

The Age of Imran Khan

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Imran Khan is almost 70 years old. But that’s not what this is about. My humble contention is that we, in Pakistan, live in the age of Imran Khan.

I belong to a generation that was born in the 1980s. Growing up under the overarching shadow of Zia-ul-Haq and the Afghan War, as far back as memory stretches, the only ‘national hero’ that one can remember is the great Imran Khan. Well, him and

Sultan Mohammad Golden—the daredevil stuntman, who flickered for a while, and then faded away.

But even as others faded away, Imran Khan did not.

Initially, Imran Khan was just our cricket captain. An international playboy with a litany of supermodel girlfriends. For those growing under Zia’s regime, this image of Imran Khan was almost an act of defiance to Pakistan’s repressive status quo of the time. At the twilight of the 1980s, as Pakistan came out of shade of military rule and into light of democracy, Imran Khan continued to be the generational representation of modernism. Rubbing shoulders with British Royalty, being celebrated as a sports icon across the world, Imran Khan was the ‘correct’ ambassador of a progressive, modern and educated Pakistan.

If all that wasn’t enough, in 1992, on a breezy night in Melbourne, Imran Khan’s popularity grew to unprecedented heights, as his cornered-tigers won Pakistan its maiden cricket world championship. This may not mean much in countries that have multiple sports icons. But in Pakistan, a cricketing hero—the first to win the World Cup—would naturally become a permanent iconic part of national history.

For most men, in most countries, this would have been the crowning glory. The rest of Imran Khan’s life could have been spent making celebrity appearances, and partying through the chaos of Pakistan’s unpredictability. But that would be most men. Not Imran Khan.

In Pakistan, during the 1990s, my generation—then in middle/high-school—spent a

significant part of our time volunteering for Shaukat Khanum Hospital's fund raising. Selling 'tickets'—Rs10 a pop—to parents and relatives, this generation followed Imran Khan to his dream of a 'free cancer hospital'. Selling fifty tickets got you a cap. Selling a hundred got you a ball. And in each school, there that one student—envy of everyone else—who sold enough tickets to get a cricket bat signed by Imran Khan himself.

That was the Holy Grail; something that Bollywood's Rekha also wanted, but didn't have. Because it was the age of Imran Khan.

Completion of the Shaukat Khanum Hospital, in 1996, coincided with the launching of the next (even bigger) chapter in the age of Imran Khan; a political party—the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf—which had no more than a snowflake's chance in hell to make any impact in Pakistani politics.

The great Imran Khan was advised against politics. This is not a game of cricket, he was told. Politics, especially in Pakistan, is a contact sport. It wasn't for Imran. He couldn't fathom, and certainly not prevail, in the myriad of compromises that is Pakistani politics.

To be honest, this wasn't bad advice. Within a year of Imran Khan launching his political party, in the 1997 elections, Khan was faced with a rude awakening. He may have been a king in the cricket stadium, but in the political arena, he was a mere bystander.

Whereas Nawaz Sharif and Benazir won close to 70 percent of the votes between them, Imran Khan got a mere 1.7 percent of the votes. He was a footnote in that election; not even. In the next election, in 2002, he won a single seat (his own). And was ridiculed across Pakistan for having wasted his stardom in the muddy waters of Pakistan politics.

This rude awakening would have been enough for a lesser man. It was clear: Imran Khan could not bend himself to fit in the corridors of political power. He did not have the finesse to negotiate his path to power. He may become some version of Asghar Khan, at best... but no more. Khan should have given up. Smarter and more seasoned political pundits advised him to stop. To relent. To see the writing on the wall. Many had already written his political obituary. They ridiculed his ideas, and laughed at the notion of him succeeding. But Khan, the resilient Kaptaan, believed that his time will come—even though there was no logical reason to do so. Why? Because he knew a secret that the rest did not: that we live in the age of Imran Khan.

During the 2008 election campaign, Kaptaan decided to boycott the elections (claiming irregularities and pre-poll rigging). In fact, Kaptaan tore his nomination papers, during a press conference, in the run-up to the 2008 elections. And suddenly, Kaptaan and his PTI had no presence, at all, in the Parliament. Political wizards swore that this would be the last of Kaptaan. That by boycotting the elections, he is going to drive away the few remaining members of his political clique (PTI wasn't much of a 'political party' at the time). People urged him to leave politics, and instead focus his attention on social-work, where he had tasted mild success. It was good advice. There was every reason for Kaptaan to quit. His days of politicking were, for all intents and purposes, over. His message had failed. And so had he.

But, as I said, Kaptaan knew a secret that the rest did not: that we live in the age of Imran Khan.

And then, suddenly, on an October night in 2011, Kaptaan witnessed his (illogical)

perseverance being rewarded. And we all witnessed a miracle in Lahore. As usual, political pundits had speculated that it would be small and meaningless. Ruling parties had dismissed it as the fading cries of a dying political party. Everyone, with their gaze towards the Minar-e-Pakistan and abated breath, waited to find out if the day would mark the end of Imran Khan's promise, or witness the birth of a new political force.

And then it happened: they came in groups of tens and twenties and hundreds—on donkey-carts and Land-Cruisers, from affluent living-rooms as well as dusty fields, some bare-footed and others in Prada shoes—till the swell of humanity became the PTI 'tsunami'. They waited patiently and danced for hours in anticipation of one person alone: Imran Khan. There was no Shah Mehmood Qureshi, or Jehangir Tareen, or Aleem Khan on the stage. In fact, this 'tsunami' had gathered to celebrate the antithesis of what these individuals stood for. The moment was a fracture in the fabric of our political history, and marked the inception of a new hope.

Kaptaan's PTI did not win the 2013 general elections, but emerged as a political force to be reckoned with. And in 2018, was elected the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

If anyone thought that becoming Prime Minister was going to be the peak of Khan's popularity... well, they were wrong. Because, it is not about being the Prime Minister; we live in the age of Imran Khan.

Khan, was removed from office this year, allegedly at the back of a US-orchestrated coup. And if anyone thought that that would be the end of Imran Khan, think again. Whether or not he was the generational icon earlier, now, in the post-PM phase, the age of Imran Khan has finally arrived.

As we gain some time and distance, and (puny) leaders will fade away from national memory, history will write its own (unforgiving) verdict on this period of time. And just as the 30s and 40s were the age of M. Ali Jinnah, the 60s and 70s were the age of Bhutto, this period—our generation's footprint—will be remembered as the age of Imran Khan.

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