PAKISTAN TEHRIK-E-INSAAF: A NEW PHENOMENON OR A CONTINUATION OF THE POLITICAL STATUS QUO?

Political gathering of the PTI

NORIA is a network of researchers and analysts which promotes the work of a new generation of specialists in international politics.
The Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaaf (PTI, Movement for Justice) was founded by Imran Khan in April 1996 as a socio-political movement inspired by the slogan, ‘justice, humanity and self-reliance’. A year later PTI contested the 1997 election hailed as the “third force” in Pakistan’s otherwise two-party system. The result was disastrous as the party did not win a single seat. The absence of a local power base, lack of party organization and inexperience were decisive in explaining PTI’s loss. Despite having articulated an alternative political program PTI struggled to retain supporters and increase its vote bank. Imran Khan won the party’s only seat in 2002 but he struggled to stay relevant relying mostly on media appearances to critique the corruption and incompetence of traditional politicians. The party’s boycott of the 2008 election further sidelined it from mainstream politics (see table 1). The situation changed in 2011 when PTI gained some political ground by raising its voice against the rampant corruption that was corroding the socio-political fabric of Pakistan and the downturn in US-Pakistan relations. The unprecedented response at PTI’s rally in Lahore later that year signalled PTI’s evolution as a viable political party, one that also had the logistical capacity to bring out the vital youth vote. At the time Imran Khan was considered to be the most favorable leader by 68% of the population.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ELECTION YEAR</th>
<th>NO. OF NA SEATS CONTESTED</th>
<th>SEAT SHARE IN NA</th>
<th>VOTE SHARE IN NA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>boycotted the election</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>16.92%</td>
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Table 1: PTI’s electoral performance 1997-2013

This paper questions whether PTI marks a departure or is a continuation of traditional Pakistani politics by examining the rise of the party over the last four years, the restructuring of the party’s organization, its electoral performance and its role in opposition. It shows that while the PTI has differentiated itself from other political parties through its message of change, electoral considerations and the embedded logic of clientelism in Pakistan’s politics has prevented it from fulfilling its vision and has instead invoked the status quo much to the consternation of its supporters. al-Nusra has managed to further its integration within the Syrian revolutionary movement.

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3 These results are based on electoral results reported by the Election Commission of Pakistan 1997, 2002, 2008, and 2013.
and its role in opposition. I argue that while the PTI has differentiated itself from other political parties through its message of change, electoral considerations and the embedded logic of clientelism in Pakistan’s politics has prevented it from fulfilling its vision and has instead invoked the status quo much to the consternation of its supporters. This is not to suggest that PTI will be unable to effect change in the future, but that it needs to rethink its strategies and maintain performance legitimacy to remain relevant to the electorate. This argument is made in the article through an in-depth analysis of newspaper-reporting and opinion editorials on the PTI over the last five years. There is very little scholarly work on the PTI mainly due to the very recent success of the party and this is the primary reason for doing content analysis of journalistic accounts. In addition, interviews with PTI members conducted in 2012 have also enriched the findings of this article.

THE ‘TSUNAMI’: Observers of Pakistani politics explained PTI’s sudden rise as a combination of the following factors: ‘fortuitous timing’, an effective narrative that resonated with a discontented citizenry and a charismatic leader who had finally “hit his stride”.4 A national sense of political crisis prevailed in 2011. The tenuous US-Pakistan relationship had worsened and was accompanied by the failure of the major political parties to deliver effective governance. PTI tapped into this widespread disillusionment caused by the blatant abuse of public offices for self-aggrandizement at the expense of the masses, who were already facing the brunt of continuous power outages, a declining economy and growing lawlessness in the country. The party further capitalized on the resentment that had built up over Pakistan’s cooperation in the War on Terror. In particular, the US-led covert operation to capture Osama bin Laden, the encroachment of Pakistan’s sovereign territory by repeated drone attacks and the perceived interference of the US in Pakistan’s internal affairs gave PTI just cause to criticize the US-Pakistan relationship. The PTI made gains within the electorate by advocating the importance of recalibrating the unequal alliance to defend Pakistan’s national sovereignty. While PTI’s message had not altered substantially since the early days of its establishment, the circumstances described above presented a unique opportunity for the PTI to articulate an alternative to the current dispensation of power. ‘Naya Pakistan’ (new Pakistan) was envisioned to be an Islamic welfare state that was corruption-free and stood on an equal footing with the US. Most significantly however, this message of change with populist and anti-American overtones would not have readily captured the hearts and minds of the educated middle-class, disaffected youth and urban poor had it not been for Imran Khan’s “passion and probity”.5 We must also acknowledge the electronic media which was not entirely sold on Imran Khan’s vision, but made it its mission to put into sharp relief the venality and incompetence of tried-and-tested politicians against the possibility of change advocated by PTI.

As the captain of a winning team in 1992 at the World Cup Cricket tournament, Imran Khan did not have to strive too hard to develop a cult of personality. Off-field, his philanthropy in building a cancer hospital in Pakistan was lauded by many as evidence of public service. Although similar to other mainstream parties, PTI is also a highly centralized organization that is embodied by the party leader’s charisma; the difference is that Khan does not hail from a political family. His political clout is not based on land-ownership, industrial wealth or being prominent in student politics. His spotless financial reputation set him apart from the incumbent leadership of Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). Khan’s anti-incumbent status in politics also gave him an edge vis-à-vis the other party leaders, because he could credibly claim to provide alternative leadership.6

WHY THE PTI DID NOT CAPTURE ALL HEARTS AND MINDS?

As PTI began to be taken seriously as a viable political player, three overarching criticisms dogged the party. First, by promising a break from the past, Imran Khan seemed to be offering something to everybody and in doing so was...
merely perpetuating the status quo. The simplicity of his message meant that it resonated widely across the public but that it was also not well-developed. In fact analysts pointed to the vagueness of his policy ideas and the lack of a concrete plan of action to achieve the goals outlined in the party manifesto. It turns out however, that this was also the underlying reason for the party’s initial success. The wide appeal of its message and the untapped capacity to achieve it gave the party much-needed credibility and “empathy” in the eyes of the masses.

Second, detractors of the PTI claimed that the party’s meteoric ascent could not have been possible without the backing of powerful allies, especially the army. No conclusive evidence to this end surfaced at the time, but this critique alluded to the distrust of the party system imbued in the citizenry as a result of repeated military intervention. Staying on the theme of powerful allies, a number of notable politicians, many of whom had served as federal ministers in previous regimes, switched political parties to join PTI. Critics pointed out that many of these politicians were erstwhile supporters of General Pervez Musharraf including the likes of Jahangir Tareen and Khurshid Kasuri. Others like Javed Hashmi had started their political careers under the tutelage of General Ziaul Haq. Finally, many of these politicians like Shah Mahmood Qureshi enjoyed personal vote banks owing to their family’s traditional involvement in politics as prominent land-owners or sayida nashins (caretakers of Sufi shrines) and therefore had access to primordial kinship networks.

The party responded by claiming that in 1997, its electoral failure was attributed to not having electable candidates with local bases of support. Yet in 2013, it was critiqued for finally attracting these electable candidates. PTI’s challenge was to recruit politicians who cared for the party’s agenda for change, which amounted to having reputations untainted by corruption, but also a track record for winning an election. Furthermore, Imran Khan acknowledged that “one man alone without an electable team can only do so much” and that he could not “find angels to join the PTI.” The problem was not so much that opportunistic politicians were linking themselves to Imran Khan, but that by “putting old wine into new bottles,” PTI was compromising its ability to break free from a political system that centered on the personalized delivery of patronage by these electable politicians to the voters.

THE ATTEMPT TO REFORM POLITICAL PARTY PRACTICES

Following the onset of the so-called tsunami, the next major test for the PTI was translating the groundswell of support witnessed at its rallies into actual votes in the 2013 general election. PTI attempted to restructure itself to encourage internal party democracy and decentralized decision-making.

In preparation for intra-party elections that would elect the party’s office-bearers starting from the grassroots, PTI launched a membership campaign. In order to attract large numbers, the party leadership decided to make the process effortless and uncomplicated.

Members were allowed to register telephonically by providing their name and national identification numbers. In preparation for intra-party elections that would elect the party’s office-bearers starting from the grassroots, PTI launched a membership campaign. In order to attract large numbers, the party leadership decided to make the process effortless and uncomplicated. Members were allowed to register telephonically by providing their name and national identification numbers.

At the time, party leaders did not anticipate that this would be insufficient information to make electoral lists or identify voters during the intra-party election. Simultaneously, PTI also provided membership booklets to active and prominent members who would physically register members and upload the details into a centralized database. PTI members who aspired for local party offices used this opportunity to establish a vote base for themselves in the upcoming intra-party election. They spent both time and money to have
were made by the party’s leader and his cabinet was a very centralized process in which decisions were activated members of the party undermined the meritocracy. As a consequence, the party’s objective to have a merit and party loyalty as criteria for selection. This, in turn created dissension within the party between the older, more devoted ideologues of the party and the new, more politically savvy and opportunistic members of the party. An important aspect of PTI’s organizational strategy and one at which it excelled was using social media for communicating with its members and the political mobilization of voters. Ammar Rashid rightly observes that PTI successfully harnessed the “horizontal integration afforded by social media” to overcome the “socio-economic heterogeneity” of its supporter base.

During the election campaign period, Express Tribune reported that PTI had some 30 volunteers maintaining the party’s official website which got 100,000 hits daily and a Facebook account with 500,000 members. To put this in perspective, competing parties like PPP and PML-N were compelled to improve their online presence. Despite this, PML-N’s website got only 1200 hits per day. Similarly, PTI reached out to Pakistan’s 3 million Twitter users by allowing its candidates to bypass media outlets and communicate directly with the voters. Thus print and online journalists were deprived of their critical agenda-setting role giving candidates more control over their own campaigns. Moreover, Twitter was an effective platform for promoting Imran Khan’s charismatic persona and for generally keeping the electorate updated on the party’s campaign activities. Overall, PTI’s online presence allowed for the socialization of like-minded individuals who were permanently mobilized by the party’s general philosophy parallel to traditional campaign activities such as canvassing, rallies and corner meetings.


21 Interviews with PTI members conducted in Lahore in June 2012.


18 This was reported in NOORANI, T. (n.d.) Executive Summary and Recommendations of the Tanseem Noorani Review Commission. Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Islamabad: Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf. Although not dated as a publication, this report was released in 2014.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE IN ELECTION 2013?

In the run-up to the General Election in 2013, it was particularly difficult to predict PTI’s performance because it was not clear if PTI would be able to convert its anti-incumbency advantage into votes. Nor was it clear if the PTI supporter showing up at the rallies would actually come out on polling day.

PTI eventually won 28 general seats and 7 reserved seats in the National Assembly. At least 65% of the seats won in the National Assembly were from Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KPK). Even though the election results were not the tsunami that had been heralded by PTI leaders, one must acknowledge that PTI won the second largest share of votes after PML-N in the general election, thus edging out PPP. PTI candidates were runners-up on 76 National Assembly seats, losing by an average margin of 27%. In some constituencies the margins of victory were so close (as low as 1.4%) that PTI claimed electoral rigging had taken place. The unexpected victory of PML-N that led it to form a single-majority government further fostered this allegation of rigging.

However, another explanation for PTI’s electoral performance was given by internal party reviews conducted by Tasneem Noorani and the intra-party tribunal led by Justice Wajihuddin (ret’d). These reviews furnished evidence on how the flaws and unintended consequences of the intra-party elections; the arbitrariness of the candidate selection decisions and over-centralization in party decision-making were also to blame for the weakness of PTI’s subsequent electoral performance.

One could plausibly argue that PTI’s electoral performance revealed the deeply entrenched logic of clientelism in Pakistan’s political system. In Punjab, which makes up more than 50% of the seats in the National Assembly, the delivery of patronage is the primary measure of a candidate’s competence. Voters elect politicians who have a proven record for protecting the interests of their constituents in thana-katchery (police and courts), delivering public utilities and providing jobs. While there was certainly an anti-PPP sentiment in Punjab, PML-N’s performance in the provincial government was still perceived to be effective. PML-N candidates were known to the voter in comparison to PTI’s relatively inexperienced candidates. PTI’s campaign of ‘hope and change’ had convinced voters on the importance of their vote but failed to change their risk-averse and pragmatic mindset that made them vote for the delivery of patronage instead.

THE POLITICS OF OPPOSITION

Historically opposition parties have hindered democracy in Pakistan by engaging in adversarial politics, instead of posing as a credible alternative and holding the ruling party accountable. In the post-election period, opposition parties have not easily consented to the electoral results. Once elected, opposition parties have set about to destabilize the government and bring about its downfall as rapidly as possible under the pretext that it was illegitimately elected. This especially holds true for the 1990s, when instead of holding the government accountable through oversight procedures, opposition parties chose to support the President’s initiative under Article 58(2b) of the constitution, backed by the Army, to dissolve the National Assembly. This undermined democracy because it interrupted the electoral cycle but also created a perverse set of incentives which limited voter choice and gave opposition parties an anti-incumbency advantage.

On the floor of the parliament, opposition parties have resorted to fiery rhetoric instead of offering counter-proposals to government-backed legislation. Outside the parliament, opposition parties have indulged in street agitation, mobilizing mass support through rallies, long marches, sit-ins, or wheel jams to protest government action. These same trends have been observable in PTI’s performance as an opposition party. PTI began by calling attention to the government’s lack of capacity to deal with domestic issues in the National Assembly. However, it did not break out of campaign mode continuing to organize political rallies to keep its grassroots support permanently mobilized. Ultimately PTI launched an anti-rigging campaign claiming that the results of the May 2013 election had been manipulated and that the party’s mandate to govern by the public had been stolen. Adding fuel to fires already being lit by PTI were the unfortunate shootings on June 17, 2014 by the Punjab police against Pakistan Awami Tehrik (PAT) workers in Model Town Lahore, highlighting the mismanagement of the PML-N government. On August
14, 2014 PAT and PTI embarked on a long march in the name of azadi (freedom) from Lahore ending up in front of Parliament house in the nation’s capital, Islamabad. PTI demanded an independent inquiry into electoral rigging and insisted that the party will continue its agitation until Nawaz Sharif resigned from power.

This move by the PTI was widely seen by the intelligentsia and media as being detrimental to Pakistan’s democratic evolution for three reasons:

First, PTI had chosen to not be a genuine opposition party. Many acknowledged that protesting electoral rigging was warranted. But the protracted dharna (sit-in) outside Parliament house distracted the PTI provincial government in KPK from dealing with the fall out of Zarbe-AZb, a Pakistan Army operation against religious militancy in FATA. PTI’s stubbornness to not end its dharna unless the prime minister resigned, and the PML-N’s inability to negotiate terms agreeable to both parties created the perception of irreconcilable differences between government and opposition, which could only be resolved through drastic action such as regime change. Mobilizing the masses purely through negative rhetoric and no actual discussion of policy alternatives only served to halt debate and action that could have alleviated the problems at stake.

Critics pointed out that if PTI’s complaint was that it had not been meted justice by the Election Commission or the judicial system as laid out in the Representation of People’s Act 1976, then as a serious opposition party it should have proposed amendments to the laws instead of placing a gridlock on the political process.27

Second, irreconcilable differences between PTI and PML-N brought the army back into politics. Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif although not constitutionally empowered to do so, was compelled to step in to mediate between the government and opposition as negotiation attempts between the two parties repeatedly failed and the protests became violent. The army also released statements to warn the Sharif government that insuring state security was paramount and that the army would not hesitate to step in unless the conflict was resolved satisfactorily. Although the army denied that it was backing the opposition, evidence released by senior PTI member Javed Hashmi suggested that the Imran Khan was instructed by the army to coordinate his protests with PAT.28 To explain the army’s motivations is beyond the ambit of this paper but suffice it to say that once again, the army projected itself as a “referee and the only institution concerned with national interest rising above the disputes of power-hungry politicians.”29

PTT’s protest and the army’s controversial role made analysts question if opposition-led dharnas were the new 58 2(b)?30 Barring a no-confidence motion, a difficult feat to accomplish in a single-majority government, how could a sitting prime minister be dislodged? Reminiscent of the 58 2(b) era, where a President backed by the military and a weak opposition could dissolve the National Assembly, it seemed as if this time an opposition party backed by the military could place a stranglehold over the government by refusing to negotiate.

Third, PTI’s actions highlighted the party’s own inherent weaknesses. Another aspect of PTI’s agitation was the en masse resignation of PTI elected representatives on the direction of Imran Khan. At least three representatives who refused to resign were expelled from the party for breaching party discipline.31 This raised suspicions that the party leadership had coerced resignations from its party members, an illegal act under Article 45(2b) of the constitution.32 This was ironic seeing that PTI had differentiated itself from other parties on the basis of internal party democracy and decentralized decision-making. Even the PTI was unable to check unilateral decisions made by the party chief.

PTI’s agitation also exposed how the party was shaped by the exigencies of the political system. Interviews with PTI members prior to the election revealed that gaining access to state resources for the delivery of patronage was the

30 Article 58, section 2b of the Pakistani constitution otherwise known as the Eighth Amendment empowered the President of Pakistan to dissolve the National Assembly at his discretion provided that in their opinion the Government could not be carried on in accordance with the provisions of the constitution. The Eighth Amendment was officially overturned by the Eighteenth Amendment in 2010.
31 Gulzar Khan from Peshawar, Mussarat Ahmedzub from Swat and Nasir Khan Khattak from Karak refused to resign saying this decision would adversely affect the PTI government’s performance in KPK. They further argued that it was an unprincipled for the party leader to make unilateral decisions.
32 This article requires the Speaker of the Assembly to ascertain if the resignation by a member of the National Assembly is voluntary and genuine.
primary motivation behind contesting an election. As a party in opposition PTI did not have access to state funds and was therefore irrelevant to the constituents, creating an urgent need to return to power. Was PTI merely an electoral vehicle to mobilize public opinion through a charismatic leadership? PTI stepped down from its dharna on December 16, 2014 after the bombing of a public school in Peshawar killing 150 people including children. It did however, negotiate the formation of a three-member judicial commission headed by Chief Justice Nasirul Mulk to investigate poll rigging in the 2013 election. The judicial commission completed its inquiry on July 3, 2015 and much to PTI’s chagrin ruled that instances of electoral rigging were not evidence of systematic manipulation of electoral results. Even though the rigging allegations were not proven and Nawaz Sharif did not step down PTI indirectly achieved two strategic goals. One, it edged out the PPP as PML-N’s main competitor in the Punjab. By sustaining a four-month sit-in, PTI succeeded in creating the perception that the next electoral contest will be between PTI and PML-N. Two, PTI increased its party identification with the Punjabi voter especially among the middle class which previously voted squarely for PML-N.

Instinctively analysts have criticized the PTI for hindering democracy. But can one really fault Imran Khan for demanding a transparent inquiry into electoral rigging? In fact he was the only one to state that a rigged election was unacceptable and that the Pakistani voter deserved better. For better or worse the party opened up a “new space for dissent.” The means used were certainly problematic but they sparked a nation-wide conversation about how far an electorate’s patience with the political system could be tested, politicized a despondent citizenry and provided an outlet to vent dissatisfaction.

33 Interviews with PTI members who wished to remain anonymous were conducted by the author from May to July 2012 in Lahore, Pakistan.