**[Poll verdict slams cancel culture](https://www.dawn.com/news/1813781/poll-verdict-slams-cancel-culture)**

[Jawed Naqvi](https://www.dawn.com/authors/280/jawed-naqvi) Published February 13, 2024 Updated about 23 hours ago

PAKISTAN’S voters have reprimanded anti-democratic power centres for seeking to ‘cancel’ political opponents. Voters ensured that Imran Khan’s popularity increased in inverse proportion to the reported repression he and his supporters were subjected to.

The voters’ emphatic rejection of threats and assorted obstacles to the polling booth counts as an uplifting sign for Pakistan’s troubled democracy. For, in its day, every political party big or small, often nudged by men in uniform, has unleashed a pattern of cancelling opponents, and Imran Khan himself is not blameless in this practice.

The verdict is praiseworthy insofar as it defied the country’s demeaning culture of political intolerance. In so doing, it also snubbed media pundits who have tended to exceed their brief as the trusted eyes and ears of democracy.

Could a similar turn of events come about in India in May? There’s an overwhelming need for it, given the penchant in evidence for jailing opponents and [evicting opposition MPs](https://www.dawn.com/news/1800370) from parliament in a new low for the cancel culture thriving under Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s watch. Modi began by calling for a Congress-free India but widened the aperture to target other opponents.

It’s unfortunate, naturally, that South Asian countries have been in the throes of the ‘cancel’ malaise for so long, rooted as it has been in the Cold War tussle that played out in the region’s young and fragile democracies. The Cold War has gone, but a new stand-off involving another set of big power rivalries continues to spur political intolerance to serve their interest.

Julian Assange’s team helped unearth undeniable evidence of the depth to which foreign talons are sunk into what otherwise wears the halo of normal political rivalries across South Asia. A Wikipedia release of diplomatic cables from Delhi revealed BJP’s Arun Jaitley in May 2005 chiding the US for letting down the party he claimed had lifted Indo-US ties to new heights. The reference was presumably to Atal Bihari Vajpayee’s 1998-2004 leadership.

“BJP spokesman and former commerce minister Arun Jaitley warned us recently that the Modi controversy continues to fester among the party rank and file, who see the chief minister’s visa revocation as a personal attack on a leader of the party that began the transformation of US-India relations.”

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*The Guardian* [published a cable](https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/139676) on Dec 1, 2010, that showed Nawaz Sharif projecting himself to the US ambassador in Pakistan as the best bet for Washington. “The best thing America has done recently, said Nawaz, was [to] arrange to have Gen Kayani named as chief of army staff. This appointment is helping army morale and raising the level of public respect for the army,” the cable noted.

“As proof of his pro-Americanism, Nawaz reminded [the] ambassador that he had overruled his chief of staff to deploy Pakistani forces with the US coalition in the first Gulf War,” *The Guardian* quoted the cable as saying. Sharif reminded the envoy that the PPP had opposed sending troops to Saudi Arabia.

In recent times, Imran Khan fell afoul of the US for a bunch of reasons, not least for asserting that Pakistan wouldn’t host the superpower’s military bases on its soil. On earlier occasions, global interests have required the country’s political arena to be cleared of civilian presence to launch US-led military campaigns in Afghanistan; first to drive away Soviet troops from Kabul and then to avenge 9/11. The much-touted liberation of Afghan women seemed an unconvincing afterthought, as Afghan women secured a decidedly more promising deal during communist rule in Kabul, or perhaps earlier.

As with political parties in Pakistan, Indian counterparts have faced challenges from the steady hollowing out of democracy. Rajiv Gandhi, despite his unrivalled majority in 1984, was never able to return to power again. Reasons cited for his fall included an unproven role in the tainted Bofors guns deal. He tried also to balance Muslim and Hindu conservatives and lost the support of both. However, a less-discussed element in his political demise was his opposition to the refuelling of US warplanes heading to the US-led Desert Shield campaign against Iraq.

When his widow was perceived as being close to power, she was slurred as a ‘foreigner’, a description that was curiously never applied to the Nepali princess who became the ‘*rajmata*’ of the Hindutva fold. Earlier, Indira Gandhi’s second coming was cut short not only because of her messing with Sikh sentiments but, inevitably, also for her stridently partisan foreign policy.

One of her last acts seen as hostile to powerful overseas interests was the call by the non-aligned summit in New Delhi in 1983 under her chairmanship urging the US to vacate the military base in Diego Garcia. Her death marked a momentous setback for India’s ties with the erstwhile USSR.

Indira Gandhi is usually regarded as the first among South Asian leaders to cancel the opposition with the 1975 emergency rule, a controversial move reportedly conceived in Moscow to thwart the twin challenge to her pro-Soviet rule from China and the US.

However, a closer scrutiny shows Z.A. Bhutto as an earlier candidate for the odium of cancelling opponents. His rejection of a Bengali rival’s claim to head the government enthused the defence establishment to shoot itself in the foot. Junius Jayewardene, a Western-style free market advocate, banned Sirimavo Bandaranaike from election after coming to power in 1977.

Bandaranaike’s support for socialist economic policies was deemed impertinent, and her proximity to Marshal Tito and Zhou Enlai were seen with suspicion in the West, even as she cultivated friendly relations with non-aligned India.

The politics of cancelling opponents was pursued freely by subsequent actors in Sri Lanka, who preferred to silence opponents than face them in democratic contests. The scourge didn’t leave Bangladesh or the Maldives unscathed. One’s best hope is that Pakistan’s amazing verdict presages a similar challenge to undemocratic tendencies stalking other troubled democracies in South Asia.

*The writer is Dawn’s correspondent in Delhi.*

[**jawednaqvi@gmail.com**](https://mailto:jawednaqvi@gmail.com)

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