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If Imran Khan is not the B team of the Taliban, then he will have to rise to the occasion, retract statements where he claimed Taliban atrocities are all government propaganda and condemn these barbarians properly

Imran Khan has made us proud on so many occasions. From the world cup to the first cancer hospital in Pakistan, he has given his all for the country, often at immense personal costs. Even his biggest political foes recognise these contributions and agree that his heart is in the right place. Washing off all personal attacks with his charismatic persona and eloquent tongue, Imran Khan has become a necessary guest for every talk show on TV.

In 1997, when Imran Khan started a political party based on justice, transparency and accountability, many sensed hope. He was not interested in winning via establishment meddling or cheap political sloganeering. The only way to break away from the status quo was through a message that resonated with the common man.

However, the Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaaf has not managed to reach the average Pakistani, even with the extensive media presence of Imran Khan, for twelve years now. In the latest IRI polls, only 5 percent of

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Pakistanis think Imran Khan is the best leader for Pakistan; only 3 percent said they'd vote for PTI. The average person seeks justice, but yet would rather vote for the PPP or the PMLN.

Why?

The answer is in the biases that Imran Khan exhibits, and his evolution into a myopic reactionary to the West. Time and again, Mr Khan has let his opposition of the West turn into a manifestation of anti-progress ideals and glorification of defunct tribal traditions. There is nothing wrong with genuine criticism of the West and its policies. The problem is with endless bashing driven by animosity, resulting in the kind of extreme paranoia and delusions where even upset stomachs are blamed on the 'Zionist Hindus'.

In an article titled "Why the West craves materialism and why the East sticks to religion", (Arab News, January 14, 2002), Imran Khan joined the ranks of Sarah Palin and George W Bush by claiming that Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is "half-baked". Those in the field of science, whether Muslim or not, have virtually unanimous consensus on Darwin's "half-baked" work and its implications. For instance, Pakistani scientist AQ Khan in a recent article explained that the "unprecedented rate of recent advances in biological knowledge has...been driven by the realisation that all organisms...share a common evolutionary origin." (The News, April 1, 2009)

Another example of his hate for the West evolving into support for regressive ideals is his endless praise of the jirga system. Imran Khan claims that these systems provide "speedy justice".

In fact the jirga system is a travesty of justice. The three essential elements of justice are 1) to permit all sides have a fair chance to present their case; 2) to have the case be decided by an independent arbitrator in light of the available evidence; and 3) appropriate decisions are executed in accordance with the law.

In a jirga, which is clearly defined by centuries of practice, tribal elders decide cases on their own will. Results are often based on arbitrary tests such as walking on coals, and the accused are awarded unconstitutional and barbaric punishments. They have awarded gang rape, live burial, forced marriage and murder as punishments for centuries.

Most Pakistanis are aware of this and would rather choose a slow court over a speedy jirga. Nothing can justify brutality at the pretext of speed. The term "jirga" may have popular connotations among Pashtuns, explaining Imran Khan's popularity in Pashtun dominated areas, but is loathed by the rest of Pakistan.

Even if jirgas were not brutal in their punishments, they are fundamentally flawed. A jirga does not translate into a lower court because of the fundamental flaws in its selection of the adjudicators and decision-making. Tribal leaders are neither independent — as they inevitably have a stake in the decisions — nor versed in the law of the land. Authorising non-state personnel to make decisions for the state only weakens the government and creates a state within a state. When the criteria of selection are genetic lineages, not expertise, the system is bound to be flawed. The solution is to control avoidable delays and raise the number, expertise and impartiality of judges — as has been suggested by Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry.

The biggest reason why PTI has lost public support is Imran Khan's impression as a tacit supporter of the Taliban. When the Taliban were blowing up schools and beheading Pakistani soldiers, it was Imran Khan who claimed that this was government's propaganda (ARY News, September 25, 2008), a claim that even the Taliban's spokesman did not make. Imran Khan's historic stagnation — that the war is America's and not ours — has contributed to his unpopularity.

Majority of Pakistanis do not agree with him. They see Pakistanis dying in Pakistan, mercilessly butchered by the Taliban. In a recent web-poll (pkpolitics.com), over 64 percent of the 1800 respondents not only considered this to be Pakistan's war, but also supported the military operation. Many who oppose the military operation oppose it in methodology — that perhaps the operation may not be able to eradicate all the Taliban — but unlike Imran Khan, they are not living in 2001.

The only half-statement he ever issued against these elements was telling Sufi Mohammad to stick to his word as those who break promises are not Muslims. Imagine this: instead of criticising Musharraf for martial law hundreds of times, at every possible venue, if Imran Khan had only said to the PCO judges "you are not Muslims, you broke your oath", and that too a year later, would anyone actually consider him to be against Musharraf's martial law? Even the 'B team' of Musharraf, the PMLQ, has given more statements against Musharraf than Imran Khan has ever given against Taliban!

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A proper condemnation requires naming the actors, as well as their leaders, condemning their specific actions and asking for legal recourse, as evident from Imran Khan's hundreds of press releases against the MQM.

Public sentiment is overwhelmingly against the Taliban. The Q League did not realise how hugely unpopular Musharraf's NRO and martial law were, and by choosing to remain Musharraf's sidekicks, they have now become a non-entity in Pakistani politics. The same will be the fate of Imran Khan and other 'B teams' of the Taliban, unless they take their opposition of the Taliban to the same level as their earlier opposition of Musharraf and America.

If Imran Khan is not the B team of the Taliban, then he will have to rise to the occasion, retract statements where he claimed Taliban atrocities are all government propaganda and condemn these barbarians properly. The issue has been raised for months now and the party's unflinching attitude, at the cost of losing popular support, suggests it is preparing for its funeral.

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