

How Imran Khan has become the Donald Trump of Pakistan

With so many Pakistanis believing Imran Khan's 'Great Steal', Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif will have little peace in office

C Christine Fair June 01, 2022 07:02:05 IST



File image of former Pakistan prime minister Imran Khan.

President Donald Trump began to delegitimise the 2020 presidential poll months before the first vote was cast, just as he did the 2016 election. He told his supporters that in 2016, fraudulent votes snatched from him the popular vote he claimed he won. We now know that there was foreign interference in the 2016 presidential elections; however, it was to help — not hinder — Trump's electoral victory. Going into the 2020 elections, a majority of Americans (60 per cent) did not have confidence in the honesty of elections. Trump began building his “Big Lie” about the theft of his victory before, during and after America went to the polls.

On 23 September, Trump said of mail-in ballots that they were “out of control.” That American armed service personnel and diplomats have been voting through mail-in ballots without problem did not deter the then president. That Americans every year safely mail their tax payments did not deter him. For Trump, they would contribute to election theft. He raised questions about the voting machines being used and accused the

democrats of using the electronic voting machines to steal his election. After the ballots were cast and counted, he demanded recount after recount. Where he was winning, he wanted the count to end. Where he was losing, he demanded recounts. The end result of [his painstaking erection of the “Big Lie”](#)? Only [one in five Republicans](#) believe Joe Biden is the legitimate president. It seems Imran Khan has taken a page out of Trump’s playbook and created a fictive Big Steal of his own.

As is well-known, former prime minister Imran Khan, was the favoured boy in the real capital of Pakistan: Rawalpindi. The army secured his prime ministership before the [election and through massive rigging and they did so by forging a coalition of the billing which Khan would lead](#). Like the prime ministers before him, he too came to believe that he was too beloved by the people and Pakistan’s allies alike to be ousted. Like all prime ministers before him, he too learned that he is as expendable as the army wants. Imran’s mistakes were numerous. First and foremost was that he failed in even the limited remit that the army grants the prime minister. Pakistan’s shambolic economy and flailing governance began to reflect poorly on the army because everyone understood he served as the pleasure of Pindi. Consequently, Pakistan’s all-powerful Army Chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, began to have concerns about his acolyte. Khan also committed the deadly sin of interfering in the army’s internal affairs when Bajwa wanted to replace General Faiz Hameed as the head of the ISI. Khan balked because it was Hameed who emplaced Khan through the electoral shenanigans the ISI had perfected. But Khan also publicly disagreed with Bajwa on a range of foreign policy matters as well whether it was Pakistan’s policy towards the United States, India or Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

As Islamabad was rife with rumours that Khan had lost the army’s support, Khan’s foes smelled blood in the water. While the ragtag band of disgruntled opponents that formed the Opposition began to organise for a no-confidence vote, Khan was busy preparing the fundament of his own big lie. Khan claimed that the United States had threatened him. He told his followers that America wants him out of power because he alone has the gonadal fortitude to oppose the imperial hubris of the Greatest Satan. [The army notably rubbished this conspiracy](#). His *paltan* of social media soldiers took to the interwebs to declare the assault on Imran Khan and Pakistan’s sovereignty itself.

With his followers believing that their beloved prime minister and democracy were being undermined by the treacherous United States, Khan denounced the members of the Opposition as traitors and tools of the United States. He then invoked constitutional national security measures which “allowed” him to prorogue parliament and call for fresh elections, which he no doubt believed he would win. Khan’s version of The Great Steal was

widely popular among his supporters who espouse his fervent anti-Americanism. No doubt they believed that they had defeated the Americans and their domestic proxy, the Pakistan Army.

Their enthusiasm was short-lived. Pakistan's Supreme Court declared Imran Khan's manoeuvre to be illegal, restored the parliament that then held the no-confidence vote which ousted Khan. (While many speculated about which way the court will rule, the court has a long history of siding with the army, as it did in this case.) The Opposition appointed Shehbaz Sharif of PML-N as prime minister.

As expected, Khan and his social media soldiers took to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and the streets of Pakistan's major cities. [On Twitter, hashtags such as 'Imported government not acceptable' and #BehindYouSkipper went viral.](#) Even before Shehbaz Sharif could shift into the Prime Minister's residence, broad swathes of the country fervently believed that he is an American implant. The absurdity of the farce would be hysterical if it weren't so dangerous. No American policymaker cares enough about Pakistan's prime minister, who is little more than a glorified Nazim of Islamabad, to bother with him or her.

But Imran Khan's media savvy has had an impact. Protestors decrying the befoulment of Imran Khan's tenure carry signs demanding that General Bajwa himself must go. Bajwa has been a burden on the army for some time beginning with rumours that [he was an Ahmadi or had strong Ahmadi familial ties](#), his 2020 extension, his standoff with Jamiat-Ulema-e-Islam chief Fazlur Rehman. Khan's rallies are increasing the cost of his tenure. Amidst the showdown with Khan, Bajwa has magnanimously announced that he won't seek another extension and will, instead, gracefully retire to whatever luxurious emoluments await the retiring king in November.

Various commentators have inveighed upon this imbroglio as being signs that Pakistan's gasping democracy is still trying to survive with a modicum of success. I'm not sure that is the case. A recent [snap poll fielded by Gallup Pakistan](#) revealed a lot of similarities between Trump supporters and those of Imran Khan. Some 43 per cent opposed the ouster of Khan through the no-confidence vote. More than one in three Pakistanis believe the conspiracy theory he promoted. Oddly, those with an FA or higher degree were more likely to believe this conspiracy than those from non-FA holders, with 56 per cent of the former believing it compared to 26 per cent of the latter. With so many Pakistanis believing Imran Khan's "Great Steal," Prime Minister Shabaz Sharif will have little peace in office.

This isn't a win for democracy. It's a win for the men on horseback who have long pointed to Pakistani politicians' corruption and infighting to make the claim that the army is the

only institution that can properly care for Pakistan. While a coup has been off the table for years, it's not obvious that in the surging chaos it will remain so.

The writer is a professor of Security Studies at Georgetown University. She is the author of 'In Their Own Words: Understanding the Lashkar-e-Tayyaba' and 'Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War'. She tweets @cchristinefair. Her website is christinefair.net. She Tweets at @CChristineFair. Views expressed are personal.

Read all the [Latest News](#), [Trending News](#), [Cricket News](#), [Bollywood News](#), [India News](#) and [Entertainment News](#) here. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

This was originally published in [Firstpost](#) on 1 June 2022.