled against cultural mores that they had adopted as citizens of UK and US. Acculturated natives embrace cultural norms of their adopted societies. They do so to advance their status in these societies. These natives live in regions where they do not have ancestral roots. But when, despite adopting foreign cultural ethos, they feel that their progress is being restricted by the producers of these ethea, they walk out from their acculturated selves, rebel against it and adopt their ancestral culture.¹⁴

But what they believe is their 'authentic/ancestral culture' is often a romanticised concoction, or even an unintentional caricature. In their rebellion against their former acculturated selves, they may begin to dress in the manner they believe people in their ancestral culture do (or ought to), or they may begin to follow their religion in a more overt manner. The acculturated native's anger, triggered by their inability to achieve prestige and success despite adopting the ethos of a dominant Western culture, is a rebellion against modernity.¹⁵

An existing identity seems unsatisfying and, in this case, alien. Existentialist angst triggered by uncertainty about who one really was,

¹³ 'Anatomy of a Murder' (Herald, September 25, 2016).

¹⁴ Lecture by Patricia Crone at Institute for Advance Studies, New Jersey, April 2012.

¹⁵ Ibid.

can make the person start identifying with ideas that seem ‘whole’ and certain. Shiekh and Shahzad found such ideas in the political absolutism of ‘militant Islam.’ Perhaps same was the case with Aziz. He wasn’t a citizen of a Western country, though. But he was provided a modern, secular education and had a ‘Westernised’ lifestyle.

Ever since the 1980s, various sections of Pakistan’s urban middle-classes have struggled to convincingly find a place for themselves within modernity. The confusion in this regard was largely caused by a State that had begun to describe itself as a ‘bastion of Islam’ — especially after the country lost its Eastern wing in 1971 in a brutal civil war. Westernisation and modernity began to be derided as being entirely alien to ‘Pakistani culture’ despite the fact that South Asia was a British colony for over a century and Pakistan’s founders were Westernised ‘modernists.’

During the General Zia dictatorship, Westernised Pakistanis were denounced as being artificial and ‘mental slaves,’ even though their entrepreneurial prowess and education were highly regarded. The Zia regime began to form an identity that merged modern entrepreneurial initiatives and disposition with Islamic ritualism. It was thus okay to partake in modern economic activity as long as one strictly followed Islam’s ritual obligations. This identity was then proliferated through textbooks and the State-own media. So, being a good Pakistani began to mean being a ‘proud Muslim’ who was ‘educated,’ and an active contributor to the country’s economy. But he/she had to *look* Muslim as well.

Therefore, the *shalwar-kameez* suddenly became an ‘Islamic dress,’ beards and hijabs became common and those who resisted such projects either became ‘mental slaves’ or, on the other hand, were *jahils* (illiterate). These notions were steadily adopted by middle-income groups. Two decades later, Imran Khan emerged as this mind-set’s poster-boy. This is when one saw the urban middle-classes begin to fully embrace an identity that was originally shaped by a reactionary

dictatorship in the 1980s. This identity, too, was constructed in relation to 'the other.' The other was a cluster comprising of modernists, liberals, progressives, and the *jahil awam* (illiterate masses). Unless one of these fully espoused the ideology and the identity of a staunch PTI supporter, he or she was not to be accepted as a sympathiser, no matter how empathetic he/she tries to be towards the supporters. Valuing a gesture of 'the other' is like betraying the (concocted) self.

Consumerism, or the preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods, largely emerged from the 19th century onwards. It began to really take off from the early 20th century, when the idea of mass production of consumer goods fully materialised. Consumer goods are often those that are not exactly a necessity. They are largely acquired for superficial purposes. It is, therefore, not a coincidence that the birth of modern-day advertising began to evolve more rapidly during this period. Its aim was to present consumer goods as necessities without which one could not become an identifiable member of society.

In 2018, I went through decades of 'consumer demographics' data of some of the world's leading marketing and advertising firms (between the 1950s and early 2000s). These included advertising firms in Pakistan and India as well. The data shows that most makers of consumer goods and services have continued to 'target' the middle-classes, or the 'aspirational classes.' These have remained prominent acquirers of consumer goods. They are also the most protuberant classes in the social and economic spaces of major cities.

However, this is not the case when it comes to politics. In developing countries, the middle-classes may be part of the electorate, but in most regions, their presence is minimal in the actual corridors of power. The middle-classes have often expressed frustration after feeling that their path to holding the levers of political power is being

blocked by members of the political elite who were born into their status instead of climbing their way up as the middle-classes do.

Modern mainstream politics is the result of certain revolutionary 17th/18th Century upheavals in Europe which saw the emergence and expansion of the middle-classes. They gradually pushed out the old political elites (the monarchs, the Church, landed gentries, etc.), and replaced these with themselves at the top. The politics that evolved during this process was a product of 'modernity' as defined by the 'Age of Enlightenment.'¹⁶

Religion was demystified and relegated to the private sphere. Newly formed polities began to be defined as nations that were tied to a particular territory and linked to integrated economies. The 'pre-modern' times were denounced as being bygone eras ravaged by wars, plagues, brutal rulers, widespread poverty, religious persecution and exploitation, superstition, and short lifespans.

The political system which the expanding middle-classes adopted and evolved was democracy. Initially, they posited that a large, prosperous middle class should mediate between the rich and the poor, creating the structural foundation upon which democratic political processes may operate. Middle-class prosperity and growth were dependent on modern economic activity which functioned outside the old agrarian structures, and took place in the expanding urban spaces. These spaces attracted labour from rural areas who became the the working-classes/proletariat. During the upward-mobility of the middle-classes, they engineered a democracy that was to constitutionally protect their properties and newfound power and wealth. But as the size of the proletariat grew, it became necessary to create room for them as well in the political system, if social and political upheavals were to be avoided.

¹⁶ Centred on the idea that reason is the primary source of authority and legitimacy, the Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that dominated the world of ideas in Europe in the 18th century.

Traditionally, the working-classes in democracies leaned left or towards socialist or social welfare policies. As a reaction, the middle-classes moved to the right. The middle-classes therefore, became more invested in curbing, or at least lessening the electoral influence of the working-classes by voting for conservative parties which treated social-democratic ideas as Trojan horses through which communism would invade and usurp all political and economic power of the 'hard-working middle-classes.' However, from within the post-19th-century political elites (in industrialising countries) also emerged outfits that evolved into becoming the parties of the working-classes. The growing number of blue-collared voters in the cities necessitated this.

This created a fracture within the middle-classes. A large section of them was now willing to undermine democracy, or a system that it had crafted itself. This section began to view it as a threat to its economic interests. Here is where we see the growth of authoritarian and fascist ideas permeating middle-class political discourses in Europe, and the emergence of men such as Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, etc. The aforementioned section's radical move towards the (anti-democracy) right can be understood as an emotional decision born from the fear of being swallowed by the classes below (the 'masses').

When the American president F.D. Roosevelt (1933-45) stated that 'the only thing we need to fear was fear itself,' he was trying to address just that. He understood that fear was capable of pushing reasonable folk into authoritarian/totalitarian/populist camps. However, after the defeat of German and Italian fascisms, social-democratic policies thrived in the democratic West. They succeeded in largely pacifying middle-class fears. The middle-classes now stood on the left and the right, yet within the mainstream democratic system which continued to safeguard and police their economic interests, and, at the same time, facilitate the interests of the working-classes as well.

But from the mid-1970s, as the nature of capitalism began to change, and the industrialised countries entered the 'post-industrial stage,' things

flipped. Between the two World Wars, sections of European middle-classes had largely moved to the right and far-right, whereas the working-classes had moved to the left. But from the 1970s onwards, when the service sector began to accumulate more wealth than the industrial sector, positions switched. The service sector has always been dominated by the middle-classes. A gradual decrease in industrial activity and/or with this activity shifting to developing countries (due to cheap labour), the working-classes were left stranded and feeling bitter.

They began to break away from mainstream democratic paradigms and embrace a populism which preyed on the fears of this class as it struggled to cope with the shift that was eroding blue-collar economic interests. So, whereas (in the West) during the first half of the 20th century, the middle-class milieu, fearing that they were about to be overwhelmed by the working-classes, had exited the mainstream democratic paradigm, and had embraced authoritarian ideas and regimes, in the second half of the 20th century, it was the working-classes who did the same by supporting the renewed rise of right-wing nationalism and then populism.

In Pakistan, the middle-classes have felt more secure during dictatorships. But in India, they have managed to break into the realm of India's political elites by riding on the wave of a right-wing political party (the BJP). In 2018, large sections of Pakistan's urban middle-classes believed that they too had done the same by voting to power Imran Khan's populist bandwagon, the PTI. But their nascent experience of democracy imploded when Khan's regime was ousted by a no-confidence-vote. This class was now back to viewing democracy as a corrupt system, engineered to serve an elite that is geared to address the issues of the classes with the most votes.

But the fact is, as the middle-classes in Europe had done between the two World Wars, the middle-classes in India and Pakistan too, consciously or unconsciously, are destroying the very idea and system that was originally crafted to serve their interests the most. This brings

us to consumerism. Between the two World Wars when large sections of the urban middle-classes in various European countries began to fear that the classes below would use democracy to undermine middle-class interests, the middle-classes became antagonistic towards democracy. They then went on to facilitate the rise of anti-democracy forces that barged in and overthrew the political elites who were at least engaging with the masses through electoral politics.

The middle-classes in South Asia have been in a dilemma of being squeezed between two forces (the electoral elite and the working-classes/peasants). So, these middle-classes have failed to fully carve out a place and identity for themselves as a political entity within a political system that is largely informed by the engagement between the aforementioned forces. According to the historian Markus Daechsel, this saw the South Asian middle-classes indulge in 'politics of self-expression.'¹⁷

This form of politics is a rebellion against mainstream politics, which the South Asian middle-class milieu dismisses as being 'corrupt.' This 'corruption' is not only denounced in material terms, but is also censured for contaminating or enslaving a community's or an individual's inner self that needs to be liberated. Instruments such as the constitution, and institutions such as the Parliament, are seen as restraints that were stopping people from seeking liberation. Liberation from what, one might ask? This is never convincingly explained. The so-called 'long march' that Khan led after he was ousted was titled as 'Azadi march' (or freedom/liberation march).

The aim of the politics of self-expression is not exactly a way to find a place in mainstream politics. Instead, it is a flight into a conceptual universe where all societal constraints that plague the middle-class 'self' would cease to exist. The politics of self-expression is a product of the consumer society.¹⁸ A new ethic of romanticism

¹⁷ M. Daechsel: *Politics of Self Expression* (Routledge, 2006) p.1

¹⁸ Ibid. p.167

driven by emotional introspection, a hunger for stimulation and arousal and a penchant for daydreaming, gave birth to a consumer society that alone could sustain the onward march of capitalism.

This drove people to develop an obsession with identities. The middle-classes remain to be at the core of consumerism. A consumer society has been defined as one in which there is no societal reality other than the relationship between consumers and branded commodities. People are what they consume.

The middle-class milieu (in South Asia) was, by virtue of its material culture, persuaded to use consumption as an outlet for its frustrated socio-political ambitions. Consumerism substitutes a fetishistic relationship with consumer goods for actual societal relations.¹⁹ A political constituency that could not otherwise exist due to the constraints imposed by a mainstream political economy, found in consumerism a space where it could establish some form of a unified cultural consciousness.

The trouble with consumer identities is that consumer goods are believed to reflect a person's innermost being, but at the same time rely on the garish and the mundane to produce identities. Consumption is not about great deeds in world history, but about the choice of toothpaste or cellphones. Yet, consumer goods through the manner in which they are marketed, provide the stuff to form identities. Marlboro smokers were rugged individualists, Coca Cola drinkers value the happiness of being part of a wholesome family, iPhone users are savvy folk who are 'creative' and 'fun-loving,' etc.

The politics of self-expression is an attempt to make consumer identities secure and 'serious' by dressing up consumption activity as politics. The language of politics thus becomes a caricature of advertising language. It retains all the hyperbole of advertisements. For example, the word 'liberation' in such nature of politics is as 'serious' as it is when used in ads of male or female undergarments! But in

¹⁹ Ibid.

politics of expression, it replaces advertising's playfulness and self-irony with the certainty of assumed prophetic airs.²⁰

In consumer societies, the language of politics becomes a caricature of advertising language which, itself is a caricature of lofty words. For example, a young man or woman is more likely to come across the word 'Revolution' in an advertisement than in politics. Advertisements and political rhetoric both exchange words which may end up meaning nothing. The middle-classes in India and Pakistan went to war against conventional politics, which they still fear is pitched against them. But even in India, where these classes have succeeded to somewhat break into and disturb the once impenetrable fortress of the country's 'rational' political elites, they have no convincing alternatives. Or the alternatives are creating unprecedented social and political turmoil because they are emerging from the politics of self-expression.

The methodology in this context is a direct reflection of the logic of a consumer society. Both in Pakistan and India, 'rational' political instruments and democratic norms are being attacked by the middle-classes through the creation of spectacles that are being beamed by the new media universe. They are like marketing stunts. Events that openly undermine the constitution, encourage the beating up and humiliation of foes, the burning of passports and flags, etc., have turned the perpetrators into political brands that are immediately and often quite literally 'consumed'. It is an ultimate extension of the self-expressionist longing for intoxication, a self-indulgent form of 'political' activity that is supposedly based on a supreme ideology, but in reality gives the person involved a taste of the ultimate power trip.²¹ Just like an expensive brand of car or a watch would.

This feeling is very different from the one felt by actual political action. It is more like the feeling of excitement that one experiences when he/she acquires a favourite consumer product. Therefore, political

²⁰ Ibid. p.169

²¹ Ibid. p.201

heroes in this regard are treated in the same manner: As brands that are formulated, marketed and consumed. No wonder then, politicians hiring marketing firms to run their election campaigns has become quite common, even if the firms usually work in the shadows.

The German historian Markus Daechsel writes, 'if there is a final conclusion to be drawn from this exposition of the politics of self-expressionism in India and Pakistan, it has to be the following: the development of a middle-class through an expansion of the social role of consumption offers no guarantee for a better political culture. Persistent contradictions between a consumer society and other forms of societal organisations will stimulate forms of self-expressionist radicalism that may be very hard to control. Far from being the historical carrier of the voice of reason and modernity, the consumer middle-class could well turn out as the destroyer of the world that gave birth to it.'²²

²² Ibid.

Chapter 3

The Making and Mutation of A Political Messiah

The shift from pre-modern societies that were deeply rooted in religious beliefs and rituals, to modern ones in which religion was ousted from political and public spaces, was a long and complex process. It began in earnest in the 18th century, gaining momentum through events such as the American Revolution (1765-84) and the French Revolution (1789-99). The US Constitution (effective from March 1784) recognised the existence of a Supreme Being and a place for religion in society. In 1791, through an amendment, the Constitution granted freedoms which included the freedom to exercise religion, but also stated that ‘the government shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.’ The clause is often interpreted to mean that the Constitution requires the separation of Church and State.

The French Revolution was directly pitched against the monarchy, the landed elites and the political power that the Catholic Church enjoyed there. The revolutionaries wanted to wipe out organised religion and establish the ‘supremacy of reason.’ Yet, the French political theorist and philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose writings inspired the Revolution, spoke about the need of having a ‘civil religion.’¹ The object of civil religion for Rousseau was to foster sentiments of sociability and a love of public duties amongst citizens.

¹ JJ Rousseau: *The Social Contract* (Independent Publishing Platform, 2014; First published in 1762)

To Rousseau, religion could play a constructive role in society and in nation-building, but this religion could not be the one that existed in France because it was 'useless in fostering the spirit of patriotism and social solidarity necessary for a flourishing State.'

Rousseau's civil religion recognised the existence of a 'Supreme Being' and of an afterlife, and that laws were sacred. By laws Rousseau meant those enacted through a social contract between a State and its citizens. After the Revolution succeeded in toppling the monarchy and the Church, the revolutionary regime established 'worship of reason' as a State creed. But this was quickly turned into the 'Cult of the Supreme Being' when the regime decided that a belief in a Supreme Being was necessary to maintain social order. Retitled as 'worship of the Supreme Being,' it borrowed heavily from the writings of Rousseau by recognising the existence of the Supreme Being and the 'Immortality of the Soul.'

It declared that the best service to the Supreme Being was the practice of man's duties to the State and nation. The most important of these duties were the detestation of tyranny, caring for the unfortunate, respecting the weak, defending the oppressed, doing unto others all the good one can, and not being unjust towards anyone. Western societies that were undergoing drastic political, economic and social changes in the 18th and 19th centuries were wrestling with the long-established presence of religion. To them, religion as it was practiced, and the mindset that it had produced, had become impediments in the path to material and intellectual progress. Religion needed to be evolved and aligned with the momentum of change and/or of modernity.

This required the disenchantment of religion through a 'rational' reading of the holy texts. Enlightenment thinkers concluded that there was no need for the Church to get involved in the matters of the State. The secularism which was born from this began being enshrined in constitutions. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sociologists such as Max Weber were announcing 'the disenchantment of the

world.’ This called into question all the supernatural forces, and the gods and spirits that were ubiquitous in non-industrial societies, and to which these societies attributed responsibility for natural and social phenomena.

The disenchantment of faith and the rise of modernity introduced a competing cosmology: the modern scientific interpretation of nature by which only the laws discovered by the scientific method were admitted as valid explanations of any phenomena. However, the carnage witnessed during the First World War (1914-18) set off a thorough intellectual scrutiny of modernity. To various European intellectuals, the erosion of religion had left a gaping hole in people’s lives because religions had been stripped of their spirituality, leaving only a wilted understanding of faith that was unable to conjure a sense of morality that regulates human behaviour. And even though, certain movements emerged, calling for a return to the emotional and fundamental understanding of religion, the material fruits of modernity were just too great to ignore or reject. Also, the exploits of traditional religions in the pre-modern world were too brutal to be romanticised as a way out of amoral modernity.

Thus emerged the ‘sacralisation of politics’ and ‘political religions.’ Sacralisation treats secular ideas (such as the nation, citizenship, and inalienable rights to life and freedom) as sacred. Sacralisation was active in the US Constitution, and during the French revolutionary regimes. Nationalism, national duty and ideas of political and individual autonomy and freedom were described as being sacred. Sacralisation understood these as modern extensions of a Christianity that existed before the faith was adulterated by greed and power, and was exploited to keep the masses illiterate and superstitious.

Sacralisation also consists of certain rituals that are treated as being sacred, such as love for the national flag, the singing of the national anthem, the celebration of national days with ‘national zeal,’ etc. The roots of these can be found in Rousseau’s civil religion in which laws

enacted by the State and governments are deemed sacred, and the best way to serve the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being itself is not entirely described as belonging to any particular faith, rather, it is understood to be an unambiguous (but non-corporeal) creator of nations. Sacralisation is an attempt to inject fervour in secular nationalist beliefs and acts. Therefore, founders of nations too are treated as sacred figures, just as traditional religions treated their saints and founders. The idea is to demystify traditional religions and fill the demystified space with secular ideas, but ones that have been sacralised. Nationalism is perhaps the most prominent example of this.

Yet, this is not always successful to neutralise the urge to feel something that could not be scientifically explained or rationalised through the senses. Concepts such as intuition, and the belief in a 'sixth sense,' for example, look to transcend reason and empirical reality to 'feel' a 'spiritual' state of being, and gain a purpose inherent in this state. This can manifest itself on an individual or on a collective level, either through 'New Age' spiritual movements, pseudoscience, magical beliefs or even through religious revivals (but in which traditional religions mutate to keep pace with modern lifestyles). From this can emerge political religions.

A political religion is not about the politicisation of religion – even though, it is often mistaken as that. The religious pulse that drove the Islamic Revolution in Iran, or the pulse that has given rise to Hindu nationalism in India, and the 'cultist' following of former Pakistani PM Imran Khan, had more to do with the formation of a political religion. But how is a political religion different from a civil religion?

Political religion can be explained as a more intensified and dogmatic version of civil religion. The origins of political religion are rooted in the erstwhile fascist regimes in Italy and Germany, and in communist dictatorships in the former Soviet Union and in China. The creation of new symbols and rituals to evoke belief in a higher cause are central to fascism and communism. Fascism drew genuine belief

from widespread segments of societies that lived under fascist regimes or were attracted to fascist movements. With the rise of fascism and 'Bolshevism' in the first half of the 20th century, many became alarmed by the manner in which communist and fascist dictatorships were manipulating religion. These new systems were appropriating elements of Christianity's symbolism to create new types of collective affinity, based either on national identity, race or class.

Communist and fascist totalitarian States tried to develop a type of absolute certainty that was offered by pre-modern Christianity. Nazism, for example, merged the rationality of modern bureaucratic systems with romanticised irrationality through new symbols, mythology and rituals. The era of totalitarian regimes was signified by leaders who manipulated the masses through a modern form of collective fanaticism. To some, this new conception of faith emerged in response to the demystification of traditional religions.

Political religions reject pluralism and seek to monopolise belief. They are diametrically opposed to all notions of individualism. Political religions carry a sense of messianic mission, binding leaders and followers together in a shared project. Like civil religion, political religions too develop new rituals and beliefs but they make a charismatic person the personification of the mission. Political religions formulate a wider mythology that allows societies to engage in activities that express their collective belief in the 'sacred cause' espoused by the new faith.

After the collapse of fascist regimes, and the rolling back of 'Stalinism' and 'Maoism,' formations of political religions did not end. They mutated through more subtle means of sacralisation. In pre-Revolution Iran, the Shah's social and economic modernisation project gave birth to a new urban middle-class. But modernisation alienated the old middle-classes whose economic base were the *bazaars* (traditional market places). As stylish malls began to squeeze out the importance of the bazaars, the old Iranian middle-classes, who were traditionalists,

began to invest even more in politically empowering the clerics. And, even though, the new middle-classes benefited greatly from Shah's modernisation policies, intellectuals from within this class emerged to denounce modernisation as a Western tool to enslave the Iranians.

The Shah tried to neutralise this perception by holding gaudy festivals glorifying ancient Persian empires. This, in turn, saw the new middle-class intellectuals bring forward the greatness of the Iranians from the point when Islam arrived in Persia. Yet, these intellectuals, unlike the old middle-classes of the bazaar, were modern and secular. The intellectual trajectory of the famous Iranian scholar Ali Shariati is a case in point. Shariati received his PhD in sociology from a university in France. Over the course of the next decade, till his demise in 1977, he fused Marxist and Existentialist ideas with Shi'ism to form what he called 'Red Shi'ism.'² Shariati was aware of how Shah's policies were creating commotion within the Iranian society, especially among the old middle-classes, the landed elites and the growing number of proletariat and the 'lumpenproletariat.'

He was also conscious of the feeling of 'rootlessness' that the demystification of Shi'ism had created among the new, more educated urban middle-classes. These classes were core consumers of Shah's modernisation, and the Shah saw them as his constituency. Shariati, however, saw the new middle-classes going through the motions without any ideological purpose, other than being mere consumers. This feeling of purposelessness had also pushed a lot of young middle-class Iranians towards leftist ideologies, such as Marxism and socialism, or towards secular Iranian nationalism. But a majority from the new middle-classes could not fully identify with any of these. Nor were they willing to follow the 'fundamentalism' of the clerics, mainly because this fundamentalism was largely associated with the beliefs of the old middle-classes that were seen as being regressive.

Shariati's aforementioned fusion delivered through lectures, by a

² A. Shariati: *Red Shi'ism* (Free Islamic Literatures, 1974) p.1

man dressed in Western attire, and often speaking with a cigarette in his hand, managed to draw the attention of thousands of men and women from the new middle-classes. They saw in him a refined, and highly educated man, who was well-informed about Western as well as Islamic philosophies, and had a surety of purpose. Shariati's 'Red Shi'ism' was about giving traditional Shia thought and rituals a revolutionary twist through modern radical concepts. Shariati explained it as a revolutionary strand of Shi'ism as opposed to 'Black Shi'ism' which had compromised the faith's original revolutionary tenor.

Red Shi'ism was a political religion. Even though it was critical of the clergy, it was flexed by the clerics to topple the Shah in 1979. But by then, the clerics had stripped away its Marxist allusions and added to it Islamist dimensions to put the control of this political religion in their hands. Despite the fact that the new middle-classes participated in the revolution against the Shah, they were mostly doing so as 'Red Shias.' The main foot soldiers of the clerics during the Revolution, on the other hand, were the old middle-classes of the bazaars, and the lumpenproletariat.

The new middle-classes thought that they had discovered a purpose outside of consumerism, but they failed to stop the clerics from hijacking this purpose. The clerics re-engineered it to mean the establishment of a theocratic State. Thousands from the new middle-classes were executed by the theocracy that came to power; thousands went into exile; and thousands of others now lived in a new form of tyranny. A new form of 'Black Shi'ism' which too became a political religion with Ruhollah Khomeini as its central, charismatic figure.

From 2011 onwards, a large chunk from Pakistan's middle-and-upper-middle-classes demonstrated unhinged support for Imran Khan. These classes are core consumers of the products of economic

modernity. Within these classes are also lifestyle liberals. But like their more socially conservative contemporaries, they too cannot identify with the dynamics of Pakistani democracy that are largely based on the politics of patronage, and more inclined to address the needs of the classes below who have larger number of votes. But both the middle-class segments are politically conservative also because they have always invested more in trying to sustain military dictatorships as a way to protect their economic interests.

Therefore, they are more willing to adopt 'Islamic nationalism' that was formulated and proliferated by the General Zia dictatorship in the 1980s, and which was carried forward by Nawaz Sharif in the 1990s, and then re-enacted by Imran Khan. The reason why so many modern urban middle-class folk fell over each other to demonstrate their love for Khan is because he just might have created a political religion. To religious-nationalists, moral rhetoric is valued over material results, which is why PTI supporters cherished Khan's *dharna* performances.

It was Islamic nationalism that was driving the pro-Imran politics of the mentioned classes. It would not suffice to call Khan an Islamist, though. He is an Islamic nationalist, but one who converted it into becoming a more messianic formation. As discussed, many political scientists and sociologists saw Stalinism, Nazism, Maoism and Italian Fascism, as political religions in which symbols and rituals of established religions were appropriated and then used to conjure devotion to a new faith whose purpose was a dogmatic obedience to the State, its ideology, and to its designated messiah. We also saw that, the space for such an emergence was created by the demystification of traditional religions.

The creators of political religions were not irrationalists. Instead, they used rational means to proliferate irrational ideas and myths. In so doing, they sacralised the internal and external spaces created by the retreat of traditional religions. But political religions did not revive traditional notions of religions as such. They simply adopted

symbolisms present in traditional religious myths to produce a living political faith that the people could not only feel, but see as well.

The Pakistani middle-and-upper-middle-classes had unconsciously been craving for a political religion. The so-called revival of interest in Islam from the mid-1970s was mostly witnessed among the growing middle-classes. That is why we saw an explosion of Islamic evangelical groups whose core purpose was (and remains to be) to weave feel-good narratives for the mentioned classes. These narratives posit that amoral materialism and religious moralism are not opposites. Like the Protestants/Calvinists of yore, the Islamic evangelists too see the accumulation of material wealth as God's way of rewarding the believer, as long as he/she continues to follow the core rituals of the faith.

There was enough space in Pakistan for a Shariati to emerge and give the middle-classes an ideological purpose that was compatible with a more scrutinised form of modernity. But the only thing the evangelical outfits ended up achieving was making the middle-classes more ritualistic. The ideological purpose in this respect was shaped by the ME. Islamic nationalism was that purpose, but it had no messiah. Khan became that messiah. In a hodgepodge manner he took bits from Shariati, Islamist ideologues such as Dr. Israr Hussain and Abul Ala Maududi, the leftist American scholar Noam Chomsky, the South Asian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, and from a plethora of contemporary postmodernist thinkers to create an Islamic nationalism that had him at its centre as a charismatic deliverer.

PTI rallies were rooted in this. They were modern, festive, pop in nature, yet stuffed with populist 'Islamic,' anti-West and nationalist rhetoric. They were designed to make the audiences feel the spectacle of the 'spirituality' and 'knowledge' pouring out of a messiah. A messiah they could see. A messiah that belonged to *their* class. This is important. This class in Pakistan had never had a political messiah. General Musharraf came close, but despite having huge political ambitions, he

seemed uncomfortable to venture into the messianic territory. And anyway, the former dictator wasn't all that keen on being photographed while performing an Islamic ritual, or delivering moral sermons. General Zia did that, but he lacked charisma.

Khan had charisma. He was a sporting hero. He was a playboy who became a born-again Muslim after retiring from cricket. He positioned himself as a reformed, incorruptible man who had shunned offers of power given to him by corrupt politicians. Of course, the fact is, he always lusted for political power, but just didn't want to go through the grind that one needs to go through to acquire it. He wanted Musharraf to make him PM. Musharraf thought Khan's views were not very sound. The next few military chiefs would finally grant him his wish – mainly because they too came from middle-class backgrounds and detested conventional political parties.

However, one can claim that a portion of the country's middle-classes had come to terms with the dynamics of Pakistan's electoral politics. For example, this segment aligned themselves with PML-N in Punjab, the PPP in Sindh, and the MQM in Sindh's capital city Karachi. But the other segment, that also has the largest number of lifestyle liberals, remained detached. So much so that, as discussed in Chapter 1, a fissure appeared within this class after Musharraf's departure. What one saw was not really a clash between different economic groups, but a tussle for power within the country's expanding middle-classes.

Khan's political religion did not sit well with middle-class segments who had found their religious purpose in the Islam preached by evangelical outfits, while others among these kept their faith to themselves. But the evangelical outfits failed to plug the spiritual void that the pro-Khan segments were experiencing. They didn't mind when told by the evangelical outfits that material wealth and lifestyles are compatible with religious ritualism and Islamic morality. But the fact that many from these segments had also increasingly become clients of

yoga institutes and of businesses selling products of 'New Age Spiritualism,' suggests that they still felt a spiritual void. Maybe they were not fully aware of this, until the void was filled by Khan and his PTI.

They sounded as contradictory as their messiah did while speaking about morality, religion, wealth, modernity, tradition, etc. Like him, they were all this and at the same time nothing. It is a matter of belief. Any attempt to approach it rationally will (and did) expose its contradictory nature. Not that the political or economic survival of the middle-classes depended on it. To them, it became something to do with their 'spiritual' selves because they were investing a lot of emotion in Khan. So, the more Khan's political position eroded, the louder, cruder and angrier they got. Some were sure he will return to power. While others had already started to frame his story as that of a messiah who took the fall for his supporters while fighting against tyranny and evil. They began to formulate a 'Lost Cause Myth.'

Across the 20th century, various American historians invested a lot of effort in debunking what came to be known as the Lost Cause Myth. The myth was the product of an elaborate undertaking in the Southern states of the US. In 1865, a brutal four-year civil war ended in that country and the federalist armies of the North, commanded by President Abraham Lincoln, vanquished Southern secessionists to abolish slavery. Compared to the rapidly industrialising North, the South was largely agricultural and almost entirely depended on an economy powered by cotton. Black men, women and children, forcibly brought from various African regions, were put to work in the South's vast cotton fields. The slaves had no rights and led brutal lives.

In 1861, a number of Southern states succeeded in creating a confederacy of their own because they believed the federation wanted to abolish slavery — even though Lincoln had only spoken of moderate reforms during his election campaign. But in the minds of Southerners, Lincoln was a haughty anti-South Northerner. After the confederacy

was defeated and reintegrated into the federation, the defeated states began to frame the war as a battle between well-meaning people against a greedy, arrogant and corrupt Northern elite. Thus the Lost Cause Myth was born. The myth insisted that slavery was just an excuse by the federalists to undermine the Southern economy and rob the Southern states to feed the North's industrialisation.

The myth grew through textbooks, literature, films and political rhetoric well into the 20th century, no matter how convincingly it was debunked. The myth is largely about romanticising a community that, apparently, had stood up to challenge a powerful conglomerate of corrupt politicians, greedy businessmen and ungodly secularists. The myth also suggests that the North wanted to usurp the rights of the Southern states and that the slaves owned by rich landowners were treated in a humane manner. To the Southerners, their forces lost, but won a moral victory.

While the myth began to fade from the 1990s onwards, another one emerged in January 2021. But it wasn't about an old civil war anymore. It was about a new 'war' — but one that was framed almost exactly the way the old one was. Its romanticised hero was Donald Trump. Two months after Trump was defeated in a presidential election, thousands of his supporters stormed the Capitol Building in Washington DC. Trump's supporters cast him as a righteous warrior ousted by traitors. They relied on the same tools that were used to promulgate confederate myths: manipulating facts, claiming persecution, demonising enemies and rewriting history.

To historians, the Lost Cause Myth has also come down to mean turning a military or a political defeat into a moral victory. A 'moral win' that is worked to help the defeated stay in the game. Empirical evidence that often contradicts the myth stands little chance to outflank the myth's emotional impact. In Pakistan, a Lost Cause Myth came into play when Khan's government was ousted in April 2022. Anticipating an ouster, Khan had already begun to allude to a conspiracy that was

apparently being hatched by the US, the Pakistani 'deep state' and opposition parties to dismiss his government. After his removal, Khan tried to drown the fact that his tenure was replete with incompetencies, corruption and acts of authoritarianism.

Having a well-oiled social media wing, his party was able to divert the mainstream media's attention towards unsubstantiated allegations of a conspiracy. Khan also bombarded the judiciary with petitions against the conspiracies and mounted an unflinching campaign against his erstwhile mentors and makers, the ME. Through social media, constant rallies and press conferences and court petitions, he was able to overshadow the failures of his ousted regime and create a Lost Cause Myth that regenerated emotional support for him.

So what was Khan's Lost Cause Myth? In a nutshell, this: he was a victim, not a villain. The villains were those who conspired with anti-Pakistan forces to oust a leader who was waging a 'jihad' against corruption in the country, and against Islamophobia in the West. He was fighting a cosmic war of sorts against powerful dark forces. And that he was the most popular leader in the country.

Lost Cause Myths use numerous means to absolve the defeated of all blame. The myth-makers distort and concoct history, immediate as well as distant. They knowingly lie, conscious that the myth is appealing to emotions that negate critical thinking and are not interested in evidence. The myth-makers want to formulate false memories that are to replace actual memories. So the actual memory of Khan's many failures as PM were replaced with memories of him being a crusader whose gallant policies were sabotaged by a corrupt system to make him look like a failure.

But did the Lost Cause Myth manage to turn Khan's so-called moral victories into political wins? Not quite. He burned his boats by alienating State institutions. To him, these institutions could be subdued by the emotional response of the electorate. However, logically, State institutions had no other choice left but to keep such

men out. The Lost Cause Myth weaved by Trump and Khan were a quick-burn phenomenon because they were rapidly and belligerently formed. They quickly burned out. As a result, his image of a 'bold', wide-eyed idealist battling overwhelming odds began to erode. He had weaved a conceptual reality for his supporters. In the end, he himself got trapped in it.

During the peak of Khan's popularity, one often came across people (mostly on social media) who let loose a barrage of curse words as a reaction to what they believed was an anti-Khan tweet or Facebook post. The words were almost always, 'looters,' 'corrupt,' 'traitors.' These words were dedicated to parties who till Khan's ouster were in the opposition. Very rarely could one find a pro-Khan or pro-PTI person actually list down the successes of the ousted PM's policies. But the fact was: as much as such folk were rare, so were his government's successes.

To a lot of critics of populism, people who voted for men such as India's Narendra Modi, America's Donald Trump, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro, Hungary's Viktor Orban, Poland's Andrzej Duda and Pakistan's Imran Khan, were all largely 'stupid.' But what is stupidity? Ever since the mid-20th century, the idea of stupidity, especially in the context of politics, has been studied by various sociologists. One of the pioneers in this regard was the German scholar and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. During the rise of Nazi rule in Germany, Bonhoeffer was baffled by the silence of millions of Germans when the Nazis began to publicly humiliate and brutalise Jewish people. Bonhoeffer condemned this. He asked: how could a nation that had produced so many philosophers, scientists and artists suddenly become so apathetic and even sympathetic towards state violence and oppression?

Unsurprisingly, in 1943, Bonhoeffer was arrested. Two years later,

he was executed. While awaiting execution, Bonhoeffer began to put his thoughts on paper. These were posthumously published in the shape of a book, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. One of the chapters in the book is called, 'On Stupidity.' Bonhoeffer wrote: 'Every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it political or religious, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other.' According to Bonhoeffer, because of the overwhelming impact of a rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence and they give up establishing an autonomous position towards the emerging circumstances. It is a condition in which people become mere tools in the hands of those in power, and begin to willingly surrender their capacity for independent thinking. Bonhoeffer wrote that holding a rational debate with such a person is futile, because it feels that one is not dealing with a person, but with slogans and catchwords.

This condition in which a person becomes a walking-talking instrument of repetitive slogans and catchwords first appeared in Pakistan's recent past during Khan's rise to power. During that period 'looters, corrupt, traitors' were active words, deployed to justify Khan's rise, and the demise of his opponents. After his fall, the same words become reactive. Either way, neither then, nor later, was this condition suitable for a more informed debate between two (or more) opposing ideas or narratives.

Does this mean that most of Khan's supporters were incapable of having such a debate? Many may not have been very well-informed about the intricacies of politics or history, but did this make them stupid — even though sometimes they did sound it? To Bonhoeffer, stupidity was not about lack of intelligence, but about a mind that had voluntarily closed itself to reason, especially after being swayed by an assertive external power. The British philosopher Sacha Golob wrote³ that being stupid and dumb were not the same thing. Intelligence (or

³ 'A New Theory of Stupidity' (International Journal of Philosophical Studies, 2019) pp.562-580

lack thereof) can somewhat be measured through IQ tests. But even those who score high in these tests can do ‘stupid’ things or carry certain ‘stupid ideas.’

Golob gave the example of the novelist Arthur Conan Doyle, who created the famous fictional character Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, a private detective, was an ideal product of the ‘Age of Enlightenment.’ He was imagined by Doyle as a man who shunned emotions and dealt only in reason, empiricism and the scientific method. Yet, later on in life, Doyle became the antithesis of his character, Holmes. He got into a silly argument with the celebrated illusionist Harry Houdini when the latter rubbished Doyle’s belief that one could communicate with spirits (in a séance).

How could a man who had created a staunchly rational character such as Sherlock Holmes begin to believe in séances? In fact, Doyle also began to believe in the existence of fairies. Every time someone would successfully debunk Doyle’s beliefs, he would go to great lengths to provide a counter-argument, but one which was even more absurd. Stupidity can thus be found in supposedly very intelligent people as well.

This can also answer why one sometimes comes across sufficiently educated men and women unabashedly spouting conspiracy theories that have either been convincingly debunked, or cannot be proven outside the domain of wishful thinking.

Doyle, who had already developed some interest in ‘spirituality,’ began dabbling in the supernatural after the death of his son. According to Golob, ‘Doyle used his intellect to weave a path through grief that, although obviously irrational, was personally restorative.’ So, embracing stupidity can be a way to live through grief or a personal tragedy which things like rationality or logic cannot address. But this does not mean that the thousands of intelligent people who begin to mouth irrational populist bunkum do so due to personal tragedies. Yet, in the context of politics, resentment and grief can be triggered in a

people if they become convinced that they have been neglected, mocked or sidelined by a political elite.

In the US, folk in the 'rural' South felt exactly that. They felt their ideas and lifestyles were mocked by the 'liberal elite' for being backward, anti-modern and superstitious. Their resentment was brilliantly tapped by Donald Trump. And even though the Southern states in the US have the largest number of Christian fundamentalists and regular Church-goers in that country, they continued to support Trump despite his involvement in scandals both of the flesh and finances.

This brings us back to Nazi Germany and Bonhoeffer. A nation was left grief-stricken by a humiliating defeat (during the First World War). It was thus willing to suspend all critical thinking after the grief was first treated with a barrage of conspiracy theories (blaming the Jews), and then by a man who became a powerful conduit of these theories. His rise was the sum of collective resentment and grief. It was a negation of an empirical reality in which a society was trapped, facing a serious existential crisis.

Indeed, the crisis could have been addressed in a rational manner as well (such as through the continuation of the democratic process). But such processes evolve slowly and often come to be seen as part of a reality that is pregnant with crisis. The answers to such a malaise often come in the shape of 'conceptual reality.' Empirical reality is the reality which one interacts with on a daily basis through the senses. Conceptual reality, on the other hand, is created and fuelled by certain ideological drivers or by what one thinks empirical reality should actually be. Conceptual reality is an imagined world but is stuffed with claims and physical paraphernalia to make it seem like empirical reality.

The promise of a 'thousand-year-Reich' by the Nazis was a fantasy that used physical symbols — such as a messiah-like leader, large rallies and public marches, uniforms, imposing architecture, etc. — to

replace an empirical reality with a conceptual one. And when a person escapes into a conceptual reality, communicating with him or her on a rational level becomes next to impossible. Conceptual reality is a product of – and mostly appeals to – people who have developed a persecution complex because they failed to find an identity or purpose in the empirical reality. So, they dismiss it and look to replace the ‘what is’ with the ‘what should be’. The results can be disastrous when they reject empirical reality by losing themselves in a conceptual reality. This reality is utopian. But when manifested physically, it quickly becomes dystopian.

Conceptual reality includes the projection of one’s beliefs on people that have little or nothing to do with them. Conceptual reality also entails projections that are often proliferated through populist media as a way to concretise it in people’s minds. Markus Daechsel gives the example of certain Muslim and Hindu outfits in pre-Partition India who insisted that their members wear a uniform and hold parades. There was no war or revolution taking place in India. But in the minds of the members of the outfits, there was (or there should have been). So, they created a conceptual reality in which there was revolutionary turmoil and these outfits were an integral part of it.

Hindus and Muslim groups, after being unable to challenge Western economic and military might in the empirical reality, created a conceptual reality by claiming that whatever the West had achieved in the fields of science had already been achieved by ancient Hindus and/or is already present in Islamic texts. In the late 1970s, tabloids in Indonesia, Malaysia and Egypt carried a front-page news about Neil Armstrong — the famous American astronaut who, in 1969, became the first man to walk on the moon. The ‘news’ claimed that Armstrong had converted to Islam. Supposedly he had done so after confessing that when he was on the moon, he had heard the sound of the *azaan*, the Muslim call to prayer.

By 1980 the news had been repeatedly carried and reproduced by

tabloids in a number of Muslim-majority countries. So much so, that Armstrong began receiving invitations from Islamic organisations.⁴ The ‘news’ continued to gather momentum in Muslim countries. In 1983, on Armstrong’s request, the US State Department issued instructions to US embassies in Muslim countries asking them to ‘politely but firmly’ communicate that Armstrong had not converted to Islam and that ‘he had no current plans or desire to travel overseas to participate in Islamic activities.’⁵

Despite this, the belief that he had converted to Islam after hearing the azaan on the moon continued to do the rounds. In fact, this impression still pops up on YouTube channels and websites funded and run by various Islamic evangelical organisations. This is a case of how a conceptual reality (in this case, the power of ‘Eastern spirituality’) compelled a member of empirical reality (Western science and technology) to leave the latter and embrace the former.

In December 2018, Imran Khan gleefully shared a 1988 video recording on Twitter of conservative Islamic scholar Dr Israr Ahmad. In it, Ahmad is seen claiming that according to one of the doctors treating the founder of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah, during his last few days, Jinnah spoke about the importance of imposing Shariah laws and the caliphate system in Pakistan. This was conceptual reality coming into play to counter the reality in which Jinnah had done no such thing and was, in fact, a Westernised man. This type of projection of a conceptual reality actually goes further back.

The day after the founder of the modern Turkish republic Kemal Ataturk passed away in November 1939, one of the leading Urdu dailies in pre-Partition India, *Inqilab*, reported that Ataturk, who had slipped into a coma before his death briefly woke up to convey a message to a servant of his. Apparently, the staunch, life-long secularist who went all out during his long rule to erase almost every cultural and

⁴ JR. Hansen: *First Man* (Pocket Books, 2018) p.525

⁵ Ibid.

political expression associated with Turkey's caliphate past, had briefly woken up from a coma to instruct his servant to tell the *millat-i-Islamiyya* (the world's Muslims) to follow on the footsteps of the *Khulafa-i-Rashideen* (the first four 'righteous' caliphs of Islam).

Inqilab was a well-respected Urdu daily catering to the urban Muslim middle-classes in pre-Partition India. The daily then went on to 'report' that Atatürk, after communicating his message to the servant, shouted 'Allah is great' and passed away⁶ – this time, for good. Quite clearly, unable to come to terms with the actual ideological dispositions of Atatürk and Jinnah in the empirical reality, some created a conceptual reality where, in death, both dramatically became caliphate/Sharia enthusiasts.

Let us now take a more contemporary example: the so-called 'US conspiracy' that Khan claimed ousted him as PM. This was repeated over and over again by Khan, his supporters and some half-a-dozen TV anchors. In the empirical reality, the performance of Khan's regime compelled its erstwhile pillar of support, the powerful ME, to begin distancing itself from a malfunctioning government. This created space for opposition parties to conjure enough strength in the Parliament to remove him through a no-confidence vote.

However, in the conceptual reality — that began being constructed by Khan when his ouster became a stark possibility — US and European powers conspired with opposition parties and pressurised the military to oust him because he wanted a sovereign foreign policy and was planning to construct an anti-West bloc in the region. There was no empirical evidence that substantiated the existence of a foreign conspiracy. But then, there is no place for anything empirical in a realm that is entirely conceptual.

In developing countries such as India and Pakistan, right-wing nationalism is still very much the domain of the middle-classes. This is understandable because the process of industrialisation was slow and

⁶ *Inqilab*, November 11, 1939.

late in these regions, and so was the expansion of the middle-classes. The economies of both the countries during their first few decades were overwhelmingly agrarian. Industrialisation did not begin in earnest till over a decade after their formation.

This meant a large rural population and a steadily growing urban proletariat. Therefore, democracy in this case, though controlled by an elite, was (for electoral purposes) driven to address the interests of the peasants, small farmers and the working-classes. It was social-democratic in nature. This did not sit well with the middle-classes. They were squeezed between a ruling elite and the classes below. They constantly feared being relegated or overwhelmed by the 'masses' because the electoral ruling elite in control of political parties was talking to the masses more than they were to the middle-classes.

The elite was, of course, courting populations that had the larger number of votes. Between the 1980s and late 2000s, middle-class economic and political interests in Pakistan were mostly stimulated by military dictators. This is why the middle-classes in Pakistan are more receptive to non-democratic forces and currents because they were provided (albeit a semblance) of political power by dictatorships. But the size of this class is growing and so is its economic influence. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it feels blocked by the electoral political elites from complimenting its economic influence with political power.

On January 17, 2022 an article written by the then PM Imran Khan appeared in some English and Urdu dailies. In it, he shared his thoughts on '*Riyasat-e-Madinah*,' or the first 'Islamic State' that came into being in early 7th-century Arabia. Khan wrote that Pakistan will need to adopt the moral and spiritual tenor of that State if the country was to thrive. Even before he came to power in 2018, Khan had been promising to turn Pakistan into a modern-day *Riyasat-e-Madinah*. He

first began to formulate this as a political message in 2011. However, this idea is not a new one. It has been posited previously as well by some politicians, and especially, by certain Islamist ideologues. Neither was there any newness in the process used by Khan to arrive at this idea. In this context, Khan took the same route as ZA Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) did decades ago. In 1967, when the PPP was formed, its 'foundation documents' — authored by Bhutto and the Marxist intellectual J.A. Rahim — described the party as a socialist entity. To neutralise the expected criticism from Islamist groups, the documents declared that democracy was the party's policy, socialism was its economy, and Islam was its faith.

The documents then added that by socialism, the party meant 'the kind of democratic-socialism practiced in Scandinavian countries,' and through which these countries had constructed robust Welfare States. But this did not impress the Islamist outfits, especially the JI. It declared the PPP as a party of 'atheists.'⁷ In 1969, JI's chief Abul Ala Maududi authored a fatwa declaring socialism as an irreligious idea. The next year, when the PPP drafted its first manifesto, the party explained that its aim to strive for democracy, economic equality and social justice 'derive from the spirit and principles which are contained in the injunctions of the Faith.'⁸

After coming to power in December 1971, the PPP began using the term '*Musawat-e-Muhammadi*' (social and economic equality preached and practiced by Islam's prophet [PBUH]). In 1973, a prominent member of the PPP, Sheikh Ahmed Rashid, declared that the economic system that Islam advocated and the one that was implemented in the earliest State of Islam, was socialist. When a parliamentarian belonging to an Islamist party demanded that Islamic rituals be made compulsory by law 'because Pakistan was made in the name of Islam,' Rashid responded by saying that the country was not made to implement

⁷ F. Isphani: *Purifying the Land of the Pure* (Oxford University Press, 2017) p.71

⁸ Pakistan People's Party 1970 Manifesto. p.3

rituals, but to adopt an ‘Islamic economy’ which was ‘inherently socialist.’⁹

Now let us see just how close all this is to the route that Khan took in formulating his concept of Riyasat-i-Madinah. In 2011, PTI and Khan suddenly rose to prominence as a party of urban middle-classes. In his speeches between 2011 and 2015, Khan was quite vocal in his appreciation of the Scandinavian Welfare States. But, often, this appreciation was immediately followed by Khan declaring that the Scandinavians had uncannily followed Islamic ideals of social justice and economic equality better than the Muslims had (or do). Of course, he did not mention that Scandinavian countries are some of the most secular nation-states in the world, and that a strong secular-humanist disposition of their polities and politics played a major role in the construction of the Welfare States that Khan was in such awe of.

As the 2018 elections drew near, Khan began to explain the concept of the European Welfare State as a modern-day expression of the 7th-century State that was formed in the city of Madinah. This notion was close to Bhutto’s Musawat-e-Muhamadi. But Bhutto and his PPP had claimed that the State in Madinah had a socialist economy, and that this alone should be adopted by Pakistan, because it was still relevant in the 20th century. This position had given the PPP enough space to remain secular in most other areas. But to Khan, if the Scandinavian model of the Welfare State was to be adopted, and then supplemented by Islam’s moral, spiritual and political ethos in all fields and areas, this would result in the modern-day re-enactment of a 7th-century ‘Islamic State.’ Khan’s idea was thus more theocratic in nature.

It seemed to be emerging from how Pakistan was imagined by some pro-Jinnah ulema during the 1946 elections in British India. To Mr. Jinnah’s party, the All India Muslim League (AIML), the culture of Indian Muslims largely mirrored the culture of Muslims outside South Asia, particularly in Arabia and even Persia. But the politics and

⁹ *Debates: Official Report, Volume 3* (Government of Pakistan, 1973)

economics of India's Muslims were grounded in India and/or in the territory that they had settled in hundreds of years ago. Therefore, the Muslim-majority State that the League was looking to create was to be established in this territory. The League's Muslim nationalism was thus territorial. It was not to be a universal caliphate or a theocracy with imperial and expansionist aims. It was to be a sovereign political enclave in South Asia where the Muslim minority of India would become a majority, and therefore benefit from the economic advantages of majoritarianism.

However, whereas this narrative – more or less – worked in attracting the votes of the Muslims of Bengal and Sindh during the 1946 polls in British India, the League found itself struggling in Punjab, which was a stronghold of the multicultural Union Party. The Indian nationalist party, the Congress too, was strong here mostly among the province's significant Hindu community. Various radical Islamist groups were also headquartered in Punjab. They had rejected the League's call for a separate Muslim-majority country. They believed that it would turn the remaining Muslims in India into an even more vulnerable minority. The Islamists viewed the League as a secular outfit with Westernized notions of nationalism and an impious leadership.

Some ulema switched sides and decided to support the League in Punjab. This is also when overt Islamist rhetoric was, for the first time, used by the League through these ulema, mainly in Punjab's rural areas. The ulema began to portray Jinnah as a 'holy figure,' even though very few rural Punjabis had actually seen him. The well-known Islamic scholar Shabbir Ahmed Usmani began to explain the yet-to-be-born-Pakistan as a '*naya Madinah*,' or new Madinah.

By this, Usmani meant the creation of a State that would be based on the model of the 7th century State in Madinah. But, much to the disappointment of the pro-League ulema, the model adopted by Pakistan was largely secular and the Islam that the State espoused was carved

from the ideas of ‘Muslim modernists’ such as the reformer Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (d.1898) and the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938). Both had urged the Muslims of India to look forward with the aid of an evolved and rational understanding of Islam, instead of looking backwards to a romanticised past.

Khan often spoke about Riyasat-i-Madinah before he became PM. But the frequency of him doing so increased when his government began to truly unravel. Amidst the growing crises, Khan began to speak more about morality, ‘Westernization,’ and Islamophobia than on how his government was planning to address the mounting economic problems that the country was facing, and the consequential political quagmire that his government had plunged itself into. Yet, he still somehow found a reason to lecture the polity on the moral and spiritual principles of Riyasat-i-Madinah, or the kind of morally upright and pious State and society that he was dreaming of constructing. One wondered, whether he was planning to do this with the large IMF loans that his government was set to acquire to keep the country from going bankrupt?

Khan’s article on Riyasat-i-Madinah was censured by the opposition parties. They saw it as a political ploy by him to distract the people from the failures of his government. There is evidence that a PR company hired by Khan had been advising him to raise the frequency of his Islamic rhetoric.¹⁰ The purpose behind this could be what the opposition was claiming. It might have also been about something personal. For men such as Khan, the personal often became the political.

It is crisis, not political convenience that more often brings out religion in politicians. In his book *God Wills It*, David O’Connell argues that when public opinion of political leaders begins to dwindle, or when a head of State or government is threatened, this is when one sees religious rhetoric appear.

¹⁰ Former PTI member Mohsin Baig claimed this in an interview with journalist Asad Toor (Asad Toor Uncensored, February 16, 2022).

In 1976, when the ZA Bhutto regime was struggling to address economic problems caused by an international oil crisis that had pushed up inflation, and due to the regime's own mismanagement of important economic sectors that it had nationalised, Bhutto decided to organise a grand 'Seerat Conference' in Karachi. The conference was organised to discuss and highlight the life and deeds of Islam's Prophet (PBUH) and how these could be adopted to regenerate the lost glory of the Islamic civilization. Khan did exactly the same.

Bhutto's intended audience in this respect was the Islamists who he had uncannily emboldened by agreeing to their demand of constitutionally ousting the Ahmadiyya community from the fold of Islam. He believed that this would neutralise the threat that the Islamists were posing to his 'socialist' government. The demand had risen when the Islamist groups in the Parliament had asked the government to provide the constitution with the provision to define what or who was a Muslim. In 1973, the government had refused to add any such provision in the constitution. But the very next year in 1974, when a clash between a group of Ahmadiyya youth and cadres of the student-wing of JI caused outrage amongst Islamist parties, the Islamist members of the assembly tabled a bill which sought to constitutionally declare the Ahmadiyya as a non-Muslim community.

Bhutto threatened to unleash the military against anti-Ahmadiyya agitators who had besieged various cities of Punjab. According to Rafi Raza, who at the time was a special assistant to the prime minister, Bhutto insisted that the Parliament was no place to discuss theological matters. In his book *ZA Bhutto and Pakistan*, Raza wrote that the Islamist parties retorted by reminding the PM that in 1973 the constitution had declared Pakistan an 'Islamic republic' – and therefore, parliamentarians in an Islamic republic had every right to discuss religious matters. After much violence in Punjab and commotion in the National Assembly, Bhutto capitulated and allowed the bill to be passed. This also meant that parliamentarians now had the

constitutional prerogative to define who was or wasn't a Muslim. This would eventually lead to the 1985 amendments in Articles 62 and 63 of the constitution, proclaiming that only 'pious' Muslims can be members of the Parliament and heads of State and government. The man who had initiated this, the dictator Zia-ul-Haq, had already declared himself 'Sadiq and Amin' (honest and faithful).

In 1976, Bhutto's Islamist opponents were deriding him as a 'bad Muslim,' because he had 'loose morals,' was an 'alcoholic,' and that his government was as bad at fixing the economy as it was in curbing the 'rising trend of obscenity and immorality in the society.' So, with the Seerat Conference, Bhutto set out to exhibit his Islamic credentials and, perhaps, to also demonstrate that his regime may be struggling to fix the economy, but at least, it was being headed by a 'true believer.' But this didn't save him from being toppled in a military coup that was triggered by his opponents who, in 1977, poured out to agitate and demand a government based on Sharia laws.

Khan was on a similar path. He had been 'reforming' himself ever since he retired in 1992 as a cricket star, a darling of tabloid press, and a 'playboy.' From a lifestyle liberal who had spent much of his time stationed in the UK, playing cricket and hobnobbing with European and American socialites, he gradually began to refigure his image. Khan also began to have one-on-one meetings with certain ulema and Islamic evangelists. Khan's aim was to bury his colourful past and re-emerge as an incorruptible born-again Muslim. But his past was not that easy to get rid of. It was kept alive by the tabloids and also by Nawaz Sharif's PML-N that (after 1996) had begun to see Khan as a threat because he was trying to appeal to Sharif's constituency. Sharif was a conservative and a protégé of Zia. In 1998, his second regime was struggling to fix an economy that had started to spiral after Pakistan conducted its first nuclear tests. This triggered economic sanctions against Pakistan, imposed by its major donors and trading partners, the US and European countries.

The crisis saw Nawaz formulate his own ‘Islamic’ shenanigans. His crusades against obscenity were coupled by his desire to be declared ‘the commander of the faithful’ (*amir-ul-mominin*).¹¹ Instead, he was brought down by a coup in 1999. Unlike the coup against the Bhutto regime which was planned by a reactionary general, the one against Nawaz (by General Musharraf) was apparently staged to fix the economy and roll back the influence that the Islamists had enjoyed, especially during the Zia and Nawaz regimes.

Khan’s party initially supported the coup against Nawaz. But it pulled back its support when the PTI was routed in the 2002 elections. Khan began criticising Musharraf as an ‘American stooge’ and ‘fake liberal.’ From 1974 onwards, Pakistan started to become what the Canadian political scientist Ran Hirschl described as a ‘constitutional theocracy.’¹² The phrase was initially coined by the French political scientist Oliver Roy for Iran’s post-revolution constitution.¹³ Hirschl explained it as the increasing Islamisation of constitutions in certain Muslim countries, and the problems these constitutions were facing in coming to terms with various contemporary political, legislative and social challenges.

Often, constitutional theocracies can also empower the Islamists even if they are in a minority in the Parliament. This is quite apparent in Pakistan. Although most Islamists scoff at democracy, there were also some prominent Islamist ideologues who posited that constitutions, judicial review, legal codes and a form of democratic election could be integrated into an Islamic State. Abul Ala Maududi and Maulana Taqi Usmani were two such ideologues. They agreed to use whatever means were available to turn Pakistan into an Islamic State. And these means included democratic institutions and the constitution.

¹¹ ‘The Unmaking of Nawaz Sharif’ (DAWN, August 6, 2017)

¹² *Constitutional Theocracy* (Harvard University Press, 2010) p.10

¹³ *Ibid.* p.14

Involvement of the ulema in drafting Pakistan's 1956 constitution was nominal, even though the constitution did declare the country an Islamic republic. Their contribution in drafting the 1962 constitution was minimal. But despite the fact that there were just 18 members of various Islamist parties in the National Assembly which came into being after 1971, their input increased during the drafting of the 1973 constitution. Their influence continued to grow. By 1991, the constitution had been thoroughly 'Islamised.'

Consequently, even the more electorally strong non-Islamist parties have had to add various Islamist ideas in their armory because private religious devotion (to Islamists) is inseparable from public political action. To the Islamists, Islam is to be applied in daily life, including in the political-public realm. And to fail to do so is to shirk one's obligations towards God. Faith, or at least their version of it, gives the Islamists an in-built political advantage. It is this advantage that the non-Islamist politicians want to usurp because they frequently find themselves pressed to continue positioning themselves as the equally pious champions of Islam.

Bhutto did so in the second half of his rule, and Nawaz during his second stint as PM. But this does not come naturally to non-Islamists. And the Islamists are never convinced. In fact, they see it as a ploy by non-Islamists to neutralise the political influence of the Islamists. Yet, in times of crisis, many non-Islamist heads of government in the country have leaned towards religion, believing that by adopting an 'Islamic' demeanor, they would be able to pacify public anger towards their failing regimes.

This can be a desperate and last-ditch ploy to survive a fall. But on occasion, it can also be about a personal existentialist crisis, which makes it even worse. Khan is a case in point. As the world continues to become more complicated than ever, political leaders are increasingly struggling to comprehend today's complexities and, thus, failing to formulate and provide a coherent vision of the future. They are

attempting to define the complexity of today's realities in an overtly simple manner.

Driven to simplify modern-day complexities, the leaderships, instead of trying to figure out new ways to move forward, have begun to look backwards, promising to bring forth a past that was apparently better and less complicated. But the recollection of such pasts is often not very accurate, because it involves a nostalgia which is referred to as 'Anemoia', or a nostalgia for a time one has never known. A past that is not a lived experience. A past that is largely imagined.

Khan liked to talk about the 7th-century State in Madinah. But as the anthropologist Irfan Ahmad and the historian Patricia Crone have demonstrated, there was no clear concept of a State anywhere in pre-modern times, East or West. The idea of the State as we know it today, began to emerge after the 17th century and matured from the 19th century onwards. It is a European concept. What's more, according to Ahmad, the idea of an Islamic State is a 20th century construct.¹⁴ It is derived from an imagined memory. Pre-modern States were vastly different than what they became from the 19th century onwards. States in pre-modern times had extremely limited capacity or resources to regulate every aspect of life.

They were impersonal and mostly instituted to collect taxes from the subjects so that landed elites and monarchs could sustain standing armies, mount their wars, and retain power. A majority of the subjects were left to their own devices, as long as they did not rebel. Conquered areas were mostly put in the hands of local leaders on the condition that they would remain loyal. States in Muslim regions and in the regions that the Muslims conquered were no different. In the 20th-century, Islamic ideologues began to speak of creating Islamic States. According to Ahmad, the idea of an Islamic State was the result of the manner in which the modern concept of the State had begun to

¹⁴ 'Genealogy of the Islamic state: reflections on Maududi's political thought and Islamism' (Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 2009) pp.145-162

fascinate ideologues and politicians in India.

The Congress began to talk about an Indian national State, the League began to work towards a Muslim-majority State, the socialists towards a Socialist State, and Islamists such as Maududi began musing about an Islamic State. Shabir Usmani and Maududi projected the idea of an all-encompassing modern State backwards as a way to explain the functions of the 7th-century Madinah State, as if it had functioned like a modern State, regulating the lives of its subjects with coded laws, interventions, and constitutions and through various established State institutions. This was not the case. There was also little or no scholarship in the pre-modern Muslim world on politics. These would only begin to appear in the 14th century in the works of Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun.

PM Khan was thus dealing in Anemoia. He, like 20th-century critics of modernity, was raging against modernity's supposedly cold and mechanical disposition. But instead of offering something new, he was investing more effort in trying to revive romanticised pasts which did not exist in the shape that they are often remembered as. Khan's failure and incompetence to address the mounting problems of the here and the now, and his insistence on creating a potpourri of Islamist schemes already exhausted by Islamist ideologues – and by heads of State and government such as Bhutto, Zia and Nawaz – may as well be the last nail in the coffin of a much-exploited idea that is almost entirely based on a politically-motivated and imagined memory.

Chapter 4

The Existentialist Angst of Coming to Terms with a Detested Reality

At 2022's Lahore Literature Festival, I was approached by a group of six or seven college students immediately after I finished moderating a session with the celebrated historian Ayesha Jalal. Interestingly, three of them, though unrelated, asked me a question that was more or less the same as the one I had been asked by another set of young men and women just hours before the session. They all wanted to know why so many 'liberal-looking' or 'liberal-sounding' folk supported Imran Khan?

By 2022, Khan had quickly mutated into becoming a contemporary right-wing populist who seemed to be more fluent in airing conservative views on various social issues than he was in the art of governance. Not that he held other views that were any different. But the more he found himself cornered by the demands of running a complex country and the more he blundered in matters of governance, the more rigid and hidebound his rhetoric became.

We have already discussed how this former star cricketer, socialite, 'playboy' and darling of the tabloid press took a rightward turn after he retired from cricket in 1992 and 'rediscovered' his faith. He also began to reassess the manner in which he understood Pakistani society. In this reassessment, he concluded that Pakistani society was organically conservative, but it was being adulterated by alien Western ideas and trends, and exploited by a 'corrupt political mafia' and 'US/European neo-imperialism.'

Unlike most Pakistani sportsmen who often come from lower-middle-class and working-class backgrounds, Khan came from an upper-middle-class family. And here lies the answer to the question that the students were asking me. Khan's transformation was very much in

line with the manner in which the Pakistani middle-income segments have been evolving from the 1980s onwards.

I was too young to fully remember the movement against the Z.A. Bhutto regime in 1977. However, as I entered my teens in 1980, I began to notice that most lifestyle liberals were overtly supporting the reactionary military regime led by General Zia-ul-Haq — the man who had toppled the Bhutto regime and then sent the former prime minister to the gallows.

This had confused me. Of course, being very young and only just starting to take interest in politics, I had a rather binary view of the two regimes: Bhutto's regime was liberal, and the one that overthrew it was conservative. And in Pakistan, conservatism is often paired with Islamism. Indeed, as I grew older and entered college in 1985, I began to understand that what differentiated Bhutto from Zia was something a lot more complex, and had a lot to do with economics.

In his book *Middle Class, Media and Modi*, the Indian author and journalist Nagesh Prabhu writes that even though multiple governments headed by the country's founding party the Congress had succeeded in lifting the economic status of many Indians, many among those who benefited from these policies largely turned right, instead of becoming a constituency of the Congress. This is not an uncommon occurrence. For example, various political scientists and economists who investigated the collapse of Soviet communism in 1991 were of the view that the socialist economy in the former Soviet Union and in its allied countries in Eastern Europe, succeeded in greatly improving the living standards of their citizens. Yet, the ruling communist parties struggled to gain any measure of genuine support from the beneficiaries. In a 2002 essay, the Russian cultural critic Maya Turovskaya wrote¹ that many people in the former Soviet Union (and in communist East European countries) had risen to become 'middle-

¹ 'The Soviet Middle-Class' (Eurozine, August 2002)

class,' even though the economy was entirely managed by the State and everyone was supposed to be 'equal.'

Turovskaya added that instead of luxury goods, 'the enjoyment of culture was at the core of communist middle-class identity.'² However, it was always impossible for the State to hide the traction of luxury goods that were celebrated and flaunted in non-communist US and Europe. To the 'middle-classes' in communist countries, these luxury items and cultural products began to be seen as the result and manifestation of Western democracy.

According to the Russian author and economist Grigorii Khanin, the Soviet economy 'genuinely flourished' in the 1950s and 1960s.³ The British economist Philip Hanson agreed with Khanin in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Economy*. He wrote that till the early 1970s, the Soviet economy 'tended to grow faster than that of the United States.' The same was the case in the Eastern European countries that were following the 'Soviet model.' Yet, in 1956 and 1968 respectively, there were serious uprisings in Hungary and the erstwhile Czechoslovakia against the ruling communist parties. Much of the opposition in this regard was made up of lapsed communists, and those who were at the core of what Turovskaya later described as the middle-class in communist countries. They also received support from 'Church groups' that had otherwise been strictly regulated by the State. The uprisings in communist Poland in the early 1980s were largely led by Catholic groups. Such groups were supported by Turovskaya's middle-classes, despite the fact that many were largely secular in their views (but anti-communist).

In China, after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, and the demise of his iconoclastic variant of Marxism-Leninism, the ruling Chinese Communist Party introduced a number of unprecedented economic

² Ibid. p.3

³ 'Soviet economic growth since 1928: The alternative statistics of G. I. Khanin' (Journal of Europe-Asia Studies, 1993) p.141.

reforms that saw the gradual opening up of the Chinese economy, and the subsequent emergence of a Chinese middle-class. However, by 1989, young people who had benefited from the new economic policies, took to the streets in a bid to topple the government. They did not become supporters of the system, regime and party that had elevated their economic status. Instead, they turned against these, and demanded democracy, freedom of speech and the freedom of practicing religion. They were ruthlessly crushed. Many from the Pakistani middle-classes turning against the military establishment (ME) after Khan's fall is also a case in point.

The middle-classes are an important segment which make vital contributions to the economy. They are also a skilled and educated white-collar workforce. But as they succeed in gaining economic influence, they then want to bolster this influence with political influence. But political influence and power are largely in the hands of ruling elites that are a class apart. In former communist countries, these elites were often found sitting at the top in the ruling communist parties, whereas in non-communist set-ups, they are placed high on the pillars of autocratic set-ups, and, in established democracies, embedded in 'pro-status quo' institutions.

When the middle-classes rebel against forces that actually facilitated their economic growth, this can be seen as defensive behaviour. In most countries, the middle-classes expanded during the rule of established parties. Most of these parties were on the left or leaning left. They were caught between serving their core constituencies (ie. classes bellow-the-middle) and an expanding middle-class. As the middle-classes gradually swelled, they increasingly became suspicious of the rhetoric, policies and programmes of the parties that still largely aimed to draw electoral traction from the classes below.

The middle-classes felt that they were being ignored and that the fruits of their 'honest hard work' and taxes were being spent on others.

As a result, from the 1990s onwards, left-leaning parties in Europe and the US refigured their orientation by pulling back various welfare programmes. This eventually saw their working-class constituencies become increasingly attracted by the rhetoric of right-wing populists. The populists claimed that established parties were entirely elitist and therefore unwilling to address the issues faced by the working-classes. And so, the ‘common folk’ (mostly white) segments of the polity rallied behind the populists. Donald Trump is an excellent example.

In developing countries such as India, the economic liberalisation introduced by the left-leaning Congress in the 1980s initiated the rapid expansion of the middle-classes. But the party failed to find any traction from among these classes because the Congress was still claiming to be working towards ‘removing poverty.’ According to the French political scientist Christophe Jaffrelot, who has written extensively on the rise of Hindu nationalism, the Indian middle-classes became suspicious of the ‘Nehruian socialism’ of Congress.⁴ They saw themselves as the main engines of the post-1980s economic growth in India. The issues faced by the classes below are of no concern to them. The Indian middle-classes insist that they deserve a larger share of power to determine the country’s economy, politics and culture.⁵

According to Jaffrelot, ‘[in India], economic liberalisation has given rise to a middle-class of a different kind. In a way, it is more politicised, partly because salaried people are more sensitive to corruption. But the middle-class is very much after growth and the means to get that growth may not matter much to them ... the middle class has little problem with rising inequalities. The social democratic Nehruvian project was intended to contain inequality. But that is not the regime the middle-class would now favour. They now support economically liberal policies. This new middle-class supports the BJP

⁴ ‘New Middle-Class Support BJP than Congress’ (Business Standard, April 20, 2014)

⁵ Ibid.

more than the Congress. First, because it wants to grow in status by being recognised as Hindu through a kind of sanskritisation process, and balance its growing materialism by some religiosity [...]⁶

From the late 1970s, religion has played a major role in the articulation of middle-class rebellions, especially in Asia. One of the main centres of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was the bazaar dominated by the lower-middle and the old middle-classes. They were aided by the new middle-classes, even though these had been one of the direct beneficiaries of the Shah's modernisation policies. The 1977 movement against the Bhutto regime was largely led by the country's middle-and-lower-middle-class segments. Their grudge with the regime was economic in nature because they felt threatened by Bhutto's policies of nationalisation. These segments were supported by the industrial class which, till the 1960s, was supporting the 'modernist' dictatorship of Ayub Khan. But they pragmatically embraced Zia's 'Islamisation' project which, as already discussed elsewhere in this book, he linked to his policies of economic liberalisation.

By the late 1980s, this nature of pragmatism had become an established behaviour when, increasingly, the 'sacred' became public and the secular was pushed into the private sphere. The middle-classes were okay with this. The link between religion and modern material benefits was further strengthened by various Islamic evangelical outfits that began to emerge. These were funded by traders, industrialists, shopkeepers, etc. In her book *The God Market*, the Indian historian Meera Nanda writes that in South Asia, exhibitions of excessive religiosity are more common in upper-and-middle-class segments. This challenges the long-held modernist theory which posits that education and economic prosperity mitigates religiosity and relegates it to the private sphere. There is now increasing evidence (at least in South Asia) suggesting that lower-middle, middle, and upper-middle-class groups are more active in exhibiting religiosity than the classes below.

⁶ Ibid.

According to Nanda, the 1980s' economic liberalisation in countries whose economies had previously been heavily regulated and centralised, produced a curious phenomenon: as economic regulations by the State and governments loosened, deregulated economic activity merged with religious activities. This may be because economic regulation, and even so-called 'mixed economies,' were perceived as being 'socialist.' This did not sit well with high-and-middle-income groups in India and Pakistan, nor with the religious outfits who denounced mixed economies as being on the left.

Consequently, many beneficiaries of a deregulated economy became overtly exhibitionistic about their faith. Even lifestyle liberals among them did not hide their sympathy for political conservatism. In India, the right-wing BJP got an overwhelming mandate in the elections from the country's middle-income groups. The party also has burgeoning relations with some of India's wealthiest entrepreneurs. The same was the case with the PTI in Pakistan. PTI signaled neoliberal economic policies, but peddled them as corruption-free-economics that would erase the 'elites.' The party also usurped the rhetoric of the religious parties. The PTI became the embodiment of the economic marriage between the higher/middle-income groups and religiosity, even though like a majority of its supporters, it continued to pose as a 'moderate' outfit.

The upper-and-middle-classes were expected to adopt and proliferate progressive currents in politics and the polity. But these classes, in South Asia, may now have become uncanny patrons of religious radicalisation. A desperate and failing Imran Khan began manifesting this with a lot more urgency. And his middle-class constituents responded to this with a muddled point of view: from throwing around the worn-out anti-corruption rhetoric, to calling anyone opposed to Khan as treacherous, to indulging in bizarre behaviour such as releasing videos of badly choreographed training sessions of 'fighters' ready to battle anti-Khan forces on the streets.

The party's social media accounts also shared fake quotes of philosophers to wrap Khan's reactionary tirades with the 'New Age' prattle associated with the pop-Sufism⁷ that 'moderates' and lifestyle liberals were/are so fond of.

In March 2022, I shared photos of a few posters with a good friend who is an enthusiastic lifestyle liberal and a huge Imran Khan fan. The posters claimed that it was one's 'divine duty' to come out and save Khan from being ousted by corrupt forces. Moreover, the posters more-than-alluded that the forces were against all that Khan was doing for Islam and the 'ummah.' My friend simply responded by sharing with me a link to an article on corruption. I asked him how this answered my question. He replied that he wasn't sure what the question was. So, I spelled it out for him: what does a 'liberal' man like him think of the apparently divinely-ordained obligation set for the supporters of a leader who now quite unabashedly wanted to be treated as a messianic champion of the Muslim world?

I asked my friend if he will be fulfilling this divine obligation.

His reply: 'Yes, if it helps get rid of the anti-Islam corrupt mafias.' He was texting me this while enjoying a beer in a lavish hut on a private plot of land in Karachi that is aptly called the 'French Beach.'

Italian dictator and one of the founders of fascism, Benito Mussolini was greatly admired by millions of his country's people. He ruled Italy from 1922 till 1945. He used to receive over 1,500 letters daily from adherents, many of who venerated him as a messiah of sorts. Mussolini was a classic demagogue. He cleverly played on the fears of the people and posed as the man who had the will and power to remove

⁷ By pop Sufism I mean versions of Sufism moulded by the pop and entertainment industry.

these fears. He gave these fears form and shape, claiming that he had pulled them out from the shadows to be identified and vanquished.

Are demagogues self-made or are they the creation of the people? Certain economic and political conditions create demagogues. These conditions combine to shape the nature and tone of discourses in a country. In her book *Demagoguery and Democracy*, Professor Emeritus Patricia writes that, 'If the nature of the discourse has become angry and polarising, it is only a matter of time that a demagogue would appear.'

Demagogues do not create the conditions that shape the discourse. They just plunge into an existing discourse, and enhance its polarising characteristics by choosing a side. They then present themselves as that side's leaders, demonising those on the other side. Demagogues do not emerge to bridge differences. They thrive on polarisation. They offer simple, binary answers to complex issues, and promise Utopias in which, of course, only their side would be allowed to exist, and those on the other side will be vanquished. The more they divide, the more powerful and secure they feel.

Demagogues appear in various shapes. They could be totalitarian, authoritarian or even elected. But their fall can be as dramatic as their rise. Particularly when the wrath that they unleash against those they see as enemies boomerangs and returns to haunt and then hunt them. In 1945, after finding himself on the losing side of World War II, Mussolini hatched a plan to escape to Switzerland. The plan was botched by a group of anti-fascists, who executed him, along with his mistress and 15 members of his last cabinet.

Their bodies were then strung upside down in a street in Milan. People in Milan tossed out Mussolini's portraits and pictures from their homes, and set them on fire. They destroyed his statues and then further mutilated his corpse. A majority of the people who came out of their homes and shops to disfigure Mussolini were largely the dictator's former admirers. In the past, they had been energised by his demagogic

demeanor and clung to his every word and promise. Years later, the same energy rebounded and disfigured its creator. A few days later, another demagogue Adolf Hitler, killed himself. His body was hurriedly buried at a secret site. There is every likelihood his corpse, too, would have faced the same wrath from former admirers.

There have been other demagogues who met similar fates: Gaddafi and Saddam, for example. But they were not killed by former fans. The two dictators were detested by most. And it was the haters who brutally killed one dictator, while the other was pulled out, tried and executed. The fate of Bangladesh's founder, Sheikh Mujeeb, is much closer to that of Mussolini's. Revered by Bengalis when Bangladesh was East Pakistan, Mujib was the face of a movement that turned militant and defeated a military regime in West Pakistan. Mujeeb was hailed as the father of the Bengali nation, and treated like a demigod. Two years after the creation of Bangladesh, he swept to victory in an election and became prime minister.

It didn't take him long in trying to turn the new country into a one-party State. Corruption soured, and the economy began to buckle. But Mujeeb's ego, inflated by sycophants, and the manner in which he was put on the pedestal, secluded him from the realities that began to negatively impact the polity. Mujeeb had capitalised on the loathing that the Bengalis of East Pakistan had developed for West Pakistan's ruling elites, especially the Punjabis. But in Bangladesh, the Punjabi elites were no more. The Bengali nationalists themselves became an elite. This elite fell with a vengeance upon non-Bengali-speaking-Bangladeshis, such as the Biharis.

However, as the economy continued to crumble, and whispers of widespread corruption and abuse of power by the government became louder, the Mujib regime intensified another divide: one between those who had fought for liberation from inside the erstwhile East Pakistan, and those who had done the same but were once stationed in West Pakistan. The latter became 'the other.'

Bengalis who were stationed in West Pakistan, mainly as military officers, government officials and white-and-blue-collared workers, had quit their jobs and followed Mujib's lead. They were equally active in the civil war against West Pakistan. But Mujib began to see them with suspicion. The impact of this was mostly felt among junior officers in the military. Mujib had invested more in a militia that operated as his party's militant wing than he did in the Bangladeshi army. The military and the police were largely made up of former fighters of the guerrilla group the Mukti Bahini that had led the liberation movement from the front.

After the creation of Bangladesh, former members of the Mukti Bahini became aggravated by the manner in which Mujib had formed his own militia. In 1975, a group of junior military officers who had once blindly followed Mujib during the civil war, barged into his house and brutally murdered him and many members of his family. One of the conspirators was the 29-year-old Shariful Haq Dalim. Dalim had joined the Pakistan Army in 1966. But he left his post and joined the Mukti Bahni when civil war broke out in East Pakistan.

In his book *Untold Facts*, Dalim describes in detail how Bengali officers who had once been posted in the former West Pakistan were humiliated, as if they were fake Bengalis. Once the ploy of abusing the Biharis as the 'other' was exhausted, the Bengalis who had been in West Pakistan became the new 'other.' Those who murdered Mujib were these Bengalis. They had taken part in his movement after abandoning their livelihoods and jobs in West Pakistan. They had all idealised him. Five years later, they killed him. There was no backlash from the lovers of Mujib. The economy had collapsed, as had the law and order situation. No one felt safe anymore. Instead of building bridges, Mujib kept widening polarisation, especially in his bid to become president for life in a one-party State.

This is not to suggest that all demagogues face violent ends at the hands of their former admirers. Sometimes the end means a life in exile

or in obscurity. What a come-down this can be. Sitting on a pedestal, praised and treated as a messiah or demigod, and then suddenly made to tumble down after the ground from beneath one's feet is pulled away by the very people who had once showered superlative praise and devotion on you.

In the early 1970s, the former Indian PM Indira Gandhi became to be known as 'Mother India.' To many, she was the human manifestation of the Hindu goddess Durga.⁸ Her party had won a landslide victory when Indian forces demolished their Pakistani counterparts in a war. But as her fame grew, the economy did not. The discourse around her became increasingly bitter. Instead of trying to mitigate the impact of this bitterness in a more democratic manner, she began to demonise those who became critical of her increasingly authoritarian and egoistical style of governance. In 1975, she declared an emergency and threw her opponents in jail, accusing them of treason and anti-State activities.

In 1977, believing that she was still Durga to most Indians, she lifted the emergency and called an election. But Durga's party suffered a humiliating defeat and she also lost her own seat. From a revered demigod, she became a rejected politician. Many of her staunchest supporters voted against her. The former British PM Winston Churchill was hugely popular when he led Britain to victory in World War II. His style was anything but demagogic, but Churchill was known for his arrogance. He had been a war-time PM, so his mindset became militaristic. He began to think more like a military man than an elected leader. Churchill was so convinced that he would be swept to power in the post-War election, that he hardly bothered to campaign. Instead, he began to demonise the opposition Labour Party, even though the party had agreed to support him during the war. Churchill warned that the Labour Party harboured dictatorial ambitions. He even compared the

⁸ RA. Sharma: *Indira Gandhi and Congress Party* (Northern Book Centre, 1988) p.155

Labour Party to the Nazis.⁹ He completely misread the political discourse in Britain after the war.

Churchill believed that British people would reject Labour Party's socialism after equating it with Stalinism and Nazism. But it was peace, progress and a return to normalcy that were at the core of the post-War discourse in Britain. The Labour Party promised these and swept the election. Suddenly, a PM who had won a war and was perhaps the most popular man in Britain, was ousted. His language and tone had become demagogic, which disturbed a nation that was coming out of a devastating war. But the war had been won. Conditions were not suitable for the emergence of a strongman. Churchill fell into a deep state of depression. When the British monarch offered Churchill the country's highest honour, The Order of the Garter, he declined, saying that he couldn't possibly accept such an honour, because the British voters had given him the 'order of the boot!'¹⁰

There is great drama in the whole process: leaders being lifted and put on a pedestal by admiring crowds and then pulled down and shredded by the same people. Such leaders believe they will be loved and adored forever. But they were loved for what they had promised. But the promises are always too tall. Once it becomes apparent that the promises were mere rhetoric, former admirers react in three ways: (1) they feel their intelligence was insulted and their emotions exploited. They want to tear into the leader in any way possible. (2) They feel ashamed that they so unabashedly fell head-over-heels over a charlatan. Not only do they feel disappointed by the leader, but in themselves as well. They are not very vocal about this realisation, though. They just become quiet. (3) Or, they furiously repress realisations 1 and 2, as if

⁹ 'Winston Churchill's "Crazy Broadcast": Party, Nation, and the 1945 Gestapo Speech': R.Toye (Journal of British Studies, 2010)

¹⁰ 'When Winston Churchill Was Kicked Out of Office in the British Election of 1945' (The Wire, August 30, 2020)

these were not emerging from within but being fed from outside. They want to retain the feelings of excitement and fondness that the rhetoric had originally generated in them. This may cut them off from reality, exactly as the elation and exhilaration of being put on a pedestal had separated their beloved leader from reality.

One saw all three reactions sweeping across Imran Khan's supporters, as it became more than evident that he will not complete his full term. Khan, too, began to seethe with anger, disappointment, confusion and a sense of betrayal. These emotions were largely projected towards his erstwhile benefactors, the ME. Aggravated emotions were also hurled at those who did not vote for his party – and even at those who did, but now wanted him out. His regime had been a disaster on numerous fronts. And the charisma that had worked so well for him, now seemed to be eroding.

Charisma has been a constant across all the leaders discussed here. It's a curious thing. In the book *Denying to the Grave*, Sara and Jack Gorman write that one of the ways 'charismatic' leaders justify the nature of power they wield is by constantly claiming that there is no other alternative. Such leaders aim to create a perception of a crisis when there is none. They then repeatedly claim that they alone are the best choice to resolve the crisis. Khan was very capable of seeding such a perception and then positioning himself as the only man willing and skilled enough to resolve 'the crisis.'

What is a charismatic leader? The idea of a charismatic leader stems from the works of the German sociologist Max Weber (d. 1920). He coined the phrase 'charismatic authority,' or authority that flows from the charisma of a leader. According to Weber, charisma in a person is because of a quality or personality trait by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men.¹¹ Weber explained charismatic authority in contrast to 'traditional authority' and 'rational authority.' Traditional

¹¹ M. Weber: *On Charisma and Institution Building* (University of Chicago Press, 1968) pp.22-23

authority flows from established customs, and rational authority through institutions of the State.

Charismatic authority flows from a leader created by ‘the cult of personality.’ Having charisma and/or the ability to instantly charm and persuade a large group of people, is not a negative trait. But when charisma is used politically, the outcome is often dark. Those who are not smitten by charismatic leaders often dismiss them for being eccentric and even comical. But charismatic leaders are well aware of their ability to effectively manipulate their audience. The number of people mocking them is always smaller than those who hang on to their every word, no matter how exaggerated, inaccurate, or, for that matter, silly.

Charismatic leaders are especially attractive during times of crises. But it is also a fact that the crises are not always as grave as portrayed by the leader. Such leaders paint a crisis that they claim only they can resolve. Also, they can create a perception of a crisis when there is none, or change the nature of a crisis according to their political needs.

During the campaigning of the 2013 elections in Pakistan, when terrorism had hit a terrifying peak in the country, Khan chose to put ‘corruption’ at the top of Pakistan’s list of crises. He hardly ever mentioned terrorism in his speeches. He continued to roll with his anti-corruption mantra even when he lost the 2013 elections to the PML-N. He explained the PML-N government — and not the violent extremists that had slaughtered thousands of people — as ‘a grave danger’ to the country (because of its ‘corruption’).

This, despite the fact that the economy had begun to actually show signs of some recovery. If this really were the case, then why were so many from the middle-classes rallying around Khan? As already mentioned elsewhere in the book, in 2017, German researcher Jochen Menges led a study to explore the impact of charismatic leaders on their followers. His findings led to what he called the ‘awestruck effect.’ According to Menges, a lot of people suspend their emotions

while listening to charismatic leaders. This hampers their ability of critical thinking. Menges adds that ‘charisma as a dominant behaviour is successful only when it is matched by submissive behaviour on the part of a leader’s followers.’

Again, to repeat myself, an earlier theory in this context is based on the works of German psychologist Sigmund Freud (d.1939). It is often referred to as transference,’ in which a person or group forms an idealised image of a father or mother figure and then projects this image onto a leader. The leader tries to enhance this idealised image of himself. In politics, this is often done by the creation of the cult of personality.

For example, photographs of Khan performing prayers, or working out, or speaking to a group of youth, etc., were floated across social media sites to substantiate the idealised image of him being a morally-correct and physically fit father figure, who could do no wrong. But the fact is: all that he did do was mostly faulty. The stories behind the faults begin to ‘leak’ in the public when a charismatic leader’s downward trajectory commences. The harder he tries to arrest the slide, the harder he falls. And the fall can have a rather traumatic impact on many of his supporters.

Some may lash out, not as organised groups of protesters, but as sporadic, inarticulate social media mobs. In such cases, their target is not only those who are critical of the leader, but also the leader himself. PTI leaders began facing loud protests at their own rallies. In fact, in one such rally just before Khan’s fall, a PTI supporter managed to get hold of the microphone to demand that the PTI government should go home.

Some supporters might feel lost. Such supporters had identified Khan as a father figure. Or maybe even a messianic figure that they could see in ‘real’ life. A mythical hero. To many, he was still the dashing man who won the 1992 Cricket World Cup and then got married to a prosperous British woman. If one wanted to see the above

playing out, they could have explored the replies to tweets of Khan's ex-spouse Jemima Goldsmith. Khan's now disoriented tribe wanted her back in his life, so that the fairy tale in their heads continues to play, and is not soiled by that one thing that this tribe seemed to detest the most: empirical reality. This reality was reserved for Khan's second and third wives. They were never allowed to be part of the conceptual reality that many of his supporters had built around him. Not glammers or white enough? Perhaps.

Between 2008 and 2015, Pakistan was facing an unprecedented onslaught from militant Islamist groups. Suicide bombers were exploding themselves in markets and even in mosques, almost on a daily basis. Khan recast the fear of extremist violence as something to do with corruption. So instead of extremism, corruption became the fear, at least to his supporters. Khan then offered his growing number of followers punching bags in the shape of Nawaz Sharif and Asif Ali Zardari.

During Hajj, when pilgrims throw pebbles at three walls, called *jamarāt*, or the concrete symbols of Satan, they do so because they expect to be rewarded by the Almighty for doing this.

Khan gave his followers symbols of corruption to be cursed and punched. They did exactly that, but the promised rewards never materialised. Instead, the trajectory of the pebbles and punches began to change course start to head towards him.

Some months before Khan's dismissal, veteran journalist and TV anchor Saleem Safi uploaded two interviews on his YouTube channel. The video was part of a series in which Safi talked to those prominent TV anchors who were once seen as being 'diehard supporters' of Imran Khan but had become vehement critics of him. In two of the interviews that Safi uploaded, the anchors — Kamran Shahid and Irshad Bhatti —

confessed that they had unabashedly supported the rise of Imran Khan at the expense of 'status quo politicians' such as the former prime minister Nawaz Sharif and former president Asif Ali Zardari. The anchors confessed that they (like most other pro-Khan TV journalists) had had no qualms in echoing Khan's constant tirades against Sharif and Zardari (of being 'corrupt').

Kamran Shahid even went to the extent of saying that he, along with the channel that he hosts his show on, often declared Khan's rallies that had 400 people as having 40,000!¹² Indeed, owning up to one's mistakes and misdeeds takes courage and should be encouraged, especially if a person is a mainstream journalist with a large audience. Senior journalist and TV anchor Kamran Khan, who for months was insisting that all was well and that the country had a 'perfect hybrid political system' headed by PM Khan, uploaded a damning diatribe against the PM on Twitter.

Kamran Khan is often seen as 'the establishment's man.' So his denunciation in this context was understood by many as a reaction to the manner in which PM Khan got in the crosshairs of the military chief General Qamer Bajwa. PM Khan did this by dragging his feet when asked by Bajwa to appoint a new head of the ISI.

Apparently, not only was the PM unwilling to replace an ISI man – who, it was widely alleged, was instrumental in shaping Khan's political rise and possible continuation of his government – but the PM also perceived the move as a signal by the military that it was now unwilling to back a failing regime. The ME, TV anchors and all the way down to a large number of supporters of Imran Khan, were not shy anymore to castigate the government for being incompetent. The military quietly lessened its support for PM Khan, but the other two did not hesitate to acknowledge that they were fooled by Khan's fiery rhetoric and promises.¹³

¹² Saleem Safi's interview of Kamran Shahid (Saleem Safi Official, November 6, 2021)

¹³ Ibid.

The realisation within the military that it had overrated Khan's political acumen was surprisingly slow. It is surprising because thought-leaders in the military are often extremely rational and precise in assessing the viability of a military manoeuvre or a political project. How then could the ME be so callous in undermining the assessment of various analysts and journalists who, especially from 2011 onwards, had been warning against such a venture, knowing well that Khan may be more subservient than Sharif or Zardari, but he was not the person to head the government of a country riddled with complex economic, security and political issues, and surrounded by increasingly hostile neighbors?

Khan has always been impulsive, egocentric and not very well informed in the fields of international relations, political administration and history. Ever since he left behind his days of lifestyle liberalism and plunged into politics, he repeatedly behaved like a person with political notions shaped by half-digested ideas of men such as the intellectual Edward Said, the political Islamist Abul Ala Maududi and even the former Pakistani Prime Minister Z.A. Bhutto. Add to this an admixture of contemporary populism and the increasingly absurd narratives of so-called 'identity politics' that has more relevance in the West, and you have what Khan was.

Back in 1997, the editor of *The Friday Times* Jugnu Mohsin wrote one of the first pieces highlighting the many political and ideological oddities and naïveté that Khan had already begun to exhibit. But 14 years later, the same man was given a large audience in Lahore by his early patrons in the military. Had he changed? Not quite. In fact, his critics thought he had gotten worse. They weren't judging him as a person, but as a politician. Yet, the timing of his sudden emergence on the big stage was near-perfect: Pakistan was facing an unprecedented onslaught from Islamist militants; the former military dictator General Musharraf had been unceremoniously ousted from power; Zardari and Sharif were back; and a whole new generation of young urban

Pakistanis had emerged that had only known Musharraf's 'enlightened' dictatorship and the chaos caused by militant Islamist groups.

This new generation of young Pakistanis had little or no memory of how the country came to be like this. That's why Khan's rhetoric revolving around the elimination of corruption, *Naya Pakistan*, 'Riyasat-e-Madina,' etc., sounded fresh and original to them — especially when coupled with performances from pop stars and 'show-biz' celebrities, most of who were still sulking about Musharraf's departure.

But the fact was: what Khan was saying was neither original nor new. It had all been said before and used in the most cynical manner by numerous political pretenders in Pakistan. But whereas the young and the apolitical lot who came out to support Khan can be excused for not knowing this, and for also being unaware of how previous generations too were suckered in by such promises, one did expect high-profile TV journalists to know better.

Let me explain. The disappointed anchors who spoke to Safi claimed that they found Khan's words extremely appealing, new and hopeful. They added that none of them had heard a politician promise what Khan was offering: End of corruption; *Naya Pakistan*; *Riyasat-e-Madina* and/or 'Islamic Welfare State.' This proves that like most supporters of Khan, these gentlemen too had no clue about the country's political history before the arrival of General Musharraf in 1999. So, like many others, they too found themselves believing that someone entirely unique had arrived. It was political stupidity.

As discussed earlier in this book, political stupidity doesn't mean lack of intelligence. It means a lack of information and certain facts. But not intelligence. Political stupidity is when people voluntarily close their minds and freeze the ability of critical thinking when swept by rousing rhetoric. Now let's explore how Khan's core rhetoric was a rehash of what had already come (and disappointed) before.

Let's start with the promise of wiping out corruption. The first time it was used politically was when President Iskandar Mirza and military chief Ayub Khan engineered the country's first coup d'état in 1958. They used the 'spread of corruption in the society' as one of the major justifications for implementing military rule. Interestingly, corruption was still an issue when a popular anti-government movement forced Ayub Khan to resign as president in March 1969.

However, those opposing him only occasionally brought corruption up as an issue against his regime. On the left side of the opposition, accusations of economic exploitation, and on the rightist side, the regime's 'secular' policies were more vehemently aired than corruption. Then, during the 1977 movement against the Z.A. Bhutto regime, corruption as an accusation was present, but was not as prominent as accusations of the Bhutto regime being authoritarian and 'un-Islamic.'

When General Zia toppled the Bhutto regime in July 1977, he largely echoed the rhetoric of the anti-Bhutto parties. During his first address on TV and radio, he rarely used the word corruption. Nevertheless, corruption did eventually come into play (as a justification) when, in 1988, Zia dismissed his own handpicked PM and parliament. He had to use the word because by the mid-1980s — as the economist Shahid Javed Burki has demonstrated in his writings on the period — political and economic corruption had become institutionalised.¹⁴

Using corruption as a justification to remove governments really came to the fore from the 1990s. Both the Benazir Bhutto regimes were removed by the 'establishment' because they were accused of being 'corrupt.' The first Nawaz Sharif regime also faced the same charge before being removed. When Benazir was dismissed the second time in 1996, the usage of corruption as an excuse to depose a sitting government became more than a justification. A caretaker government

¹⁴ SJ. Burki: *State and Society in Pakistan* (Peace Publications, 2019) p.77

handpicked by the establishment deepened the word's political meaning by launching an 'Ehtesaab Bureau' (accountability bureau) and then commissioning a few pop songs and videos against 'corrupt politicians.'

The imagery used in this regard was 'revolutionary.' It was as if a revolution of sorts was being triggered by a handful of bureaucrats, industrialists and military men. It was surreal. Musharraf, too, used corruption as a justification to keep Sharif and Bhutto away. So, Khan simply picked up a worn-out cliché but packaged it the manner in which the 'revolutionary' Ehtesaab Bureau had done in 1997. The irony is: the Bureau had facilitated the electoral victory of a man (Nawaz) whose government had been ousted on charges of corruption in 1993.

Now, about Khan's supposedly original slogan of creating a Naya Pakistan. Z.A. Bhutto, in his first national address as head of State and government in December 1971, talked about 'building a new Pakistan.' Indeed, by this he meant a Pakistan that had by then lost its eastern wing after a gruesome civil war. So, what Bhutto got was a different Pakistan. But when his phrase was used by pro-government newspapers, it connoted a Pakistan free of economic exploitation, manipulative bureaucrats and ambitious military generals which Bhutto called 'Bonapartists.'¹⁵

Khan's slogan/promise of creating a 'Riyasat-e-Madina' is a direct offshoot of how politicians before him had promised an updated model of '*Khilafat-e-Rashdeen*' or the 'pure rule' of Islam's earliest caliphs. In 1967, the Jamat-e-Islami promised a '*Khilafat-e-Rashdeen*' which it interchangeably used with '*Hakumat-e-Ilahi*' (rule of God). This didn't get the party any significant votes, though. It was routed in the 1970 election.

PM Khan often described Riyasat-e-Madina as an early (Islamic) example of the modern Welfare State that took shape centuries later in

¹⁵ KB. Sayeed: *Politics in Pakistan: The Nature and Direction of Change* (Praeger, 1980) p.89

various Scandinavian countries. Many found this claim to be rather fascinating. Yet, it was first used in this manner in PPP's 1967 foundation documents and then again in the party's 1970 manifesto. In explaining the party's socialism, the PPP claimed that its socialism was not communist, but more like the social democracy of Scandinavian countries. Then the party further expanded this idea by calling it 'Islamic socialism' or the kind of socialism that was implemented by the early 'rightly guided caliphs.' It also gave it another term: '*Musawat-e-Muhammadi*.'

General Zia, too, often used the term 'Khilafat-e-Rashdeen,' all the while institutionalising corruption and intolerance in the society. Just before his ouster, when Khan directed his ministers to celebrate that year's Eid Miladun Nabi 'with great gusto,' and 'like never before,' he was actually taking yet another page out of Bhutto's playbook. In 1976, with the economy buckling under the strain of rising petrol prices, and his regime facing increasing hostility from religious parties, Bhutto decided to hold an international 'Seerat Conference.' Ulema from Pakistan and various Muslim countries were invited to highlight the life and conduct of Islam's Prophet (PBUH). The conference took place during the celebrations of Eid Miladun Nabi.

As a politician, Khan was nothing like what he was as a cricketer. As a politician he was unoriginal and ill-informed. His knowledge of history and the complexities of the Pakistani polity, and of international politics was no better than that of his young supporters. They can be forgiven for this. They were young. But not the man who turned 70 in 2022, nor the TV anchors and his uniformed patrons in the ME who should have known better.

There is a decreasing likelihood of Khan ever being able to bounce back and return to power. He isn't getting any younger. The way he responded to his ouster, only strengthened the perception that he is

unfit to lead a complex country such as Pakistan. He doesn't have many friends left in the military, judiciary or in the media. He still has some, but their influence is rapidly weakening and eroding. There is nothing new he has to offer. Therefore, for months after his dismissal, all he tried to do was whip up the emotions of his supporters, portraying himself as a victim of diabolical conspiracies.

Secondly, the ME which is still a powerful player and has a say in civilian political equations, has already confessed that the 'hybrid regime' project headed by Khan, but largely formulated by the military in partnership with some senior judges and TV journalists, was a disaster. It brought the country's economics, foreign policy and politics at a dangerous impasse. There is no foreseeable possibility that the military will be willing to tolerate Khan's return to power.

The term 'hybrid regime' was first used by the Hungarian sociologist Elemér Hankiss in the 1990s. He used it to describe the communist regime of János Kádár in Hungary. Kádár was appointed by the Soviet Union as Hungary's premier in 1956, after a popular uprising in Budapest against the communist set-up was crushed by Soviet forces. Kádár treaded a fine line between the democratic aspirations of the protestors, and Soviet-style authoritarianism. He introduced civil, social and economic reforms that were a departure from the previous 'Stalinist' model of authoritarianism. But he maintained the political supremacy and monopoly of the Hungarian Communist Party.

Hankiss' term was picked up by European and American political scientists to mean a transitional period in former communist countries and non-communist dictatorships when these began to adopt democratic reforms after the end of the Cold War in 1991. Till the 1980s, countries going through this process were described as 'transitional democracies'. But this term was replaced with 'hybrid regimes' in the immediate post-Cold War period.

Initially, there was an element of optimism in the term, because most political scientists believed hybrid regimes would eventually evolve into becoming full-fledged liberal democracies. However, in 2002, the American political analyst Thomas Carothers, asked political scientists to study the term ‘hybrid regime’ without the optimism attached to it, and without the assumption that such regimes would transform into becoming liberal democracies.¹⁶ After Carothers’ advice, a conceptual shift occurred in the study of ‘hybrid regimes’.

This is when hybrid regimes stopped being understood as transitional and began to be seen as hindrances in the path of systems attempting to convert themselves into democracies. Hybrid regimes are navigated by powerful State institutions (such as the military) or ‘strongmen’ (backed by State and economic elites). They adopt certain democratic traditions, such as elections, through which they legitimise their power and portray this power as if it were achieved through ‘democratic’ means. The elections are usually rigged and the assemblies are stuffed with manageable members who can be controlled.

In 2008, after the collapse of Pakistan’s last direct military dictatorship, and the country’s transition to democracy, the ME beat a strategic retreat. However, in 2011, it was back. After concluding that conditions were not suited to engineer another military coup, it decided to shape a hybrid regime and/or a set-up navigated by the military from the shadows and having a cosmetic democratic front. It theorised that the country’s two largest parties — the PPP and PML-N — had completely broken away from its orbit and thus, could threaten its political interests.

It was also noted that the military dictatorship that had been ousted in 2008, had, however, managed to build a strong pro-military constituency, mainly among the urban middle-classes. The military began to shape this constituency into a vote-bank. The PTI, once a tiny

¹⁶ ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’ (Journal of Democracy, 2002) pp. 5-21

centre-right party led by Imran Khan, was chosen to become the recipient of this vote-bank. The party's size witnessed a sudden increase when the military used its resources to bolster Khan's then insignificant political stature through the manipulation of mainstream electronic media, social media and the induction of 'electables' plucked from various mainstream parties.

In 2018, an election was allegedly rigged because the vote-bank that PTI had inherited wasn't large enough to produce a convincing win. Khan became PM and headed a coalition government clubbed together with the help of the military. ME's experiment of shaping and installing a hybrid regime was a success. But soon, the experiment started to unravel, putting the military on the spot. Once Khan began to lose the support of his erstwhile makers, his regime crumbled.¹⁷

Could the military not see that the experiment was bound to fail? Especially with a volatile character such as Imran Khan being at the centre of the experiment with some overtly politicised military officers handling him? I believe the military was convinced that a hybrid regime could work if its chosen frontman was able to meet two conditions.

Firstly, a hybrid regime in a developing country needs to maintain good relations with developed countries. There are economic benefits in this if the regime comes across as being friendly, stable and strategically valuable. Being under the gaze of the developed countries helps the regime to legitimise itself as an internationally recognised entity, and avoid committing disruptive internal and external excesses.

In this, Khan was an unmitigated disaster. He ended up disrupting Pakistan's historical economic, strategic and political relations with the US, European Union countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and even China. Secondly, if a country being led by an authoritarian or hybrid regime has democratic neighbours, that country will eventually transition to becoming a stable democracy. However, when Khan was installed as

¹⁷ 'The Right Path': N.Sethi (The Friday Times, November 27, 2022)

PM, Pakistan's largest neighbour, India, had a hardline Hindu nationalist government.

Indeed, although India's government had come in through an untampered democratic process in 2014, its disposition was not only overtly hostile towards Pakistan, it was also increasingly seen as a government that was eroding India's established democracy. Then there is Iran, a theocracy, and Afghanistan, another theocracy, as neighbours.

With neighbours like these, Khan began to dream of creating a one-party State. That party would have been PTI using the military as a personal policing institution. Of course, this became a highly problematic notion for the military. Khan needed to stay the course of at least pretending to be a democrat. Now that the hybrid experiment has imploded, one expects that Pakistan's return to democracy, which was impeded by the experiment, will be able to regenerate itself. But it is important that the regeneration is driven by certain considerations.

These include the repairing of economic and strategic ties with the US, European Union countries, Saudi Arabia and China, and a conscious effort to prove that Pakistan is not in any danger of becoming an Iran or an Afghanistan; or that its democracy will *not* allow the coming to power of a demagogue, such as India's Narendra Modi. Or for that matter, Imran Khan. After repeating over and over again that his regime was ousted by the US, Khan suddenly tried to sound pro-US by 'clarifying' that it wasn't the US, but his former mentor and facilitator General Bajwa who ousted him.¹⁸ Of course, he said this three months after Bajwa retired as Army Chief.

But it was too late. Khan had lost all support in the ME, whereas, the US had remained impersonal towards him even when he was PM. In a December 22, 2022 editorial for the *Friday Times*, the veteran political analyst Najam Sethi categorically announced that 'Imran is done!'

¹⁸ 'Bajwa, not US behind ouster: Imran' (DAWN, February 13, 2023)

But what about his core constituency, the urban middle-classes? Some of them hoped that Khan would come from behind (like his cricket team did in 1992) and win the top slot again. Some began to dream of the emergence of yet another 'strongman.' Some returned to being apolitical again. The fact is, the attempt by the middle-classes to grab political power was sabotaged by their own self-styled messiah. Now the question is, how long before this class once again falls for a glorious fantasy fed to them by cynical kingmakers? Or will it learn anything from a disaster that they were a part of? Will they ever overcome the angst of facing a reality that they detested; the reality of Pakistan as it is — complex, chaotic, and diverse? Or will this class continue to reside in a conceptual reality in which it alone calls the shots? This class has demonstrated social and economic dynamism. But its political thinking and desires have remained static.

During last decade's upsurge in the fortunes of populist politics in numerous countries, Imran Khan emerged as its central figure in Pakistan. Globally, Khan never became as prominent in this context as his populist contemporaries such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Narendra Modi, Boris Johnson and Viktor Orbán. But he was very much a product of the populist wave that began to sweep across various regions from 2010 onwards.

In *Imran Khan: Myth of the Pakistani Middle-Class*, Nadeem Farooq Paracha explores the political, social and historical factors that led to Khan's rise and his eventful fall as a politician. In so doing, Paracha also scrutinises the political and social dynamics of Khan's core constituency, the urban middle-classes. He demonstrates how these classes have continued to sabotage their own political interests due to their stubborn search for 'strongmen.'



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