

Pakistan: Assassination Time Again

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A failed attempt in Wazirabad last Thursday to assassinate the former Prime Minister, Imran Khan, has resulted in mass demonstrations throughout the country. Khan was aboard his campaign truck, on the long march of his supporters to Islamabad to demand immediate elections. Bullets hit him in the leg. Was it two or three? Such is the focus of debate on Pakistani television. A dozen others were injured, while a father trying to protect his three children was killed. The dialectic of illegally or constitutionally toppled leaders retaining their popularity makes the Army extremely nervous. Technically, the coup against Khan was legal: he lost a vote of no-confidence in April. The chicanery behind the scenes will come to light one of these days. Khan himself had few doubts that US pressure was behind his removal. The US State Department strongly denied any involvement, though did not hide its irritation at Khan's criticism of the 'mess' created in Afghanistan, nor at Pakistan's abstention on the UN vote for sanctions against Russia (the new government similarly abstained in the latest Ukraine vote).

A delegation of the ISI - Pakistan's intelligence service - who were visiting the Pentagon at the time of Khan's comments, reassured their friends that the country's foreign and defence policies were decided by the Army, not the Prime Minister. This is, of course, true and has been the case since General Zia-ul-Haq declared martial law and removed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977. Zia promised elections within ninety days of the coup. In that case, suggested Bhutto, who had been placed under house arrest, all political leaders should be allowed to campaign publicly. The Army agreed and Bhutto went on a public tour, during which he was welcomed by huge crowds (a quarter of a million in Lahore alone). The general panicked. Were Bhutto to be re-elected, he would punish the coup-makers. A plot was therefore manufactured to charge him with murder and get rid of him. After a rigged trial, Bhutto was hanged in 1979.

A few months ago, I was reminded of these scenes from Pakistan's past. Khan's Party for Justice (PTI) is very different from Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in social composition and political programme, but the dialectic is similar. Khan's removal led to large-scale demonstrations - his supporters chanting *Jo Amrika ka yar hai, Ghaddar hai, Ghaddar hai* ('Anyone a friend of America is a traitor, a traitor') - and the PTI went on to win a string of by-elections against the new government, in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi city. Khan's popularity could not be doubted, but his demand for new national elections was refused. Ironically, the unelected new Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif, was advised by his brother Nawaz Sharif (a former PM himself) not to form a new government, given the state of the country, and instead call an election. But the younger brother was desperate for power. The Army backed him, believing that they needed a new government in place for a year or so to destroy the PTI (who they had helped to power in the first place, in the hope that Khan would be a tame politician).

Khan and the PTI are now accusing Sharif, the interior minister and a senior general of being involved in the shooting. The would-be-assassin has claimed that he acted on his own because he was disappointed by politicians and their broken promises. He's not alone in this regard, but shooting at them won't change all that much. A corrupt and violent elite linked to all political parties and the Army will not disappear overnight. The ruling classes in the country have done virtually

nothing to help the poor. Whether the man who fired the bullets is working for more sinister forces (something many in the country believe) we do not know. Was it a shot across the bows to frighten Khan away from politics? If so, it has had the opposite effect. The shooter claims he got the idea when he heard the call to prayer earlier that day.

Interestingly, the word assassin is of medieval Islamic origin. It derives from the hashashin, drugged-up killers belonging to a Shia sect created by Hassan-i-Sabbah in 1090. Peaceful hippies they were not. They were professionals hired out to anyone who needed them for financial or political purposes. Dissolved in the 13th century, their ghosts seemed to have entered Pakistan soon after the country was formed. The first Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan was assassinated at a political rally in 1951. The killer, Said Akbar, was shot dead immediately by veteran policeman Najaf Khan, who happened to be standing right behind him. A coincidence, the police said. The result of his death was a weakening of the refugee presence in the government and founding party, and the rise of the Punjabi landlords as the key players in the country. Bhutto was hanged; his daughter Benazir Bhutto was assassinated (also in Rawalpindi). Prior to that, her brother Murtaza Bhutto had been ambushed and killed outside his house in Karachi in extremely murky circumstances – some blamed Asif Zardari (Benazir’s husband and widower, later Prime Minister).

And now an attempt to kill Khan. Will it change anything? I fear not. The masses are cynical, the politicians and generals busy making money. There is no national alternative in sight. The Pashtun Protection Movement is the only serious group resisting the crushing hegemony of the ISI. Its MPs and activists are often arrested and tortured. The PTI’s collaboration on this front discredited it greatly. As did its total failure to deal with corruption outside and inside its own ranks. It would be good if some lessons were learned, and the next elections were more than two power-hungry blocs fighting to increase their bank-balances.

The whirligig continues.

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P.S.

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