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Portrait

## 'When you speak out, people react'

Imran Khan's skill with a bat made him a hero in Pakistan. Now his outspokenness has left him on the sidelines. Declan Walsh meets a man of contradictions

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A framed portrait of a suave young man with a confident smile and a bouffant hairstyle sits on the table of Imran Khan's gloomy basement office in Islamabad's Parliament Lodges. This is the Khan we once knew: the cricket legend who captained Pakistan to World Cup glory; the playboy prince who bedded many glamorous women but married just one, the English heiress Jemima Goldsmith; the airbrushed icon of 80s glamour such as Simon le Bon, Stringfellows nightclub and DeLorean sports cars.

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Today, Khan's handsome looks are creased by wrinkles, small bags shadow his proud eyes and the shaggy mane of hair looks tousled and dishevelled. Of course, at 52 he has a right to look older, but he also wears a more careless, even dog-eared, appearance. He is wearing a tapioca-coloured shalwar kameez, the classless uniform of every plain-thinking Pakistani from off-duty army generals to humble tea-wallahs in sweaty bazaars.

Khan is late but flushed with excitement. He had to drag himself away from a "riveting" cricket Test on television. "It's been a long time since I've enjoyed cricket, especially the one-day game," he declares in a big, embossed voice that fills the room. "The problem is that there are no quality bowlers, just mediocre ones that look good."

But much the same could be said of Khan himself. Since he forswore sport and sex for politics and piety about a decade ago, Khan's form has been highly erratic. As a politician, he has singularly failed to inspire fans to convert their love for him into votes. And since divorcing Goldsmith last summer, after a nine-year marriage, he has edged his views ever closer to the fringes of Pakistan's radicalised political spectrum.

He has voted with the MMA, a coalition of hardline Islamic parties, in the national assembly. He has also followed the mullahs' lead on several policy issues - opposing operations against al-Qaida militants in the tribal areas,

railing against madrassa reform, and criticising women who participate in mixed-sex road races. But his most famous stand came last May when, brandishing a story in Newsweek magazine about the desecration of the Qur'an at Guantánamo Bay, Khan declared to journalists that Islam was "under attack" - a widely publicised gesture that inflamed sentiment across the Muslim world and sparked a week of riots in neighbouring Afghanistan that killed at least 16 people. Khan remains unapologetic.

"To throw the Qur'an in the toilet is the greatest violation of a Muslim's human rights. Should we close Amnesty and the Red Cross because they bring up violations?" he says. "When you speak out, people react. Violence is regrettable, but that's not the point."

To paint him as a fundamentalist is plain wrong, he says: "People support the MMA because it is anti-Musharraf and anti-America, not because they want Islamisation. American cultural and religious persecution - like Abu Ghraib - is helping the terrorists and playing into Bin Laden's hands."

Pakistan's greatest problem is not the radical Islamists but its power-crazed president, he insists. "Musharraf is destroying our democracy by using this war on terror. Why did he put 700 people behind bars when Pakistan had no connection with the London bombings? In the world's eyes, Pakistan became a hub of terrorism. And at home, it reinforces the idea that Musharraf is a stooge implementing an American agenda."

You would not have heard such harsh words some years back. After the 1999 military coup, Khan was one of the general's most ardent supporters, so much so that he claims he was offered the prime minister's job. "I was charmed by him. I believed this was a man who could set our country straight, end corruption, clear out the political mafias," he says. But after a blatantly rigged referendum in 2002 extended Musharraf's grip on power, the myth "began to shatter" he says: "Here was a man who claimed to support democracy and he was rigging the elections, just like [former dictator] General Zia had."

But that sort of U-turn is partly why the brilliant cricketer has made such a miserable politician. Khan's ideas and affiliations since entering politics in 1996 have swerved and skidded like a rickshaw in a rainshower. An undisputed national hero after the 1992 World Cup, he first eroded confidence by promising to marry a local girl, then choosing the daughter of a British tycoon. Later, he supported and spurned Musharraf. Now he preaches democracy one day but gives a vote to reactionary mullahs the next.

As a result, Khan's Tehrik-e-Insaaf party has been creamed twice at the polls- once at the 1997 general election, and again in 2002. Now if Khan wants to address his entire parliamentary party, he need only look in the

mirror - he holds the sole national assembly seat. Still, he has avoided obscurity - newspapers still report his statements - but has traded it for notoriety.

"Imran's life is riddled with contradictions," said Najam Sethi, editor of the liberal Daily Times, which recently ran an editorial entitled Imran Khan's Simplistic Notions. "He is essentially a do-gooder but has these half-baked ideas, the sort you would pick up in an airport. And now he is caught in a no man's land, satisfying neither liberals nor conservatives."

For Pakistan's thin middle-class crust, he is an intense disappointment. Mention his name at dinner tables and the reaction is the same: people roll their eyes, chuckle lightly, then exhale a sad sigh. The star has burned up, they say, consumed by its own heat and oxygen. "He used to be my hero," a friend told me, shaking his head. "But now . . . I don't know. He seems to have thrown it all away."

Can it be that bad? Khan himself is curiously un sentimental about the passion that made his name. Since retiring from cricket 13 years ago, he has played only a handful of charity matches and offers his match commentary to TV sports stations only "when I need to make some money again". The reason is religion. His spiritual reawakening began after a chance meeting with a Sufi mystic at a dinner party about 17 years ago. "I was impressed by his complete wisdom; he opened me up to a whole spiritual world," he says. "Cricket and professional sport breeds this ruthlessness in you, because coming second has no prizes. The killer instinct you need has no compassion for the losers. But this is totally different, it breeds compassion."

Khan's Sufism also provides a defence against critics who, recalling those racy reports about wild nights with fast women in London, accuse him of hypocrisy. "Those people are exactly like the fundamentalists who try to tell you how to live your life," he says testily. "Our Islamic practice is divided in two. One half is the rights of society - rape, murder, corruption, public immorality. When you violate these rights, people should attack you."

"But then there are the rights of God - worship, drinking alcohol, fornication, and so on. These things are part of the sacred relationship between man and God. The Qur'an says to put a veil on your sins. So whatever I do, as long as I kept it between me and my God, it's not hypocrisy."

He has endured many accusations about his private life. He laughingly recalls speculation that his marriage to Jemima Goldsmith was part of a global Zionist conspiracy: "It was so bizarre and ridiculous. One newspaper printed a fake cheque for \$40m from Jimmy Goldsmith on its front page. Of course they had to retract it but that was three weeks before the [1997] election, so the damage was done."

His attraction to politics partially scuppered his marriage, he admits. "Jemima suffered because of my political life," he says. "Sometimes you had to go on tour for three or four days. For a Pakistani girl that is not difficult but a cross-cultural marriage needs more time. I gave it less."

The phone rings. It is his eight-year-old son Suleiman, back in London after a trip to Los Angeles. The booming voice, previously unenthused, brightens up. "So you are coming on Sunday? All your cousins are waiting for you," he says. By agreement with Goldsmith, he only sees the two boys - Qasim is six - during the holidays. It is a "void", he admits, but he firmly denies tabloid reports of a possible reunion with his ex-wife. "No, that chapter is completely closed. There's only speculation because of Jemima's relationship with Hugh Grant. But it has no bearing on us. I can't live anywhere else and she can't live in Pakistan. It's not an option."

Although he claims to be insulated from the Hugh Grant tittle-tattle, his private life has not entirely eluded the gossip columnists. Last May, lurid local press reports linked him to actress Goldie Hawn at a party in India. Khan snorts in amusement. "I just happened to be sitting next to her at a party last November. But then the ISI [Pakistan's formidable intelligence agency] picked it up and reproduced it here in May to discredit me after the Qur'an affair. The whole thing is a big joke."

Now that he has reordered his priorities post-Jemima - he resented having to spend four months a year in the UK - he says he is happy with life in Pakistan. He enjoys shooting partridge, hill walking and has a new farmhouse outside Islamabad. He still runs Pakistan's largest charity - a Lahore cancer clinic with an annual budget of \$18m. A second hospital in Karachi is in the works.

But he curtly denies being in a new relationship, even though Islamabad's dinner-party circuit is rife with stories of a recent trip to the northern areas with an unidentified European woman. If he marries again, he says it will only be to a woman who is "on the same road as me, someone who knows the life and can take it. Otherwise, I'll go it alone."

So the top priority remains politics. He reels off his wish list - reform of the courts, a return to democracy, the demise of the "crooks" currently running the country. But is anybody listening? He is convinced that they are. "I still say that if there was a presidential election in Pakistan tomorrow I would be able to put up a very good fight, because I have something that hardly anyone else has - credibility. The basic ingredient for getting votes is trust, and people trust me."

Still, the shadow of the old Imran is hard to shake off. After posing restlessly for a few photographs, he rises from his chair. "God," he says, darting for the door, "I'm dying to know what happened in the match."

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