

ISAS Brief

No. 338 – 25 August 2014

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Is Imran Khan Losing Political Traction?

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The twin marches led respectively by Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Tahirul Qadri's Pakistani Awami Tehreek will undoubtedly result in a number of unintended consequences. All of them will be negative. The first relates to the role of the military in politics. Just when it appeared that the armed forces might have finally returned to the barracks, the two long marches have brought them back to the policy making table. Second, the marches may interrupt, if not entirely halt, the slow move towards the establishment of a representative and reasonably inclusive political order. This began to happen with the elections of 2008 when a regime led by the military allowed the transfer of power to the political parties it could have otherwise influenced. This process of political change was quickened by the elections five years later. The 2013 elections were held after an administration had completed its full constitutionally-mandated

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term in office. The elections also resulted in the transfer of reins of power to an administration led by a different political party, one that had responsibly occupied the opposition benches for five years. In a stable political system, the results of an election are not contested by the losing party to the extent done by the PTI after the 2013 poll.

Third, the political movements launched by these two parties have brought instability to the province of Punjab. Sindh with violence in Karachi, the province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa with Islamic extremism, and Baluchistan, host to a long-enduring insurgency, were all dealing with uncertainty. That affected their economic and political progress. Punjab province had been largely spared. That will not be the case anymore.

As the leaders of these protest movements reminded those who were watching their progress from outside, protest is an essential part of democracy. That is certainly the case. But that is not the case when a protest movement shakes the foundations of the political structure. Qadri did not pretend to support the system that was in the process of being developed. But the system which Imran Khan is challenging is the one that has given him political prominence. Let us see how these two protest movements developed in their final moments.

Imran Khan set out from Lahore to Islamabad seemingly confident. The march began on 14 August 2014, Pakistan's 67th birth anniversary. Perhaps recalling the freedom struggle by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founding father, or perhaps anticipating what he wanted to see as Pakistan's future, the former cricket hero had called his campaign the "Azadi march", the march for freedom. He left his Lahore residence before Tahir ul Qadri, leader of the other march with a different goal, was able to join him. A disappointed Qadri decided to proceed to Islamabad on his own, accompanied by thousands of followers, mostly young men and women. They came from the network of schools called Minhaj ul Quran. These were established by Qadri to teach Quran, the holy book of Islam, by going beyond the literal meaning of the text. This was the Sufi way, a tradition to which the Toronto-based Qadri belongs. .

Before setting out, Imran Khan described the protest he was embarking upon and what he expected to achieve. He did not explain how he would reach the goals he had set out for himself and his followers. "You have to fight for freedom", Khan told the crowd that had assembled outside his Lahore house before he began the 300-km journey to Islamabad. "We will reach Islamabad and

there we will see the dawn of a new Pakistan”. The journey on the fabled Grand Trunk Road built by the sixteenth century Muslim emperor Sher Shah Suri normally takes five hours by bus or car. It took Imran Khan and his followers a day and half. On the way, Khan’s bullet-proof car was fired upon, said the PTI, by the supporters of Mian Nawaz Sharif’s Pakistan Muslim League. No one was seriously hurt but Khan decided to leave the procession and sped to Islamabad in his car.

The government’s initial reaction was to use force to keep the twin-marches out of Islamabad or at least away from the city’s sensitive areas that housed the president, the prime minister, the parliament, and the diplomatic corps. This was the capital city’s “red zone”. But wiser counsel prevailed including that given by the military’s senior leadership. Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister of Punjab and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s younger brother, met for a couple of hours with General Raheel Sharif, Chief of Army Staff, a day before the scheduled “freedom march”. On the eve of the march, the government announced that the two groups would be allowed to enter the capital city but not the “red zone”.

This behind-the-scene intervention by the military brought it back as a major player in the policy making structure. This position was threatened when after the elections of 11 May 2013 Sharif came back to Islamabad with a comfortable position in the National Assembly. The previous government headed by President Asif Ali Zardari was a weak coalition which had ceded control of foreign and security policies to the military. Relations with the United States, Afghanistan and India were largely the responsibility of the men in uniform. One of the unintended consequences of Imran Khan’s march, therefore, was to secure an important seat for the military at the table. According to Kamran Bokhari, vice president at Stratfor, a United States-based geopolitical consultancy, “now that the government has sought its help to deal with the threats from Khan and Qadri, the army has regained the role of a systemic referee. The military does not want to see democratic consolidation but neither does it want the constitutional process to be so upset that it endangers the republic”.

Finally in Islamabad along with tens of thousands of supporters, Imran Khan addressed his followers at 4 in the morning of 15 August. “Under no circumstances we will accept this election”, he told the crowd. He was referring to the elections of May 2013 in which, according to the official count, Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League had won twice as many votes as the PTI. “I am sitting here. Nawaz has one option. Resign and order re-election”, he said. Promising to stay

in the capital for as long as it takes to have his demands met, he summoned his followers to reappear at the ground in the afternoon.

Concerned that the enthusiasm of the people who had gathered at Islamabad might be ebbing, both Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri upped the ante. The latter presented his four-point agenda including the demand for the resignation of the Sharif brothers, placing their names on the “exit control list” so that they did not flee the country, dissolution of the national and provincial assemblies and appointment of a government of technocrats that would oversee the writing of yet another constitution. He wanted a complete change in the system, not its overhaul. Imran Khan, conscious of the fact that his followers might be losing patience, told the prime minister: “I am not here to sit for weeks. It’s better for you to listen to our demands and leave as soon as possible”.

As so many who have led marches and *dharnas* came to realise, the “morning after” is the most difficult part of a campaign. Will Khan be able to get out of the situation in which he had landed himself? Promising a long stay may be practical for him and his close associates. All of them are well-resourced, not dependent on daily work for living wages. The government could wait out too; so could Imran Khan and his close political associates but his followers could not. Late in the evening of 17 August, Khan changed his tactics again. Stressing that he wanted to avoid violence and clashes between PTI workers and police, Khan called on all supporters to stop paying utility bills and taxes such as income tax and general sales tax to what he called this ‘corrupt government’. He seemed to have landed himself in an awkward position, speaking more or less in the same breath about forcing the government out of office and launching a peaceful disobedience movement. “I personally want to storm this fake parliament and Prime Minister’s House, hold Nawaz Sharif by the neck and subject him ruthless accountability. But we believe in a peaceful struggle”, Khan thundered.

In an editorial published a day after Imran Khan launched the disobedience movement, the newspaper *Dawn* summed up the situation well. “It is sad and ignominious path that a political leader with genuine public support just a year ago is now embarking on...The PTI’s latest threats will peter out much as the independence rally did, but true political stability will only come if the [ruling party] the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) too changes tack. What is crystal clear in hindsight was also fairly evident in foresight: the greater threat to political stability came from the PML-N’s slow response to PTI’s initially reasonable demands and then the panic mode that the

PML-N leadership seemed to get into. Now the PML-N will again have some time and space to reshape the political narrative and national discourse”.

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